



The Renewal of Transnational Proxy Wars: The Escalating Geopolitical Crisis in the Red Sea and Beyond

By Dr. Abdulkadir Osman Farah and Abdi Aadam

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Abstract

Major global powers, like the United States, often harbor worries about the prospect of direct conflicts with other major nuclear powers such as China or Russia. Such direct war could contribute to the disruption of the global geopolitical order and can potentially unleash global civilizational collapse. Recent research shows that, rather than engaging in direct confrontations, these major powers tend to employ numerous short- and long-term proxy wars in various poorer countries and societies such as those in and around the Somali Peninsula and Bab-al-Mandab. Less powerful regional powers, both actual and potential, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Ethiopia, also assert their influence in regional affairs through similar proxy engagements. This dynamic results in the proliferation of conflicting hierarchical proxies, driven by confrontations led by major powers, occasionally in collaboration with ambitious regional players. Unfortunately, societies like the Somalians and the Djiboutians often fall victim to the consequences of these proxy conflicts. Considering these challenges, such vulnerable societies should adopt state-driven alternative diplomatic and strategic approaches. This could include entering deep partnerships with non-hostile powerful countries. Seen from civic transnational perspectives, the countries could also mobilize transnational communities and networks scattered around the world to fortify their resilience against the complexities of proxy wars that could otherwise overwhelm their countries and societies.

“...For centuries, foreign powers have alternately come, conquered, and colonised the peoples of the area [the Somali Peninsula], turning the place into scenes of big-power showdowns, conquests and re-conquests....In 1878, Menelik, then the King of Showa addressed a letter to the heads of the governments of Italy, France, Germany, and England complaining about the fact that the Muslims who control the entire stretches of the coast, and who held the key to Babel Mandab, Hafun, and Zeila had closed the way to the access of the ocean and therefore the trade. During this period, however, he does not make any territorial claim of any city-state on any coast – like Mogadiscio, Merka or Brava, three city states on the Somali coast, which had known the splendour of world fame as grand centres of commerce.

Maybe he had not by then heard of them in the way he had heard of Zeila and Tajura, the ports through which his kingdom imported “provisions, arms, agricultural implements, artisans or even messengers of the Gospel” and which he used for his country’s exports...”

Nuruddin, Farah (1978) Which Way to the Sea, please. *Horn of Africa*, 1(4), 31-36).

Introduction

A complex and multifaceted transnational geopolitical emergency currently unfolds across the Middle East, the Horn of Africa (the Somali Peninsula) and beyond. A recent culmination of a nearly decade-long proxy war (from 2015 to 2022) in Yemen involving nations such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran, and Western powers has now set the stage for a renewed and potentially more extensive proxy conflicts with profound global repercussions.

In the present iteration of the proxy war, the Bab-al-Mandeb region serves as the focal point, with two primary conflicting nation-state factions at play. The first coalition, spearheaded by Western nations including the US and UK, boasts support from Middle Eastern, European, Asian, and Australian allies. The opposing faction, led by Iran, encompasses Yemeni, Lebanese, Iraqi, and Syrian societies. The historical ties and strategic interests of the US and the UK in the region have been well-documented, involving long term defense contracts and the maintenance of substantial military bases in the Gulf (Cleveland, 2018). Presumably responding to perceived disruptions in international maritime routes as well as the preservation of global order, these Western powers are engaging in an additional proxy war maneuvers that have the potential to escalate into a full-scale conflict.

Contrary to the idea of a general disruption in maritime mobility and trade, evidence indicate a targeted restriction by the Yemenis on shipping routes to and from Israel (Wintour, 2024). In this regard, the actions of the Yemenis have indeed influenced maritime conditions in the Red Sea. Rather than utilizing the Bab-al-Mandab and the Suez, the Yemenis compelled shipping corporations worldwide to reroute through the economically demanding longer distance via South Africa (Jordan, 2024). As they advocate for global humanitarian intervention, the Yemenis justify their actions referring to the ongoing suffering and genocide against the Palestinians. They link the provision of food and humanitarian aid to Palestinians with the re-opening of the Bab-al-Mandab strait to Israeli-bound ships (Geopolitical-monitor, January 2024).

