



THE INFLUENCE OF GULF STATES IN AFRICAN POLITICS: QATAR, SAUDI ARABIA AND UNITED ARAB EMIRATES IN FOCUS

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the rising influence of Gulf States, specifically the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, in Africa's political sphere. It argues that Gulf engagement in Africa extends well beyond conventional diplomacy, representing a multifaceted political strategy encompassing investments, security cooperation, humanitarian operations, religious outreach, media influence, and statecraft. The paper examines the strategies these countries deploy to project influence in African political environments, and the ways in which their involvement affects governance, foreign policy orientation, regime stability, and conflict dynamics in selected African states. Using a qualitative-comparative secondary research design, the study draws on documentary analysis of official government records, policy papers, development finance data, trade and investment information, conflict datasets, and existing scholarly literature. The findings reveal that while all three Gulf states pursue strategic foothold in Africa, they rely on distinct mechanisms: the UAE deploys commercial diplomacy, port access, logistics infrastructure, and security alliances; Saudi Arabia combines economic engagement with religious and strategic diplomacy; and Qatar focuses on mediation, humanitarian diplomacy, and soft power. The paper further demonstrates that Gulf inter-state rivalry has deepened alliances and exacerbated tensions among African countries, particularly in the Horn of Africa, North Africa, and the Sahel. At the same time, this competition has created bargaining opportunities for African states in their engagement with Gulf actors.

Keywords: African Politics, Gulf States, Religious Outreach, Strategic Diplomacy, Statecraft

INTRODUCTION

Gulf States have found a haven in Africa especially in it is social, economic and political affairs, reflecting their aspiration to extend their influence to this part of the world. This increasing Gulf engagement in Africa is driven by their desire for a place rich in natural resources, a rapidly growing young population, and a strategic location controlling key maritime routes (Guzansky & Lubotzky 2025).

This move is coming at a time when the traditional powers such as the United States is pulling back and Russia and China face economic headwinds, while the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia see the ongoing crisis as a window of opportunity. Hence, these gulf states perceive the continent not only in terms of economic potential but also as a political and security sphere that enables them to extend their influence beyond the Middle East. That is, past study have shown that in the last decade, Africa has become a more prominent arena in the foreign policies of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. Their engagement is no longer limited to trade, religious ties, or development assistance; it now encompasses infrastructure finance, port access, security cooperation, mediation, humanitarian action, and elite diplomacy. This shift is particularly

visible in the Horn of Africa and along the Red Sea corridor, where growing external competition has linked African politics more closely to Gulf strategic interests. Brookings describes this as an unprecedented rise in Gulf political, economic, and strategic activity across the Red Sea, while SIPRI has documented how the Horn's security environment has been reshaped by expanding external military and maritime involvement (Vertin, 2019).

The strategic importance of this relationship is readily explained by geography. The Horn of Africa sits adjacent to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the Gulf of Aden, and major sea lanes connecting the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and Asia. These waterways are critical for shipping, energy flows, food security, and regional military logistics. North Africa and the Maghreb have similarly gained significance as geostrategic gateways linking the Gulf to the Mediterranean, Europe, and wider African markets. A Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung study argues that, since the Arab uprisings, Gulf states have increasingly treated North Africa in strategic rather than purely ideological terms, using aid, investment, political support, and security cooperation to protect national interests (Melvin, 2022).



Although the three Gulf states share an interest in expanding their presence, they do not behave uniformly. The UAE currently stands at the forefront of the Gulf's expansion in Africa, focusing on building a visible profile through development financing and infrastructure-centred engagement (Guzansky & Lubotzky 2025). Since 2019, UAE owned Emirati companies have reported deals exceeding \$110 billion (about \$72 billion of which are in renewable energy).

