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The Horn in March: Fault Lines Deepen, Alliances Shift, and Strategy Hardens



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Foreword

“**The Greater Horn**” Strategic Brief offers a monthly synthesis of key diplomatic and security trends in one of the world’s most volatile yet consequential geopolitical theatres. This edition, covering developments from March 2026, draws on open-source intelligence, strategic assessments, policy briefings, and regional commentary to deliver nuanced, non-partisan, and research-driven insights into strategic complexities, internal vulnerabilities, emerging partnerships, and geopolitical recalibrations shaping the region’s trajectory. Intended to inform regional policymakers, analysts, and stakeholders, the briefing is produced by independent experts committed to regional stability, cooperative security, and evidence-based Policymaking.

**Blen Mamo, Executive
Director & Editor-in-Chief,
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The Horn in March: Fault Lines Deepen, Alliances Shift, and Strategy Hardens

Executive Summary

March 2026 reflected a complex interplay between strategic diplomatic expansion, internal fragility, and intensifying regional competition across the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia each exhibited distinct yet interconnected trajectories, underscoring a region undergoing recalibration amid global polarization and evolving security dynamics.

Ethiopia emerged as a central diplomatic actor, advancing a strategy of multi-vector engagement and strategic neutrality. Addis Ababa deepened ties with Gulf states, the United States, and Russia while avoiding direct entanglement in Middle Eastern tensions. This positioning reinforces its ambition to serve as a geopolitical bridge between Africa and the Middle East. However, external activism contrasts with persistent domestic fragilities, where unresolved post-conflict dynamics continue to challenge cohesion. The launch of voter registration signals institutional progress, yet the political environment remains contested. Meanwhile, fuel shortages linked to Red Sea disruptions exposed structural vulnerabilities, highlighting the delicate balance between diplomatic ambition and internal stability.

Eritrea's trajectory remained defined by strategic opacity, proxy engagement, and expanding transregional alignments. Continued involvement in northern Ethiopia and Sudan reinforces its role as a covert but influential actor. Its links to Iranian-aligned networks and Red Sea logistics corridors indicate integration into broader geopolitical systems. At the same time, Asmara has intensified efforts to shape international narratives, reflecting sensitivity to growing scrutiny. Despite limited detainee releases, domestic repression persists, underscoring a model of external activism paired with internal rigidity.

Djibouti consolidated its role as a stable but tightly managed strategic hub at the Bab el-Mandeb. The pre-election environment points to political continuity under President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh, with limited opposition space. Simultaneously, Djibouti leveraged its location to expand diplomatic engagement, hosting regional talks and strengthening ties with Gulf and international actors. Security pressures, including migration flows and counterterrorism commitments, reinforce its frontline role, while economic initiatives continue to position it as a regional logistics hub.

Somalia's trajectory reflected a dual dynamic of sustained counterterrorism operations and deepening political fragmentation. While military pressure on Al-Shabaab and ISIS-Somalia yielded tactical gains, insurgent resilience persists. Escalating tensions between the federal government and regional states risk undermining these gains, highlighting the gap between security progress and political consolidation.

Overall, the Horn of Africa is moving toward a more complex and contested equilibrium, where domestic vulnerabilities intersect with expanding geopolitical competition.

Section One: Regional Power Recalibrations and Internal Fragilities

1.1 Ethiopia: Balanced Diplomacy in a Fragmented Geopolitical Landscape

In March 2026, Ethiopia's political and diplomatic trajectory reflected an increasingly sophisticated balancing act between internal consolidation and assertive external engagement, shaped by a rapidly shifting regional and global environment marked by Gulf tensions, great-power competition, and the spillover effects of the Iran-related crisis.

The month opened with the powerful symbolism of the Battle of Adwa commemorations, which once again anchored Ethiopia's political narrative in sovereignty, unity, and resistance. Senior military and political leaders framed Adwa not merely as history, but as a living doctrine guiding contemporary statecraft.¹ Yet, this unifying narrative unfolded alongside visible fractures, particularly in Tigray, where parallel commemorations exposed persistent mistrust toward federal institutions. The contrast between national symbolism and localized political tension revealed a core structural challenge: Ethiopia's ability to translate symbolic unity into political reconciliation remains incomplete.² This tension was further amplified by rhetoric surrounding the Pretoria Agreement, whose uneven implementation continues to shape political discourse and uncertainty ahead of elections.

In a recent interview conducted in Tigrinya,³ Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed expressed strong support for the people of Tigray, stating that they deserve peace and development, cherish these values, and have fought for them, while emphasizing they do not deserve another round of war and destruction. He portrayed the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) leadership as clinging to an outdated 50-year-old ideology resistant to modern reform and change, accusing them of obstructing dialogue, refusing compromise, failing to fully implement the Pretoria Agreement, and preparing for renewed conflict by arming forces and acquiring weapons. This rhetoric unfairly blames Tigray's legitimate leadership for defending regional rights and autonomy against federal overreach, while positioning Abiy's government as the aggressor risking escalation, making the federal side appear as the true warmonger intent on suppressing Tigray rather than pursuing genuine reconciliation or addressing the immense suffering endured during the war.