Possible outcomes of the clash between two main conflicting groups could encompass an escalation of hostilities involving societies bordering the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, even extending to broader regions. This may, for instance, trigger a potential rekindling of the transnational conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia, particularly concerning the utilization and distribution of the Nile waters. Additionally, adverse repercussions may manifest, exacerbating the plight of already struggling populations, such as Palestinians, Somalis, and Djiboutians.

The ongoing conflict in the Red Sea holds profound political, trade, and security implications, particularly for Horn of African societies. Existing research on proxy warfare underscores the pivotal role that proxy wars play in contemporary and prospective conflicts.

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Under such scenarios, involved hegemony not only inflict immediate and enduring harm on civilian populations. Such major global and regional powers also steer toward indirect engagements through weaker allies to achieve strategic objectives and gains.

The strategic significance of the Bab-al-Mandab has attracted major powers like the US, China and others leading to the establishment of diverse military bases in Djibouti. The positioning of the Saudi-led coalition and Iran-backed partners in this geopolitically significant area further compounds the impact, affecting not only the well-being and security of regional societies but also influencing the global generation and distribution of economic resources and mobility on a larger scale.

Proxy Turmoil

With emphasis on "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict" Mumford (2013) discusses the emergence of proxy wars as heralds of future conflicts. An epoch where traditional warfare decline, yielding ground to the rise of private transnational military entities and the ascendance of new major global powers such as China. Furthermore, Mumford (2023), in discerning the consequences of these proxy wars, delineates a dichotomy between the immediate and the enduring consequences. The branches of such conflicts, whether short-lived or protracted, establish a kind of dependence among those entangled in their intricate spirals.

Vladimir Rauta (2020), on the other, while partially concurring with the proliferation of proxy conflicts, discerns the states' engagement in such endeavors as rooted in risk mitigation, cost efficiency, and the pursuit of strategic dominance. The case of the Syrian war, epitomizing this paradigm, illustrates the orchestration of proxy conflicts by major powers as well as regional powers, each amplifying their influence through designated proxies.

As proxy wars unfold, it is the convoluted entanglements of major powers that set the stage and sustain these performances. Powers, entwined in their rivalries, draw weaker states and societies into the vortex of conflict. In this regard, Catherine Latchford (2022) adds the idea of the erosion of sovereignty, both of warring states and the so-called proxy "puppeteers".

The absence of a direct conflict between major powers has to do with the existence of potent nuclear arsenals, coupled with the mobilization capabilities of liberal societies. Such concerns relegate the prospect of all-encompassing warfare among major powers almost improbable. Instead, the theater of preference manifests as proxy conflicts, reverberating across territories from Ukraine through the Middle East and Africa to the Bab-al-Mandab. Here, opposing global and regional powers engage in a kaleidoscope of proxy forms. While some entities may reap benefits, it is the civilian populace that endures the most of these protracted conflicts (Kononov, 2019).

Potentially, states such as South Africa might call for the adaptation of normative responsibility, invoking the "responsibility to protect." Yet, these endeavors, masked in the rhetoric of safeguarding the vulnerable, often falter under the hegemonic inclinations of dominant nations (Coen, 2015). In this paradoxical situation, vulnerable communities, temporarily shielded by humanitarian responsibility, find themselves exposed to the shifting winds of geopolitical hegemony.

Transnational Geopolitical Entanglements in the Middle East and Africa

In the intricate landscape of geopolitical complexities, a delicate interplay unfolds, revealing intricate connections between tangible events, historical trajectories, and present realities. A once dormant transnational proxy conflict has reignited, inflicting additional suffering on a world in perpetual unrest. Despite previously negotiated accords brokering ceasefires and peace among the Yemenis, Iranians, Saudis, and Emiratis, a new extensive proxy conflict seems to emerge.

The world now witnesses a resurgent storm, an existential turmoil echoing, if not surpassing, earlier proxy wars. This storm casts its shadow across the volatile realms of the Middle East and the Horn of Africa, foretelling a threatening integration into the fabric of global politics and the economy. Simultaneously, the ancient and enduring conflict between Israel and Palestine, reignited on the 7th of October 2023, unfolding a tragic scene of immense human devastation and social ruin. Another grand theater of proxy conflict, involving both western and non-western societies, occurs. Amidst the expanding constellation of nations embroiled in the Bab-al-Mandeb and the Somali Peninsula, a form of conflictual dualism emerges.