Significantly, Doha recently announced an unprecedented investment plan of \$103 billion across six African countries. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, leads the beneficiary chart, with about \$21 billion to be invested in mining, energy, and agriculture followed by Mozambique, with about \$20 billion aimed at agriculture and energy development; Zambia and Zimbabwe, each to receive around \$19 billion focused on diverse sectors including oil and gas; and Botswana and Burundi, each slated for roughly \$12 billion. Botswana will focus on infrastructure, diamond processing, tourism, cybersecurity, and security, while Burundi prioritizes energy, agriculture, and infrastructure (Guzansky & Lubotzky 2025).

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has adopted a broader but more gradual approach. It is investing in agriculture, renewable energy, mining, and infrastructure with a major focus on East Africa and the Sahel Belt as part of its effort to ensure food security and expand its regional influence. For example, Saudi Arabia has planned to significantly expand its investment in the strategic port of Assab in Eritrea and announced plans to increase overall investments on the continent to about \$25 billion in the coming years. Some of these projects are carried out in cooperation with international financial institutions. They are aligned with Saudi Vision 2030, reflecting the kingdom's ambition to secure food supplies, reduce dependence on oil, and leverage the strategic importance of the Red Sea (Procopio & Čok 2025). In addition, Saudi Arabia, through its King Salman Center and some other organizations are advancing its religious and humanitarian aid drive to strengthen its cultural and religious presence. This move seeks to reinforce its position as a leading Muslim power with vast economic capabilities and a growing global profile.

Against this background, this study examines how the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar influence African politics, how their approaches differ, and what political effects follow from their involvement. The paper argues that Gulf influence in Africa is multidimensional, state-specific, and contingent on local political conditions. It is guided by three central questions: How do the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar project influence in African politics? What distinguishes their respective strategies? And how does that influence affect governance, alignment, and conflict dynamics in African states?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent literature has elevated Gulf involvement in Africa from a marginal topic in Middle East studies to a substantive field of inquiry. Scholars now situate this engagement within broader debates on security, regional order, political economy, and foreign influence. The most concentrated body of work focuses on the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, where geography, maritime routes, and political fragility have made the region especially

significant to outside powers (Verhoeven, 2018; Melvin, 2019; Vertin, 2019).

Security and Geopolitics

One major strand of the literature examines security and geopolitics. Verhoeven (2018) argues that relations between the Gulf and the Horn should be understood through shifting patterns of security interdependence and competing visions of regional order. Melvin (2019) adds that the Horn's security environment has been transformed by the simultaneous presence of multiple foreign military actors, with geopolitical competition now driving much of this external involvement. Vertin (2019) reaches a similar conclusion, demonstrating how ports, military access, and elite alliances have tied Gulf rivalries more closely to politics on the African side of the Red Sea. Taken together, these works show that Gulf engagement is not merely economic or diplomatic; it is deeply strategic and political (Verhoeven, 2018; Melvin, 2019; Vertin, 2019).

Geoeconomics and Infrastructure

A second strand addresses geoeconomics, arguing that ports, logistics, infrastructure, and trade corridors are not neutral business activities but also create political leverage. Vertin (2019) highlights the importance of port projects and coastal access in the Red Sea arena, while research on North Africa demonstrates that Gulf states have increasingly linked investments and economic relations to broader strategic goals. This perspective expands the analytical frame: Gulf influence in Africa operates not only through force or diplomacy, but also through commercial presence and infrastructure deals (Vertin, 2019; Sons, 2021).

Divergence Among Gulf States

A third theme emphasizes that the Gulf states should not be treated as a monolithic bloc. Even when they operate in the same African spaces, they often pursue different objectives and deploy different tools. The UAE is typically presented as the most active actor, combining commercial, political, and security interests. Qatar is more commonly associated with mediation, diplomacy, and humanitarian engagement, while Saudi Arabia is generally linked to development finance, religious legitimacy, and broader regional diplomacy. This disaggregated perspective is important because it resists the tendency to overgeneralize "Gulf influence" as a single coherent strategy (Vertin, 2019; Sons, 2021).

