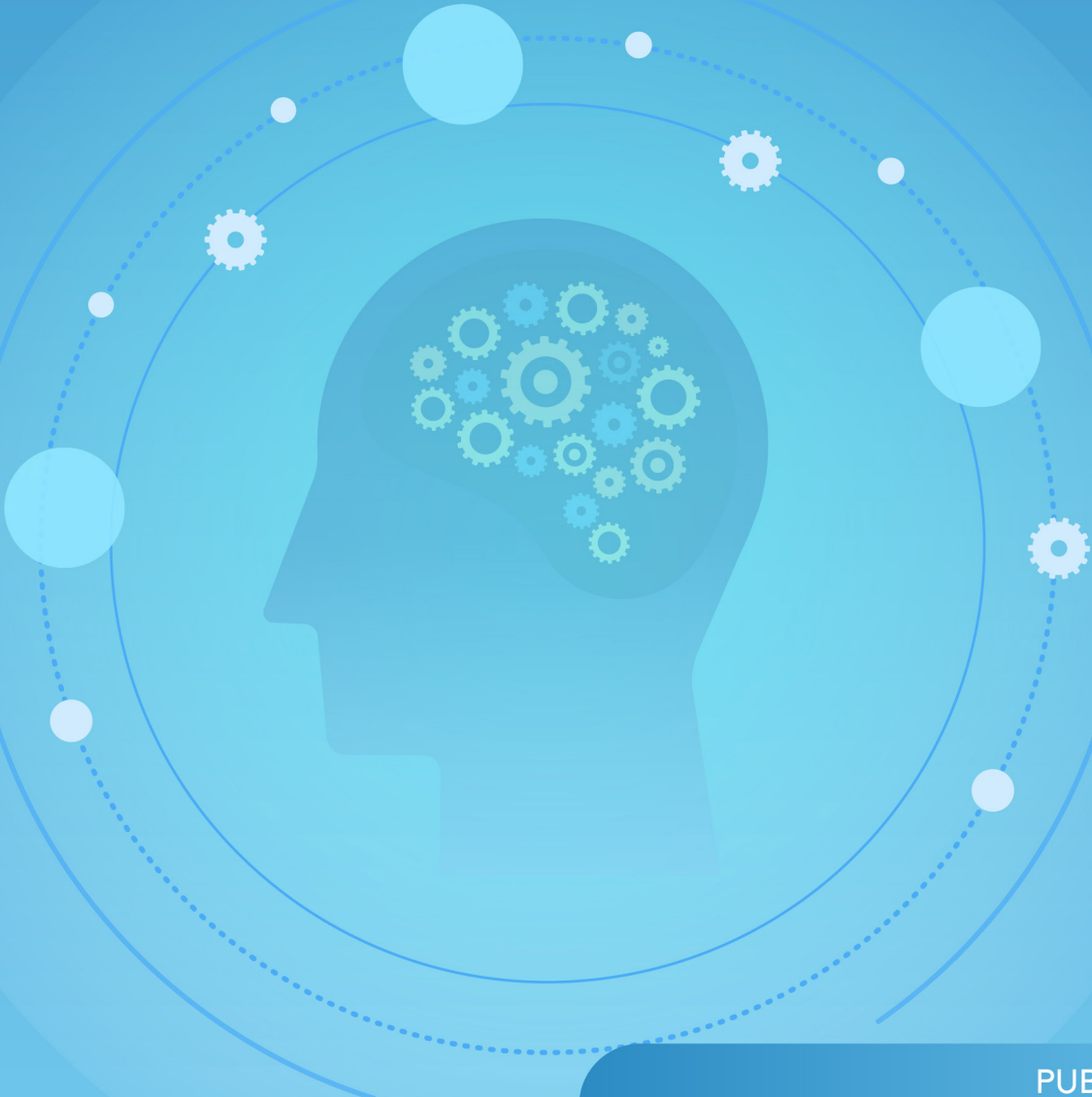




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Somalia Relations with the United Arab Emirates: A Study of Bilateral Relations (2000-2022)

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, the UAE has been a major player in Somalia by gaining port contracts, forming and training special forces, building alliances with the Federal Government, and also maintaining friendly ties with Somaliland, a self-declared independent province but lacking international recognition. These actions have fueled domestic unrest and harmed Somalia's unity, sovereignty, and democratic processes. Thus, this paper examines Somali-UAE bilateral relations from 2000 to 2022. The study sought to ascertain Somalia's strategic position within UAE foreign policy, identify the factors that bolster Somalia-UAE relations, and explore potential avenues for the expansion of these linkages. The study utilized a qualitative technique grounded in descriptive and historical research designs. Secondary sources were examined and assessed. The study indicated that the United Arab Emirates established a military facility in Somalia for political and security purposes. According to the research, Somalia needs a pragmatic and assertive foreign policy strategy to promote its national interests. The research uncovered that UAE trade indexes are increasing, while Somalia's is declining. However, political stability and security reform could attract international investors. Diplomatic relations between Somalia and the UAE are improving with multilateral security agreements and renewed security sectors. Finally, the study recommends that the UAE leadership respect Somalia's sovereignty and territorial unity, safeguarding brotherly relations. The paper also suggests that the Somali government should elucidate its foreign policy, goals, and relationships with Arab League and OIC countries—the research further advocates for enhancing trade, security, and economic collaboration with the UAE.

INTRODUCTION

The more globalized culture of today blurs the lines separating local, regional, and global, powerfully influencing our daily lives (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2011). The contemporary sovereign countries were founded by the Westphalian Treaty in 1648 and the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, which segmented the old world into state entities. In the early twentieth century, four colleges in the United States and Europe recognized international relations as a separate discipline under political science (Potter, 1923). On that note, the modern state structure, founded on sovereignty and territorial integrity principles, was formed by the Treaties of Utrecht and Westphalia, which laid its foundational framework. The UAE's involvement in Somaliland and Puntland, regions claimed by Somalia, has intensified tensions about Somalia's sovereignty, making these principles relevant to the bilateral relationship of this study. Moreover, international relations is a comprehensive concept which encompasses not only the interactions among countries, states or nations but also between states and non-state entities, including religious institutions, Islamist movements, Sufi orders, mosque committees, humanitarian relief organizations, Community-based organizations (CBO), and multinational corporations, as well as between states and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) like the UN and the EU (Wilkinson, 2007).