On one hand, the consortium of Western powers, united with regional affiliates such as Egypt, Israel, the Arabian Gulf, and even Ethiopia, assumes its stance. On the other, the cohort of resistance constellations, encompassing the Iranians, Yemenis, Lebanese, and the Iraqis asserts their positions. Within this dialectic dualism lie the so-called victim nations, the Somalis, and Djiboutians, trapped in the crossfire of competing proxies.

The potentiality of a collaborative expansion of belligerence, orchestrated by the United States and its Western allies in harmonious convergence with Middle Eastern supporters, stretches its shadow across the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. A pattern of conflict, resonating in regional and global disharmony, potentially provokes the prospect of a coordinated counterpoint from China, Russia, and potentially the African Union. Moreover, the Egyptian and Ethiopian transnational complications of the Nile spark concern for factual threats. Then there is the continuing plight of the Palestinians, Somalis, Djiboutians, and Yemenis — societies already embroiled in existential life struggles amidst the unfolding imposing proxies.

The mainstream media portrays the current Middle Eastern conflict as an apparent mark of a militant Palestinian assaulting the border ramparts of Israel. Yet, the essence reveals itself in the perennial and historic discord between occupying Israelis and occupied Palestinians. Western societies, with their political loyalties align and extend a sympathetic hand to the Israeli cause. The Arabian Gulf, hesitating in its resolve, stands on the precipice of indecision.

The Yemenis, in a declaration both fervent and enacted, align themselves with the Palestinian cause. The Africans, expressing limited moral solidarity, cast supporting proclamations for the beleaguered Palestinians (The East African, 2024). Ethiopia, as the host of the African Union's headquarters, contemplates avenues to fulfill its historical aspiration, navigating the shifting tides of geopolitical opportunity. Ethiopian leaders declared their willingness to access a seaport, with or without the deployment of force (Zelalem, 2023).

The Ethiopians eventually signed an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) with leaders from Somaliland (a region formally part of Somalia) (Onyango-Obbo, 2024). The agreement violates numerous international and regional laws and so far, succeeded mobilizing otherwise fragmented Somalians within the republic and beyond.

Amidst this transnational strife, the beleaguered Somalis find themselves attentive in intricate positioning within national and regional volatility. Djiboutians, custodians of economically lucrative military bases, confront the dilemma of preserving both their economic sustenance and security amidst the prevailing disturbance.

The conflict, expanding its branches in the Red Sea inscribes its political impacts on the Horn of African societies. Tensions, disputes, and overt military conflicts flourish within these uncertainties. Trade routes, security, and regional stability become sacrificial offerings on the platform of transnational proxy machinations.

Conclusion

A resurgence of proxy conflicts sets ablaze into historical rivalries by introducing new complexities to the volatile regions of the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. The dualism between Western powers and their regional affiliates and the resisting constellations, along with the involvement of major global players like China and Russia, casts a looming shadow over the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. The ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine, often misrepresented in the media, underscores deep-rooted tensions, while the plight of nations like Djiboutians, Somalians and Yemenis suffer in the crossfire of proxy conflicts. The Ethiopians and Egyptians disputing over the Nile adds another layer of worries, highlighting the multifaceted nature of emerging geopolitical challenges.

While the direct conflict between major powers seems improbable due to nuclear arsenals and mobilization capabilities, the world is witnessing a preference for proxy conflicts, causing widespread human suffering. Calls for normative humanitarian approaches, such as the "responsibility to protect," face challenges amid the hegemonic interests of dominant nations, leaving vulnerable societies to geopolitical shifts.

Finally, struggling societies such as Somalians currently remain unable to engage in the realist international politics of balancing power. Instead, the political leaders can proactively pursue diplomatic engagements through international, transnational, and regional organizations. Politicians can also mobilize Somali transnational communities worldwide in putting pressure on hos societies and in extension also on global and regional hegemons. Struggling nations can additionally seek urgent assistance from stronger non-hostile nations, countries with capacities to engage a balance of power of their own, without contributing and facilitating yet another form of proxy wars.

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