African Agency and Critical Perspectives

More critical scholarship challenges state-centred readings of Gulf-Africa relations. Ylönen (2022) argues that realist accounts often portray Gulf countries as naturally dominant actors while devoting insufficient attention to African agency. African governments, elites, and local actors are not simply acted upon; they negotiate, redirect, and sometimes resist outside influence in ways that materially shape political outcomes. This makes Gulf influence relational rather than unidirectional (Ylönen, 2022).

Overall, the literature is strong in explaining why the Horn of Africa matters, how Gulf rivalries cross the Red Sea, and why the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar warrant separate analytical treatment. However, little work brings all three Gulf states within a single analytical framework and traces the political consequences



of their respective tools across multiple African regions. That gap frames and informs this study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper employs neoclassical realism as its primary theoretical framework, supplemented by Joseph Nye's concept of soft power. The combination is appropriate because it connects structural explanations of state behavior with the internal processes through which foreign policy is formulated and executed, and in this case, it shows the relationship between the foreign policy direction of the Gulf states and African countries.

Neoclassical Realism

In his foundational contribution, Gideon Rose (1998) argues that the scope of a state's foreign policy is shaped by its relative material capabilities, but this relationship is not direct: systemic pressures are filtered through intervening domestic variables such as elite perceptions, leadership preferences, and state institutional structures. Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell (2016) extend this framework, treating neoclassical realism as a research program capable of explaining foreign policy decisions, grand strategies, and patterns of international behavior. This is why this theory is most appropriate for this study, as the neoclassical realism provides a coherent logic to explain why the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar pursue an active African policy. Neoclassical realism also explains the context of why and how the Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar) confront a volatile, competitive regional environment, and account for why they behave differently, given their distinct domestic politics, elite priorities, and regime security concerns.

This theoretical framework is especially well-suited to middle-weight and small states. Miller and Verhoeven (2019) argue that both Qatar and the UAE have pursued foreign policy strategies aimed at "overcoming smallness" by leveraging ideological and strategic differentiation to expand their international footprint despite limited size. Their analysis reinforces the proposition that Gulf engagement in Africa is part of a broader strategy through which comparatively small but wealthy and geopolitically exposed states accumulate power, diplomatic capital, and strategic autonomy.

In the context of this study, the systemic environment comprises the geopolitical pressures generated by the intersection of the Gulf region, the Red Sea, and Africa. The Horn of Africa and North Africa serve as strategic gateways connecting Gulf security concerns to transcontinental trade routes and political networks. Intervening domestic variables include regime security concerns, elite threat perceptions, state capabilities, and divergent foreign policy visions, which are all factors that account for the UAE's commercial-security activism, Saudi Arabia's developmental and normative leadership, and Qatar's mediation-and-humanitarian orientation (Melvin, 2019; Sons, 2021; Barakat, 2024).

Soft Power as a Complementary Concept

Neoclassical realism cannot fully capture the Gulf's influence exercised through attraction, agenda-setting, legitimacy, and reputational positioning. The study, therefore, incorporates Nye's (1990) concept of soft power, which is the capacity to shape the preferences of others through appeal rather than coercion, drawing

on cultural attraction, ideology, and institutional presence. This is particularly relevant here because the Gulf influence in Africa cannot be reduced to military access, conditioned aid, or economic leverage. It also operates through media outreach, mediation, religious diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, elite networks, and reputational policymaking. Qatar's humanitarian diplomacy and media prominence, Saudi Arabia's religious legitimacy and diplomatic outreach, and the UAE's image as a development and logistics hub all demonstrate the importance of attraction and agenda-setting alongside hard-power instruments.

Neoclassical realism thus explains the motivations and structural context of Gulf engagement, while soft power clarifies the nature of the instruments deployed. Together, they provide a framework suited to analyzing a topic that spans hard security, geoeconomics, normative diplomacy, and symbolic politics.