Since antiquity, the Horn of Africa, encompassing the Somali peninsula, has fostered strong connections with the Arabian Peninsula, which were further reinforced by the advent of Islam in Arabia in 610 AD. Due to political and religious unrest in Arabia as well as natural disasters, numerous immigrants have moved to the Horn of Africa in search of economic opportunity, unity, and the spread of Islam (Abdullahi, 2011). The historical record of the 19th century shows the affinity and connections between some Somali clans in the current Puntland state of Somalia and Sheikh Saqar al-Qāsimi, the ruler of Sharjah emirate in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The narrative of Sheikh Ali Abdurrahman (Majeerteen) constitutes a documented historical account. Sheikh Ali Abdurrahman fled his house following a dispute with his tribe and established residence in the eastern area under the guidance of Majeerteen Sultan Noor Usman. He allied with rebel Sultan Haji Farah Hirsi and sought to set up a new sultanate or depose his cousin. Sheikh Ali composed a letter to Sheikh Saqar al-Qāsimi, the ruler of Sharjah, soliciting collaboration. He thereafter journeyed to India and Zanzibar, where he resided for 15 months under Sultan Said al Bu-Saīdi. He reached Marka in 1847 with the intention of founding an Islamic Emirate (Abdullahi, 2011).

Since their respective inceptions in 1960 and 1971, the Federal Republic of Somalia and the United Arab

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Emirates (UAE) have maintained strong diplomatic ties. Both nations are constituents of the Arab League (AL) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), two groups that promote cooperation among Muslims. Following the fall of the central government of Somalia in 1991, the emphasis shifted to economic cooperation and trade. Since Somalia's re-establishment in 2000, ties between the UAE and Somalia have grown, notwithstanding diplomatic rifts caused by the Gulf crisis and Somali neutrality. Since the state breakdown, the relationship between Somalia and the UAE has been characterized by charity as much as by trade. The UAE has mostly engaged in humanitarian domains. Charity groups based in the United Arab Emirates have helped feed the hungry, construct mosques, schools, Islamic centers, hospitals, and orphanages in Mogadishu, as well as provide aid to Somali nationals.

The United Arab Emirates has intensified its engagement in the Horn of Africa by assisting in the resolution of Somalia's piracy situation and providing humanitarian relief to Mogadishu (Telci, 2018). The UAE has emerged as a key player in the region by strengthening its political and economic connections. The International Humanitarian City in the UAE is the largest humanitarian center globally. The Emirati bilateral aid policy integrates military and humanitarian support, as Gulf donors transition from little humanitarian help to substantial disbursements aimed at economic stabilization (Rift Valley Institute Briefing Paper, 2021).

After the state collapsed in 1991, Somalia and the UAE resumed diplomatic ties in 2013. The political, economic, security, investment, and development spheres were the primary focal points of the signed memorandum of agreement. The Emirati embassy in Mogadishu was reinstated. Political tensions and public outcry led to the cancellation of DP World, an enterprise controlled by Dubai. Visas to Somali people were temporarily halted and residency visas for Dubai residents were not renewed by the UAE. Another factor contributing to the rise of anti-Emirati sentiment in Somalia was the closure of the hospital it ran in Mogadishu (Telci & Horoz, 2018).

According to recent studies, the political and security rivalry between Middle Eastern governments and those in the Horn of Africa has grown since the Arab Spring (Kabandula & Donelli, 2025). In already unstable nations like Somalia, this rivalry has only made things worse. Nonetheless, studies examining the impact of the Gulf States—and the United Arab Emirates in particular—in Somalia are few. This paper examines the UAE's perceived geopolitical interests in Somalia, its motivations for investing in the country's strategic location, and its aspiration for a relationship with Somalia. The diplomatic ties between the two nations have received less attention than their economic and commercial connections, despite the extensive literature available on these subjects. This article fills a knowledge gap by offering a critical examination of the diplomatic relations between Somalia and the UAE during the past 20 years.

This work was significant since it addressed deficiencies in the limited and fragmented literature. Researchers, lecturers, scholars, educators, and politicians now possess a new resource that may assist them in establishing closer diplomatic connections with Somalia and the United Arab Emirates, capitalizing on possibilities, and surmounting challenges. The article analyzed the challenges both nations have faced in the past and present, along with their future prospects.

The declining connection between Somalia and the UAE has prompted discourse among scholars. The academics address topics such as humanitarian operations, the expansion of UAE military outposts, DP World's involvement in Somalia's ports, the UAE's strategy regarding autonomous regions, and the implications for Somalia's political independence, territorial integrity, and the Horn of Africa region. Moreover, difficulties have arisen in the Somali-UAE relationship owing to many reciprocal actions, including the UAE's termination of a military cooperation program with Somalia and Somalia's prohibition of Dubai-operated DP World. The United Arab Emirates has committed to buying livestock from Somaliland markets and supporting the Somaliland government in strengthening its security forces and military. Somalia has prohibited DP World from operating within its borders due to deteriorating relations (Africa Research Bulletin, 2018). The ports of Somalia, including Barbara, compete with those in the United Arab Emirates, notably Jebel Ali Port; hence, the primary objective of the research is to explore Somalia's strategic position for commercial benefit. Abu Dhabi faces challenges in preserving its critical role in the Arab world, but the political stability and functional condition of Somalia might facilitate a substantial market presence there. Besides the primary purpose of this study, which is to investigate the bilateral relations between Somalia and the United Arab Emirates from the year 2000 to 2022, the study is guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To identify the nature of the Somalia-UAE relations.
2. To determine the strategic location of Somalia in UAE foreign policy.
3. To ascertain the factors strengthen Somalia-UAE relations and their future development prospects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Somalia-UAE relationship has received little literary attention. To date, there has been no study on the subject, no exhaustive scholarly publications, and no books. Researchers have written several reports and a few articles. Although many aspects of the content were captivating, it lacked the requisite depth to provide an extensive comprehension of the issue and did not put it together. This signifies the existence of deficiencies in the literature, indicating gaps within it. Thus, this article attempts to address these deficiencies in the literature. Here, nevertheless, the researcher acknowledges some pertinent works of literature.

Fabio van Loon's recent work "Middle-Power Aid Rivalry

in the Horn of Africa: A Comparative Study of Emirati and Turkish Foreign Aid Policy in Somalia” examines Turkey’s foreign assistance approach of promoting Political Islam, and the UAE’s approach of endorsing Secular Absolutism. The evolution of a politically weaponized Islam, supported by Erdogan’s administration, has subverted Turkey’s foreign aid ideology. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and its Western and American allies have been observing and combating conservative Islamic groups in the Middle East, including Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and Yemen’s Houthi rebels. Emirati investments in Somalia concentrate on the nation’s essential economic and security goals, unlike Turkey’s multifaceted and multi-actor support approach (Loon, 2022).