Incorporating African Agency

Realism and neoclassical realism can be excessively state-centric, and this is a caveat that must be addressed. As Ylönen (2022) argues, much of the literature on Gulf-Horn relations treats Gulf states as the dominant actors, effectively backgrounding the role of African governments, elites, and civil society actors. This criticism is taken seriously in this present study. The neoclassical realist framework is accordingly modified to treat African governments, elite coalitions, and political actors as strategic agents who bargain with, accommodate, redirect, or resist Gulf engagement in accordance with their own interests. This modification substantially improves the analytical purchase of the framework for studying African political dynamics, where external influence is always mediated through domestic political conditions (Ylönen, 2022; Bachmann et al., 2024).

Therefore, the resulting causal chain is as follows: external competition and strategic opportunities generate motivation for Gulf engagement; elite perceptions and institutional capabilities shape the foreign policy of each Gulf state; those policies are expressed through specific instruments such as aid, ports, logistics, mediation, security partnerships, media diplomacy, which in turn produce political outcomes whose character is determined by the behavior of African actors.

Table 2: Application of the Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Element	Meaning Within the Framework	Application to This Study
Systemic pressures	Strategic opportunities and threats in the international environment	Red Sea competition, Gulf rivalry, maritime security, regional order-building
Intervening domestic variables	Leaders' perceptions, regime-security concerns, state structure, elite strategy	Different foreign policy styles of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar



Hard-power instruments	Coercive or material tools of influence	Security cooperation, military access, strategic infrastructure, financial leverage
Soft-power instruments	Attraction, agenda-setting, legitimacy, and reputational influence	Mediation, humanitarian diplomacy, media influence, religious diplomacy
African agency	Local actors shape how external influence is received and negotiated	African governments and elites bargain with, redirect, or resist Gulf engagement
Political outcomes	Effects on domestic and regional politics	Alignment, regime support, elite coalition shifts, governance effects, conflict dynamics

Table 2: Application of the theoretical framework. Source: Author's synthesis based on Rose (1998), Ripsman et al. (2016), Nye (1990), and Ylönen (2022).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design, drawing on secondary data to examine the influence of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar in African politics. Given the multi-level nature of the research questions, which span multiple Gulf states, diverse

instruments of influence, and varied African contexts, a secondary data approach is both appropriate and practically necessary within the available scope and timeframe.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study illuminate the complex and differentiated character of Gulf influence in African politics. The evidence confirms that the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar employ combinations of hard-power and soft-power instruments, including security cooperation, port access, military arrangements, investment, humanitarian diplomacy, mediation, and media influence in pursuit of distinct strategic objectives. This pattern is consistent with the integrated theoretical framework, which opined that international pressures are filtered through domestic political institutions and elite preferences, producing unique instruments of influence whose effects are moderated by African agency (Rose, 1998; Ripsman et al., 2016).

Distinct Strategic Postures

Among the most significant findings is the divergence in strategic postures among the three Gulf states. The UAE consistently champions and combines commercial and security interests, as reflected in its port acquisitions in Somaliland (Berbera) and Eritrea (Assab), strategic infrastructure projects, and security partnerships with regional military forces. In contrast, Qatar relies primarily on humanitarian initiatives, mediation, and media prominence to exercise influence. This demonstrates that a significant political impact is achievable without large-scale military deployment. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia employs development finance, institutional diplomacy, and normative leadership to secure strategic gains. These conclusions align with Miller and Verhoeven's (2020) argument about small states overcoming smallness as each Gulf actor translates its domestic strategic agenda into a distinctive interpretation of the opportunities available in Africa.

Table 4: Comparative Patterns of Gulf Influence in Africa

Gulf State	Primary Instruments	Regional Focus	Empirical Findings	Theoretical Interpretation
UAE	Ports, infrastructure, security partnerships	Horn of Africa, Red Sea coast	Strong operational presence in Berbera and Assab; integration of commercial and security activities	Hard-power projection mediated by elite perception (NCR)
Qatar	Humanitarian aid, mediation, media, diplomacy	Somalia, Sudan, selective Horn states	Aid as political tool; strengthened diplomatic access during Gulf blockade	Soft-power influence aligned with NCR systemic opportunities
Saudi Arabia	Development finance, normative diplomacy, religious legitimacy	Sudan, broader sub-Saharan Africa	Aid allocation influenced by Arab solidarity, recipient needs, and	Institutional influence reflecting domestic regime priorities within NCR



			commercial ties	framework
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Table 4: Comparative patterns of Gulf influence in Africa. Source: Author's synthesis based on secondary data.

Geography and Strategic Context

The findings further underscore the importance of geography and strategic exposure in shaping regional dynamics. The Horn of Africa remains the most heavily engaged area, consistent with prior research from Verhoeven (2018), Melvin (2019), and Vertin (2019). Its proximity to the Red Sea and its history of political instability create an environment particularly conducive to Gulf strategic investment. North Africa and the Maghreb have grown in salience in recent years, driven by Gulf interest in energy projects, infrastructure corridors, and access to Mediterranean and European markets (Sons, 2021). These patterns confirm the neoclassical realist argument that external engagement is driven by systemic opportunities and strategic threats.

African Agency as a Moderating Variable

The analysis provides robust support for the role of African agency. Elite and governmental actors in Djibouti, Somalia, and Sudan have demonstrably used Gulf competition to extract better terms for aid, port access, and military cooperation, reinforcing Ylönen's (2022) critique of state-centric approaches that treat Africa as a passive arena for external projection. This finding has important implications for how Gulf influence is theorized, especially as political outcomes are shaped largely by Gulf strategic intent and not by African bargaining and domestic conditions.

Interactions Among Instruments

The analysis also reveals systematic interactions among the instruments Gulf states deploy. Hard and soft tools are frequently combined: the UAE's port and infrastructure investments typically accompany aid provision or cooperation agreements; Qatar's humanitarian interventions are reinforced by media strategies and diplomatic engagement; Saudi Arabia's development finance is aligned with its objectives of regional normative leadership. These complementarities confirm that influence is multidimensional — analyzing any single instrument in isolation will produce an incomplete and potentially misleading account of Gulf engagement (Barakat, 2024).

Context-Dependence of Instrumental Effectiveness

Finally, the findings demonstrate that the effectiveness of any given Gulf instrument as highly context-dependent. Hard-power strategies such as port acquisition and basing arrangements are most consequential in host states that have limited bargaining leverage or are strategically dependent. Soft-power strategies such as humanitarian aid, mediation, and media influence are most effective in settings characterized by political fragmentation or transition. Qatar's success in Somalia, where it established meaningful influence through humanitarian and diplomatic means without military infrastructure, illustrates this point clearly. These contextual dynamics are consistent with both neoclassical realism's emphasis on the domestic mediation of systemic pressures and Nye's argument that soft power operates through attraction rather than compulsion (Rose, 1998; Nye, 1990).

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the roles of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar in African politics, with particular attention to the divergence in their approaches, instruments, and political outcomes. The analysis shows that Gulf influence on the continent is multidimensional, combining both hard-power tools, including ports, security cooperation, and strategic infrastructure and soft-power instruments such as humanitarian diplomacy, mediation, media outreach, and normative leadership. These tools are deployed within the logic of neoclassical realism, wherein systemic competitive pressures are processed through domestic political structures, elite perceptions, and regime priorities, with soft power supplementing the framework to explain attraction-based influence (Rose, 1998; Ripsman et al., 2016).

The findings reinforce the importance of treating the Gulf states individually rather than as a homogenous bloc. The UAE's operational strength in commercial, military, and infrastructural domains, particularly in the Horn of Africa, contrasts sharply with Qatar's reliance on humanitarian and diplomatic means, which demonstrates that meaningful political influence can be achieved without large-scale military or commercial deployment. Saudi Arabia's developmental and normative strategy, meanwhile, builds durable influence through institutional relationships and long-term engagement (Miller & Verhoeven, 2019; Verhoeven, 2018).