Hassan Abdi Hassan examines the UAE’s stance on Somalia amid the Qatar-Gulf diplomatic conflict in his 2017 article. He specifies numerous causes for the issue, one of which is Qatar’s backing of terrorist organizations, including al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Hamas. The Horn of Africa is characterized by political instability, internal armed conflict, and a fragile post-war recovery, compounded by the Gulf crisis. The Gulf War has intensified regional militarism, forcing governments to align with one of four nations: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, or Turkey. Hassan contends that the current situation in the Gulf might escalate the bloodiest territorial dispute in the Horn of Africa by leading to a military war between Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. Another important aspect is the role that the UAE has played in Somalia. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE are all trying to gain geopolitical influence in the nation. The article also discusses Somalia’s neutral position during the diplomatic crisis in the Gulf (Hassan, 2017).

The United Arab Emirates foreign policy following the Arab Spring of 2011 has been examined by Kristian Coates Ulrich, a renowned scholar in UAE-Africa relations. Ulrich contends that the UAE has embraced a more assertive position in regional and international policies, emphasizing a state security approach to foreign relations. Under Sheikh Zayed, the UAE prioritized fostering strong connections with Gulf nations and other Arab and Islamic governments, particularly the Gulf Cooperation Council and Palestine. Significant alterations to UAE foreign policy commenced in the late 1990s, as the UAE shifted focus from Arab and Islamic concerns to aggressively engaging with global economic trends. This resulted in strengthened connections with the United States, engagement in Middle Eastern crises, and involvement in Afghanistan since 2001. In the last ten years, the UAE has progressively emerged as a contributor to regional security frameworks in the Gulf and the Middle East. The UAE’s muscular foreign policy is demonstrated through its military involvement in Afghanistan, regional interference in Bahrain, and military actions in Yemen. Kristian’s paper “Transformations in the UAE’s Foreign Policy” emphasizes the UAE’s increasing assertiveness in foreign policy as a security “clique” exerted influence over policymaking (Ulrich, 2017).

The study conducted by Kyrre Berland, Chris Brew, and Delia Burns examines the policy goals of the UAE in Somalia and the Horn of Africa. Their study titled “Examining Emirati Foreign Policy Influence in the Horn of Africa” analyzes how the geopolitical strategy of the United Arab Emirates impacts the dynamics of Somali politics. Berland *et al.* (n.d.) investigate a range of topics pertaining to Somalia’s state-building and bearded trade post-2005, encompassing corporate affiliations, resettlement policies, market expansion, Somalia’s geopolitical stance relative to the UAE, and Emirati ports as manifestations of UAE influence.

The report of the International Crisis Group titled, “The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa,” exposes the growing presence of the UAE and other Gulf nations in the Horn of Africa. The study discusses the Intra-Gulf Crisis, the Arab Spring, the catalyst in Yemen, and the peace treaty between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Sanctions against Qatar were imposed as a result of the Intra-Gulf Crisis, while military operations in Yemen were led by the UAE and Saudi Arabia to defeat Houthi insurgents (International Crisis Group, 2018b). In addition, this work is referenced by the majority of researchers in the discipline.

The 2018 “United Arab Emirates: Somalia’s New Scapegoat” by Hassan Mudane draws attention to the deteriorating ties between the two countries. Ethiopia, he contends, has always been seen as Somalia’s scapegoat; the UAE is now part of this story. Mudane points out two causes for the sour diplomatic ties: Somalia’s neutrality on the Qatar-Gulf conflict and the UAE’s worry about the connections between Somalia and Turkey. He asserts that the Federal Government needs to handle internal matters and adopt a more reasonable approach to foreign policy (Mudane, 2018).

The 2018 paper authored by Sharmake Farah with the title “Managing Somalia’s Stressed Diplomatic Relations with UAE Briefing Note” offers a thorough analysis of the UAE’s and Somalia’s diplomatic ties. It touches on topics such as the UAE’s interests, the Memorandum of Understanding, the Arab Spring, present challenges, and policy recommendations to mitigate the UAE’s intervention and prevent a detrimental decline (Farah, 2018).

In his 2018 paper titled “A Lost Love between the Horn of Africa and the UAE,” Ismail N. Telci examines the geopolitical impact of Arab Gulf countries, especially the UAE, on Somalia. Telci brings attention to the fact that local administrations in Somalia and Djibouti have objected to the UAE’s attempts to dominate key ports. The study also brought light to the situation at the UAE military installations in Somalia. According to Telci (2018), the Horn of Africa region is seeing the arrival of global powers such as Russia, Turkey, and China seeking alliances and cooperation with Eastern African states.

Political analyst Shafi’i Abtidoon observes in an essay published by the Al Jazeera Center for Studies that the Somali-UAE ties have been a focus of examination since 1837, particularly in light of the northern Somalia region’s close connections with Sultan Saqr Al Qasimi. Following

Somalia's 1960 independence and the establishment of two civilian governments, the UAE extended financial and military assistance to the revolutionary government. The 1970s witnessed an economic apex as commerce between the two nations peaked. In the context of the multinational coalition "Restore Hope," the United Arab Emirates dispatched armed forces to Somalia after the collapse of military governance in 1991 and the ensuing civil strife. However, by 1994, these efforts had proven to be futile. In 2017, amid the Gulf conflict, the UAE terminated relations with Qatar and aligned with the quadripartite coalition to enlist Somalia. The Gulf conflict spillover and the Berbera Port Agreement are the two principal factors contributing to the diplomatic crisis between Abu Dhabi and Mogadishu. The political situation between the United Arab Emirates and Somalia was worsened by the Gulf conflict, and in 2018, an agreement was signed between Ethiopia, Somaliland, and the Dubai Ports Company (Abtidoon, 2018).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study examines diplomatic ties between Somalia and the United Arab Emirates during the past two decades within a qualitative framework, employing descriptive and historical research designs. It was descriptive, detailing the diplomatic ties between the two nations rather than engaging in a profound analysis, and it was historical, assessing the past in connection to the present and future. The qualitative approach clarifies viewpoints and ideas in depth, reducing bias while revealing attitudes, actions, and experiences (Dawson, 2009). Historical research primarily focuses on the examination of the past and its connection to the present (Thomas, 2021). At the very early stage of qualitative data analysis, the researcher needs to possess a comprehensive notion of the data and its fundamental components. The researcher examined and gathered data from credible sources; familiarity with the data did not pose a significant problem in this study. The next step is to ascertain the comparability of the data. At this point, it is feasible to determine the authenticity of the data presented in several publications and journals on pertinent topics (Ragin, 2014). Under the qualitative approach, the researcher has the chance to easily examine a substantial volume of data. Furthermore, the primary emphasis of the aforementioned topic is the social and political context, together with the dilemmas surrounding the UAE's presence in Somalia and their diplomatic ties. The study relied on document review as a tool of data collection to gather and analyze the data. In addition, the study considered over 60 secondary sources, including existing empirical works of literature such as paper journals, books, book chapters, research outputs, organizational reports, government documents, policy documents and briefs, press releases, reports, articles, periodicals, newspapers, websites, archives, libraries, and media outlets, to understand the bilateral relations between Somalia and the United Arab Emirates. The sources were selected based on three principal criteria:

relevance, credibility, and historical scope. Sources were specifically chosen for their direct relevance to the bilateral relations between Somalia and the United Arab Emirates, particularly in the domains of diplomacy, trade, humanitarian assistance, and security cooperation. The study focused on publications issued between 2000 and 2024, ensuring legitimacy. The selection process prioritized peer-reviewed articles, reputable policy analyses, and verified statistics databases. Moreover, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the historical context and contemporary developments in Somalia-UAE relations, ensuring a rigorous and uniform document review approach. To begin, the researcher has acquired a better grasp of the subject and has selected the best suitable approach, design, and strategy by reviewing various secondary sources, including books, journals, and websites. The researcher has finally decided to use a secondary data collection technique for this study (Johnston, 2014).

Following an introduction to research methods and procedures, the researcher has reviewed many books and magazines covering topics like Somalia's relationship with the United Arab Emirates. Given the sensitive nature of the issue and the scarcity of prior academic studies, the researcher has benefited from these samples to get a deeper understanding of the subject and the current state of affairs. Relevant information for this research may also be found on several websites regarding the foreign political policies of the UAE concerning their engagement with Somalia and vice versa. Unfortunately, due to temporal and budgetary constraints, the researcher was unable to go to the UAE or Berbera Port to conduct interviews; nonetheless, the news reports from both sites have given a comprehensive summary of the situation. Thus, the researcher spent a lot of time online and perused various sources (Stage & Manning, 2015). Indeed, another impediment to primary data collection through interviews was the issue of security (Silverman, 2015). Extensive background information about Somalia and the UAE is essential for this study to derive reliable findings; also, the researcher has to collect supplementary samples on the same issue to substantiate their claims of authenticity. The researcher could not have accumulated such an extensive data collection without the internet and libraries. The subsequent qualitative approach has proven effective in analyzing this extensive dataset. For that reason, this research will use a qualitative approach.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A nation's diplomatic and foreign policy objectives may concentrate on security and militarism, economic profit, or financial and humanitarian assistance as a means of soft power to meet national ambitions. Each nation benefits from the interconnectedness of these international policy instruments, which collectively promote a unified and comprehensive strategy. Somalia's significant maritime, geopolitical, and geographical position has heightened the involvement of Gulf States in

Somali politics. When Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, and the UAE severed diplomatic ties with Qatar and banned its airspace use, the Gulf States' power increased during the Gulf crisis. Nonetheless, Qatar has opted to utilize Somalia's airspace (Mohamed, 2024). In addition, The UAE's involvement in the Horn of Africa began in the late 1990s. However, subsequent to the Arab Spring, the UAE has strengthened its regional involvement. Donelli and Dentice (2020) assert that the UAE's approach is centered on three interconnected domains: security, humanitarian diplomacy, and economy. On the same note, Somalia's strategic geographical position in the Gulf of Aden, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean has drawn the attention of Gulf nations, notably Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to strengthen their commercial, political, and military influence in the Horn of Africa, particularly in Somalia (Dahir, 2022). In compliance with these specifications, this subsection first offers a concise overview of the historical and diplomatic ties between the UAE and Somalia to provide a whole picture of the subject, and then it details the trade, humanitarian, and military policies that govern these relations.

Historical Background of the Somalia-UAE Relations

The historical lineage of the current diplomatic relationship between Somalia and the United Arab Emirates goes back to the first century CE (Schoff, 2011). Throughout the medieval and early modern eras, several Somali Sultanates fostered strong connections with neighboring countries beyond the Red Sea. Following gaining their independence in 1960 and 1971, respectively, the two nations became constituents of the OIC and the League of Arab States. Islam, proximity to the Arabian Peninsula, common ancestry, and a shared colonial past unite the two nations.

The two nations have maintained an exemplary diplomatic connection since the early 1970s; the President of Somalia visited the UAE several times and received cordial receptions from King Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahaney, the creator of the UAE. The practicalities and perspectives of Gulf Arab assistance, investment, and trade concerning African states cannot be comprehended without acknowledging the intricate historical context of ambivalent connections between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa (Meester, *et al.*, 2018).

The relationship between the UAE and Somalia remained robust after the breakdown of Somalia's central government in 1991. Subsequent to the disintegration of the Central government of Somali in 1991, the United Arab Emirates has focused on humanitarian initiatives, particularly in education, healthcare, and assistance for Somali orphans (Mohamed, 2024). The UAE awarded commercial permits and visas to Somali enterprises as well as welcomed Somali traders (HIPS, 2018). But Somalia has discovered itself in the epicenter of a violent geopolitical battle with great costs. After September 2001, the UAE's interest in Somalia shifted quickly and transformed into a foreign policy goal (Farah, 2018).