The study also highlights regional variation in Gulf foreign policy behavior. The Horn of Africa, given its stake in maritime trade, proximity to maritime choke points and its history of instability, remains the primary site of Gulf engagement (Melvin, 2019; Vertin, 2019). The Maghreb and North Africa are rising in strategic salience, particularly regarding infrastructure, energy, and Mediterranean connectivity (Sons, 2021).

African agency emerges as a critical moderating variable. The evidence consistently shows that African actors do not absorb external influence passively, but negotiate, redirect, and resist it according to their domestic circumstances and strategic interests. This finding directly addresses the shortcomings of state-centric analytical approaches and underscores the need for scholars to take local agency seriously when analyzing the effects of external actors (Ylönen, 2022; Bachmann et al., 2024).

Ultimately, Gulf influence in Africa is strategically differentiated, geographically varied, instrumentally multifaceted, and largely shaped by African political dynamics. Comprehending this influence requires attention to both structural constraints, including regional rivalries, maritime security, and strategic competition, and the diverse pathways through which states translate structural incentives into political effects. The study provides a foundation for further comparative and empirical work on one of the most consequential emerging relationships in contemporary world politics.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are directed at researchers, diplomats, and policymakers in both Gulf and African states. The recommendations are as follows

Strategic Coordination Among Gulf States

The UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar should consider aligning their African engagement strategies to reduce duplication, mitigate competitive externalities, and maximize collective impact on development and political stability. The evidence indicates that uncoordinated action can exacerbate regional rivalries and contribute to domestic instability in host states (Melvin, 2019; Verhoeven, 2018). Enhanced communication with local stakeholders would also improve credibility and reduce the risk of misaligned incentives.

Integrating Hard and Soft Power

Gulf states should ensure that soft-power instruments such as humanitarian assistance, mediation, public diplomacy, and cultural engagement are effectively integrated with hard-power resources rather than deployed in isolation. Qatar's experience in Somalia demonstrates that soft power can generate substantial political influence in divided settings where military and economic leverage is limited (Pericoli & Donelli, 2024). Reputation-building, normative engagement, and mediation capacity can complement or/and sometimes substitute for development and security investments.

Strengthening African Agency

African governments should be empowered to negotiate the terms of their engagement with Gulf states strategically, rather than being subject to external competition they cannot shape. The experiences of Sudan, Somalia, and Djibouti show that domestic actors can use Gulf rivalry to improve terms for aid, port development, and political partnerships (Ylönen, 2022; Sons, 2021). African governments are advised to develop donor coordination frameworks, establish monitoring mechanisms for externally financed projects, and integrate Gulf-backed initiatives into national development planning to ensure coherence and accountability.

Holistic Policy Impact Assessment

Both Gulf and African policymakers should invest in comprehensive impact assessments that account for the political, economic, and social consequences of external engagement. The findings demonstrate that different instruments — ports, security cooperation, aid programs — interact in complex ways, producing both intended and unintended political effects (Bokhari & Oh, 2022; Melvin, 2019). Systematic assessment would improve project selection, enable governance monitoring, and provide the evidence base for adaptive policymaking.

Expanding the Research Agenda

Academic research should move beyond its current geographic concentration to address Gulf engagement in West, Central, and East Africa, where involvement is expanding but systematically understudied. Future research should also adopt more integrated methodological designs — combining quantitative analysis of aid and investment flows with qualitative examination of political

outcomes — to better capture the multi-channel character of Gulf influence (Sons, 2021; Verhoeven, 2018).

Aligning Engagement with Governance Objectives

Finally, Gulf states can enhance both the impact and legitimacy of their African engagement by ensuring that hard and soft instruments are aligned with host-country governance objectives. Port development, infrastructure investment, aid delivery, and mediation programs should be designed to strengthen host-government capacity and reduce elite capture or aid dependency. Aligning external engagement with domestic governance priorities is consistent with the neoclassical realist insight that foreign policy outcomes are jointly determined by systemic pressures and domestic institutional conditions — and with the soft power logic that durable influence depends on genuine attraction and shared benefit (Rose, 1998; Ripsman et al., 2016).

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