Diplomatic Relations

For millennia, Somalia and the Arab Peninsula have maintained deep religious, cultural, political, and commerce connections. Furthermore, Somalia is a member of the Arab League. With the intention of influencing over Somalia's political decision-makers, the two rich oil and competing nations, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have strengthened their power in Somalia by supporting the electoral campaigns of Somali parliament and presidential candidates financially. As a result, the Somalia election turned into a real and common example of clientelism and vote-buying in both parliamentary and presidential elections (Mohamed, 2024). Unaji (2007) enumerates diplomatic, cultural, psychological, economic, and military instruments as essential means for executing foreign policy. The Gulf nations further promote their national interests in Somalia through carrot diplomacy. Carrot diplomacy is a technique based on realism theory, in which nations utilize economic incentives or sanctions to induce other states to align with their national interests (Akçay & Kanat, 2018). For instance, the UAE employed this strategy when the central government of Somalia declined to sever relations with Qatar. Measures were implemented to penalize the Federal Government, included the closure of hospitals, the cessation of military training for Somali troops, and the shutdown of military outposts in Mogadishu. Moreover, it altered its connections and collaboration with federal member states like as Jubaland, Galmudug, and Puntland, in addition to the secessionist entity of Somaliland. This move infringes against territorial integrity and political independence, as the Federal Government is the sole authority responsible for formulating and executing foreign relations with other nations (Mohamed, 2024).

The United Arab Emirates terminated diplomatic ties with Somalia after the 1991 fall of the country's central government, which triggered prolonged civil wars and conflicts. The bilateral relations between the two nations were established on shared interests, especially in the realm of commerce (Farah, 2018). Following the breakdown, Somalia was no longer recognized as a legitimate membership in the international community. Nonetheless, Somalia finally finished its political transition in 2012 when it ratified a temporary constitution that allowed for a restricted, indirect election of a new federal parliament and president. The U.S. recognition of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) was formalized on January 17, 2013, and permanent diplomatic presence was reinstated in Mogadishu on October 2, 2019. Other countries followed suit, notably the UAE, which reopened its embassy in Mogadishu in 2014.

During the first tenure of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, Somalia continued to reconstruct its international connections. Throughout this administration, Somalia's foreign policy remained stagnant owing to weak state institutions, incomplete restoration of international confidence in Somalia, and

the regional and global systems maintaining a status quo. Nonetheless, Hassan's government established the foundation for the reinstatement of Somalia's diplomatic posts globally. Following Somalia's official recognition as a member of the international community in 2013, many senior Somali representatives traveled to the UAE to pursue collaboration for Somalia's reconstruction.

Furthermore, in late March 2013, Fowzia Yusuf Adan, the Foreign Minister of Somalia, and Sheikh Abdallah bin Zayd, her counterpart from the UAE, executed a Memorandum of Understanding. They reached a consensus to restore formal diplomatic relations between Somalia and the United Arab Emirates. Prime Minister Abdiweli Sheikh Ahmed of Somalia started an official three-day visit to the UAE in March 2014 to discuss about how the two countries may work together more closely (Raxanreeb, 2014). During discussions with UAE, the Emirati officials reaffirmed their dedication to Somalia's continuous post-conflict rebuilding efforts. Moreover, Prime Minister Omar Abdirashid continued the same policy towards the UAE. The two countries began to cooperate on several issues of mutual interest, including defense operations, re-institutionalization of government, marine safety, and the local rebuilding efforts. Furthermore, the Somali Foreign Minister Abdisalam Omar and the Emirati Foreign Minister Abdalla bin Zayd met to further the two countries' relationship on March 2015 (Goobjoog News, 2015). Additionally, in an effort to boost bilateral ties between the two nations, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, the president of Somalia, made an official visit to the United Arab Emirates in August 2015. As a result, UAE began to support Somali reconstruction multi-sector programs, including humanitarian, security, health, and capacity building.

Over the past few years, the UAE has been a major player in Somalia. Gaining port contracts, providing training, forming special forces, negotiating agreements for military bases, and forming political alliances with the Federal Government of Somalia and federal member states like Puntland and Jubaland are all ways this influence is shown. However, the decline of the relations between the two states occurred with the ascension of President Mohamed Abdullahi 'Farmaajo' and Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khayre to the office on February 8, 2017. The UAE also encourages friendly ties with Somaliland, a province that proclaimed independence from Somalia in 1991; however, it lacks international recognition. These acts fueled the ongoing domestic unrest in Somalia and harmed the country's unity, sovereignty, and democratic processes (Mohamed, 2024; Mudane, 2018).

On his inaugural foreign journey after winning reelection on May 15, 2022, Somalia's president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud visited the United Arab Emirates. His goal was to enhance ties with the United Arab Emirates, so he engaged in discussions with the country's new ruler, Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, about important bilateral matters. A motto of "Somalis in agreement among themselves and with the rest of the world" was

adopted by the new government under Mohamud.

The diplomatic relations between Somalia and the UAE have experienced fluctuations of progress and decline due to various factors. On one hand, the UAE has considerably helped improve connections through humanitarian assistance, supplying food, medical supplies, and infrastructural development, which Somalia has well accepted. In addition, assisting with counterterrorism initiatives against al-Shabaab and the training of Somali military troops exemplifies security collaboration that has reinforced relationships between the two nations. The bilateral ties between the two nations have improved due to economic investments, which have invigorated Somalia's economy and upgraded its ports and infrastructure. These initiatives have significantly facilitated the development of bilateral relations. On the other hand, numerous factors have led to the decline of connections. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) expressed disappointment that Somalia did not side with the Saudi-led coalition during the 2017 Qatar-Gulf crisis, opting instead for neutrality (International Crisis Group, 2018). Moreover, the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) views the UAE's economic and military engagements in Puntland and Somaliland as a threat to Somali sovereignty. Somalia's decision to bar DP World from using its ports due to sovereignty concerns added fuel to the already tense relations. The diplomatic ties between the two states are complex and often controversial owing to these factors.

The relationship between Somalia and the United Arab Emirates has been considerably affected by regional and international dynamics. The Gulf conflicts and the actions of other countries have been critical in this context. During the 2017 Gulf War, Somalia navigated a delicate situation amidst the political rift between Qatar and the Saudi-led coalition, which also included the UAE. The UAE was dissatisfied with the decision of Somalia to maintain neutrality throughout the crisis, resulting in a temporary deterioration in relations between the two nations (Dahir, 2022). Meanwhile, the UAE is antagonized by Turkey and Qatar, whom they see as regional competitors, due to the rising involvement of these states in Somalia through humanitarian assistance, military training, and infrastructural development (Mohamed, 2024). In addition, countries like China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are competing for influence in the Horn of Africa. Consequently, Somalia is increasingly struggling to maintain its sovereignty and strategic alliances while also balancing the interests of the UAE.

Despite notable changes, the foreign policy of the United Arab Emirates toward Somalia is quite similar to its approach to Yemen and the Horn of Africa. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has previously assisted Somalia and Yemen using humanitarian diplomacy, a method used to gain influence and establish partnerships. In addition, the United Arab Emirates has established military installations in strategic locations such as Berbera in Somalia and Assab in Yemen, indicating its broader

objective of controlling key regions in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (Stevis-Gridneff, 2018). The UAE is increasing its economic and geopolitical influence in both regions through investments in infrastructure and ports (Ding, 2024; Kabandula & Donelli, 2025). These collaborative initiatives demonstrate the UAE's broader regional aspirations. However, the political dynamics and level of engagement by the UAE differ greatly among various contexts. The United Arab Emirates has actively participated in military operations in Yemen against the Houthi rebels, although its involvement in Somalia has been less pronounced, focusing on the assistance and training of local forces rather than direct combat engagement. The United Arab Emirates must navigate the complex landscape of Somali internal politics, which includes conflicts between the central government and regional groups like Puntland and Somaliland. For instance, the UAE has adopted a more direct approach to alliances by forging closer ties with certain factions in Yemen, notably the Southern Transitional Council. These contrasts illustrate how the UAE may achieve its strategic goals in various regional contexts.

Different political factions in Somalia have diverse views about the UAE's influence. To start with Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), the connection between the FGS and the UAE has been intricate. The United Arab Emirates has offered military and humanitarian assistance to Somalia, but its activities and presence in Somaliland and Puntland have been seen as a threat to Somalia's sovereignty (Ahmed, 2018). As an example, the FGS contends that the UAE's port agreements with Puntland and military installation in Berbera (Somaliland) violate Somali territorial integrity. However, the economic and security benefits of UAE investment and military presence have been positively acknowledged by Somaliland and Puntland (Levy, 2023). One example is the investment by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the Berbera port has positively influenced the Somaliland economy. On contrary, some Somali opposition and civil society groups see the UAE's influence adversely, asserting that it deepens internal conflicts and hinders democratic initiatives. Some see the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) purported backing for certain candidates in the Somali elections as an intervention in Somalia's domestic matters.

Trade Relations

The Gulf nations possess a longstanding history of commercial and trading ties with the Horn of Africa. The Horn of Africa is situated in northeastern Africa, adjacent to the Indian Ocean, and it is separated from the Arabian Peninsula by water. It serves as the conduit to eastern and central Africa for the Gulf nations, which are constrained by the Red Sea and the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb (Ding, 2024). However, the UAE has decided to extend its influence over the Horn of Africa primarily through trade. The initial objective of the Emirates was to function as a manufacturing facility, importing diverse agricultural products from multiple regions of Africa.

The subsequent phase involves preparing them for sale and international consumption, which includes packaging (Marchand *et al.* 2017). In the context of Somalia and the United Arab Emirates, commerce is essential for promoting stable governmental relations. According to Ding (2024), trade between nations in the Horn of Africa and the Gulf States has been heavily influenced by geopolitics in recent years. Trade is profoundly embedded and widespread owing to its historical and cultural elements. Dubai functions as the headquarters for several Somali enterprises, establishing the United Arab Emirates as a major hub for this population. Somali enterprises may establish operations and engage with other firms inside Somalia and internationally due to the nation's streamlined residence and registration procedures. According to Scoop Independent News (2008), there are around 10,000 Somali entrepreneurs in the UAE. In fact, Dubai was a significant commercial partner for Somalia, acting as a conduit for the bulk of its imports until the 2010s. Additionally, Somalia, serving as the principal entry point to global markets, sent its commodities to Dubai (Assal, 2006).

Agriculture and livestock are significant sectors of trade collaboration between the nations of the Horn of Africa and the Gulf States. Livestock constitutes the cornerstone of the Somali economy, representing 40% of the gross domestic product (GDP), whereas Saudi Arabia and the UAE comprise 80% of Somalia's livestock export market (Ding, 2024). Somalia's export of \$146 million to the UAE indicates that the Overseas Employment Certificate (OEC) global trade index forecasts a trade profit of \$1.134 trillion for the UAE by 2022. Somalia's principal imports are condensed milk worth \$64.5 million, audiovisual products totaling \$115 million, and wrapped tobacco priced at \$534 million. In the last 15 years, there has been a 13% annual increase in exports from Somalia to the UAE. In 2020, Somalia's exports to the UAE increased by 5.89%, amounting to \$146 million, compared to \$61.8 million in 2005. The UAE constitutes 47% of Somalia's exported goods, making it the largest export partner. In 2021, the trade deficit had even widened since the UAE imported goods worth USD139.42 million from Somalia, as reported in the United Nations Common format for Transient Data Exchange for power systems (COMTRADE) database (Trading Economics, 2022). Furthermore, the \$1.3 billion in remittances sent back by Somalis residing abroad are a major boon to Somalia's economy. Somalia exhibits significant reliance on the UAE for financial remittance operations. Some of the remittance firms based in Dubai are Salama Money Express, Amal Express, Al-Mustaqbal, Dahabshiil, Kaah Express, and Amana.

Below, Figure 1 displays the trade indices for the UAE and Somalia from 2000 to 2022. Due to governmental instability and civil strife, Somalia's trade rates declined from 2001 to 2006. Nonetheless, its values have increased since that time, perhaps due to efforts aimed at strengthening states and reinstating optimism. The

political and economic stability of the United Arab Emirates has resulted in a consistent enhancement in the nation's trade rate. Somalia seems to be seeing a decrease in trade indicators, but the UAE is witnessing a rise. The

trade and commercial sectors in Somalia might gain from the enactment of security reforms and the establishment of political stability.

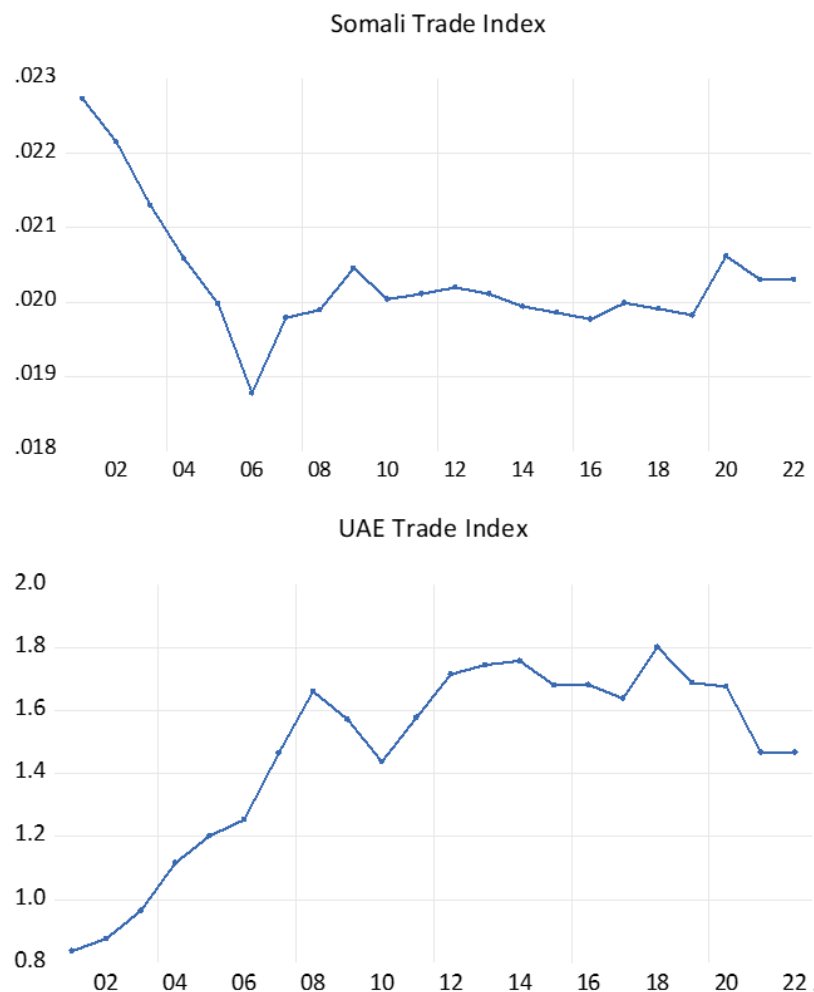


Figure 1: Somalia-UAE Trade Index.

Source: Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) & World development indicators (WDI)

The UAE's investments in Somalia have had both positive and negative long-term implications on the nation's economy. On the positive side, the UAE's infrastructure projects, particularly in the ports of Berbera and Bossaso, may improve trade and connectivity, benefiting Somalia's economy significantly. In addition, these infrastructure projects could provide job possibilities by invigorating local economies and constructing essential infrastructure. Moreover, the present agricultural and livestock-based economy of Somalia might be diversified with the support of investments from the UAE, fostering overall economic growth and resilience. These potential benefits illustrate the transformative impact of investments in Somalia's economy if they are handled properly. Nonetheless, these investments include substantial risks. A primary concern is that Somalia may forfeit a degree of its independence and policy autonomy should it become economically dependent on the UAE. Furthermore, other parts of Somalia may stay underdeveloped owing to the UAE's

concentration on Somaliland and Puntland, exacerbating regional inequalities within the nation. In addition, the assumption of substantial debt to finance these infrastructure initiatives will further complicate Somalia's economic stability. Finally, the Somali government must exercise caution about UAE investments to prevent issues related to financial sustainability, regional disparity, and dependency and ensure long-term economic prosperity (Trading Economics, 2022).

Humanitarian Relations

Humanitarian assistance engagement is a foreign policy instrument that affects other nations, motivated by ethical principles and national objectives. Throughout Somalia's civil war, the Gulf nations predominantly assumed a humanitarian role, assisting impoverished populations, constructing educational institutions, and financially supporting educators, rather than giving the state first priority and fostering peace initiatives (Mohamed, 2024).

The Gulf States, with substantial financial assets, have strengthened their influence in the Horn of Africa through assistance and investment. They are actively engaged in Horn of Africa affairs, utilizing their economic power to resolve crises and enhance their political influence. They utilize the Horn of Africa as an expansive theater for geopolitical rivalry (Ding, 2024).

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In 2011, the United Nations classified the Somali regions of Bakool and Lower Shabelle as under famine due to the most severe drought in East Africa in sixty years. As a whole, the eight areas in southern Somalia and extending beyond were in danger of being consumed by the crisis (Pham, 2011). More than 25 million people, mostly in Somalia and Ethiopia, might face extreme food insecurity by the middle of 2022. Potential outcomes include malnutrition and world famine (Birhan, 2024). According to the FAO report (2017), twelve million people in countries including Somalia, Kenya, and Djibouti needed food assistance in 2012. The UAE is a significant benefactor to the Horn of Africa during the severe drought. In the Horn of Africa, organizations like the Sharjah Charity Foundation, the Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Charity, and the United Arab Emirates Red

Crescent have collaborated with other organizations to construct refugee camps and provide aid to those in need in Ethiopia and Kenya. The United Arab Emirates has established itself as a major actor in global humanitarian relief efforts since 2011 (Ding, 2024).

According to OCHA (2011), the United Arab Emirates' philanthropic organizations and in-house groups were instrumental in preventing deaths due to drought and starvation. In 2018, Somalia received 900 metric tons of food assistance from the Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan Humanitarian Foundation. For the benefit of those affected by flooding and COVID-19 sufferers in Somalia, the United Arab Emirates provided airlifted relief in May 2022. The humanitarian and charitable organization established by Mohamed bin Rasheed Al-Maktoum rehabilitated forty artesian wells, constructed ten hospitals, donated sewing machines, goats, and livestock, and dug twenty-three irrigation canals. The Dar Al Ber Society raised 4 million dirhams in 2022 to facilitate an assistance initiative that provided meals to those in need. Almost a thousand tons of humanitarian supplies landed in Mogadishu in August 2022 from a UAE assistance ship (Goobjoog News, 2022).

Military Relations

States like Somalia, which is strategically located in the Horn of Africa, are impacted by security cooperation as a means of projecting power and advancing foreign policy objectives. As a result of escalating rivalry for access to the Red Sea, developing nations in the Middle East have invested billions of dollars to obtain ports and plots of land to construct military outposts since 2010 (Stevie-Gridneff, 2018). Military invasions of neighboring countries are not new, but they have changed over history in response to the growing influence of superpowers like the United States (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Russia (USSR) (Lersch & Sarti, 2014).

In the last ten years, the United Arab Emirates has boosted its military presence internationally and enhanced its geopolitical influence by creating military facilities and conducting joint military training with many nations in the Horn of Africa (Ding, 2024). Somalia has transformed into a battlefield for global powers due to the creation of military installations and infrastructures, with states such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey collaborating with the US and China. The security concerns and demands of these governments, both at home and abroad, have led to an expansion of their presence within the last decade (Kabandula & Donelli, 2025). In addition, Somalia and the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) military ties may be analyzed in light of Turkey's emergence as a new moderate power, the crisis within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the conflict in Yemen involving the Houthis rebels (Wilson & England, 2019). Prior to 2009, Djibouti was home to military installations maintained solely by the US and France. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations have shown considerable interest in setting up

a presence in the zone ever since. Examples include the 2016 approval of a Saudi military base by Djibouti and the 2015 ratification of a 30-year agreement with Eritrean President Afewerki to permit GCC operations in Eritrea by King Salman (Aidi, 2020).

The UAE built an airfield that was its first-ever permanent military facility and an overseas supply depot near the port of Assab in Eritrea. Afterward, the UAE stopped depending on Saudi naval bases and instead set up military outposts in Somalia, Djibouti, and Ethiopia. The UAE has as one of its primary foreign policy goals the extension of its influence in the Red Sea and East Africa. Military operations have taken place out of many of the Red Sea coast and Gulf of Aden ports that the UAE has taken over, including Mukalla, Aden, Moqa, Berbera, and Assab (Ding, 2024). Many researchers, like Mohamed (2024), contend that the UAE employs petrodollar diplomacy to make deals with different Somali states concerning port administration, military station arrangements, and the training of local armed forces loyal to them, all without the consent of the Central Federal Government, to enhance its economies and sustain its strategic status as a global trade hub. The United Arab Emirates exploits Somalia's weak governance, fragmentation, and insufficient administrative ability to assert control over its territories.

Since 2012, when President Hassan Sheikh Mahmoud took office, the military relationship between Somalia and the UAE has been fortified through the development of tight ties with Emirati authorities. Abu Dhabi has strategically positioned itself as a significant player in the nation through two primary mechanisms: the regulation of port operations and the establishment of defense installations (Telci, 2018). The relevance of the Horn of Africa to Gulf States is illustrated by the fact that its coastline is as near to Yemen as 30 kilometers (18.5 miles) at the Bab El-Mandeb strait, a vital maritime chokepoint for oil cargoes moving from the Gulf to Europe (Hassan, 2017). Despite calls from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Bahrain for the Somali government to cut ties with Qatar, Somalia has managed to preserve positive relations with the country. Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, the president of Somalia, has urged all parties to engage in talks and has permitted Qatari aircraft to traverse the airspace of Somalia (Schwikowski, 2017).

Since the inception of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the UAE has been constructing military installations in Somalia and other regions. This aims to enable it to more effectively project its power into the Gulf of Aden and create channels for the future delivery of food. In April 2017, DP World, the premier logistics enterprise of the United Arab Emirates headquartered in Dubai, was given a contract to develop Bossaso Port in Puntland, after a proposal to expand the Port of Berbera in Somaliland in 2016. Meester *et al.* (2018) found that the UAE made significant investments in Somaliland and the semi-autonomous region of Puntland, while Qatar and Turkey maintained proximity to the Federal Government

in Mogadishu.

The Gulf crisis has spread into far-flung regions as a result of the deteriorating UAE-Somalia ties. The Somali government contended that Emirati actions threatened its territorial integrity as a country and voiced disapproval of the military installations in the Puntland and Somaliland regions. According to observers, Abu Dhabi has supported some regional political entities and armed organizations militarily and financially, and it has tried to set up military bases in these regions (Telci, 2018). In detail, following Farmajo's criticism of the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) conduct in Somalia and allegations that Abu Dhabi disregarded the nation's sovereignty during his 2017 presidential campaign, ties between the two nations deteriorated (Telci, 2018). The economic zone agreement between the United Arab Emirates and Somaliland was canceled owing to the prevailing tensions between the two nations (Ahmed, 2018). Subsequently, a bill mandating the cessation of all Emirati military and commercial operations across the nation was passed by the Somali parliament in March 2018. Following Somalia's seizure of a UAE-owned aircraft that was illegally bringing around \$10 million in cash into the nation in April 2018, the UAE-Somalia conflict has intensified. However, the UAE contended that the money will be utilized as part of the training program for Somali army personnel and that the assertions made about the aircraft were not accurate (Ahmed, 2018).

The new administration led by President Hassan Sheikh Mohamed has implemented a foreign policy aimed at fostering amicable ties with all nations for the benefit of Somalia. To bolster security, the two states initiated multilateral collaboration to train, and equip Somalia's armed forces to combat al-Shabaab and Daesh. The recent endorsement of the military agreement by the Cabinet Ministries between the two nations signifies a revitalization of security sector cooperation. Paradoxically, following the 2022 election, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud of Somalia has strengthened relations between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Federal Government of Somalia because they supported and sponsored his May 2022 presidential election (Levy, 2023). However, since five Imarets military officers and one Bahraini were killed at a military base in Mogadishu while they were training Somali soldiers, the relationship has soured (Reuters, 2024). However, Soyly (2024) contends that the naval agreements between Somalia and Turkey contributed to the declining relations between Somalia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The primary aims of these treaties are to safeguard Somalia's territorial waters and to provide its navy with equipment and training.

CONCLUSION

The paper investigated the evolving Somalia-UAE relations, focusing on diplomatic, trade, humanitarian, and military aspects. The study identified that the UAE's interest in Somalia stems from economic, humanitarian, and security concerns. This corresponds with the study

(Al Attas, 2018). In addition, the study indicated that the Gulf crisis, Gulf States' involvement, and competition among Qatar and Gulf governments have also jeopardized Somalia, as per various studies (Cannon & Donelli, 2019; Donelli & Dentice, 2020; Marsai & Szalai, 2021). Furthermore, the study reveals that the UAE has increased its military presence in Somalia for political and security reasons, aiming to protect the Bab el-Mandeb canal, combat piracy and terrorism, and reduce Qatar and Turkey's influence. However, the situation presents challenges and opportunities for Somalia's foreign policy. This aligns with the findings of Vertin (2019). The study also shows that Somalia and the UAE's diplomatic ties have significantly improved under President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's friendly foreign policy, leading to the signing of multilateral security agreements, as supported by studies (Gebru *et al.*, 2023; Mohamed, 2024; Ylönen, 2022). The study recommends Somalia should adopt a proactive foreign policy, considering the increasing involvement of Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE military installation in Berbera. The article suggests the UAE should accept Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, maintain friendly ties, and clarify its foreign policy and goals with the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

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