Ethiopia's diplomacy was notably active and multidirectional, with the Gulf, the United States, Russia, and Iran-related tensions forming the axis of engagement. The working visit of Abiy Ahmed to the United Arab Emirates (March 9–13) reinforced a deepening strategic partnership centered on investment, logistics, and Red Sea geopolitics.⁴ This was

¹Addis Standard. 2026. "Tigray Marks Adwa Anniversary Amid Renewed Political Tensions."

²Borkena. 2026. "Ethiopia Celebrating 130th Anniversary of Adwa Victory."

³Ethiopian News Agency. "PM Abiy Calls for Breaking 'Circle of Animosity,' Stresses Dialogue Over Conflict." Ethiopian News Agency, March 4, 2026.

⁴The National. 2026. "Prime Minister of Ethiopia Arrives in Abu Dhabi on a Working Visit."

complemented by continuous engagement with Gulf actors, including Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Oman, positioning Ethiopia as a pragmatic partner across competing blocs.⁵

This Gulf outreach became more pronounced following Iranian-Israel regional escalations. Ethiopia expressed solidarity with Qatar and condemned violations of sovereignty in discussions with Kuwait⁶, aligning itself with international norms while strengthening political trust with key Gulf partners. Simultaneously, Addis Ababa maintained open channels with Iran and Iraq through diplomatic consultations led by State Minister Hadera Abera.⁷ This dual engagement illustrates a deliberate neutrality strategy: Ethiopia is neither aligning nor isolating, but positioning itself as a bridge across divides.

This balancing posture was further reinforced through direct engagement with Gulf leadership, including communication with Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, where Ethiopia combined condemnation of aggression with calls for de-escalation. The strategic implication is clear: Ethiopia is crafting a diplomatic identity as a stabilizing interlocutor capable of engaging all sides without entanglement, thereby protecting its economic interests tied to remittances, trade corridors, and diaspora communities.

Engagement with global powers followed a similar multi-vector logic. On March 11, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio held talks with Abiy Ahmed, focusing on counterterrorism, regional stability, and economic cooperation.⁸ This reaffirmed Ethiopia's role as a key security partner for the United States in the Horn of Africa. Just days later, on March 16, Abiy held a strategic call with Vladimir Putin, advancing cooperation across political, economic, and humanitarian domains.⁹ The simultaneity of these engagements highlights Ethiopia's deliberate non-aligned positioning, actively engaging both Washington and Moscow without privileging one over the other.

Regionally, Ethiopia reinforced its centrality in Horn of Africa diplomacy through trilateral engagement with Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and Ismail Omar Guelleh, focusing on security coordination, maritime stability, and economic integration.¹⁰ ¹¹This effort to institutionalize regional dialogue mechanisms signals a shift from reactive diplomacy to structured geopolitical management.

Parallel multilateral and bilateral diplomacy further amplified these efforts. On March 17, trainee military officers from Kenya, Uganda, Zambia, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Rwanda,

⁵ Borkena. 2026. "Ethiopia, Several Gulf Countries Held Talks as US-Israel War on Iran Continues."

⁶ Addis Standard. 2026. "PM Abiy Expresses Solidarity with Qatar in Call with Emir Following Iranian Attacks." March 3, 2026.

⁷Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia. 2026. "A Week in the Horn." March 20, 2026.

⁸ U.S. Department of State. 2026. "Secretary Rubio's Call with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy." March 11, 2026.

⁹ Addis Standard. 2026. "Vladimir Putin, Abiy Ahmed Discuss Bilateral Cooperation, Disaster Response in Phone Call." 2026.

¹⁰ Addis Standard. 2026. "Leaders of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia Hold Tripartite Talks on Regional Peace, Security." March 12, 2026.

¹¹ Dawan Africa. 2026. "Horn of Africa Leaders Meet in Djibouti to Strengthen Security and Economic Ties." 2026.

Malawi, and Tanzania received briefings at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Ethiopia's contributions to counter-terrorism, maritime security, Red Sea stability, Nile affairs, and AU/IGAD frameworks, exporting Ethiopia's regional peace-and-security expertise. The same day, Foreign Minister Gedion Timothewos welcomed the African Union Pre-Election Assessment Mission.¹² State Minister Hadera hosted Japan's Director-General for African Affairs (mid-March), proposing a formal political consultation mechanism on investment, trade, peace, and security. Finance Minister Ahmed Shide's delegation to Rome (March 16–18) secured a landmark bilateral debt restructuring agreement under the G20 Common Framework with Italy, plus support for World Bank-co-financed reforms, Koysa Hydropower Project financing, and Bishoftu International Airport components, aligned with the Mattei Plan for Africa.¹³¹⁴ Additional bilateral steps included Foreign Minister Gedion receiving Italy's Undersecretary of State Maria Tripodi (March 26) and participation in the WTO Ministerial Conference (MC14) in Yaoundé (March 26–29), advocating LDC support and market access (including with Saudi Arabia).¹⁵¹⁶ Ethiopia sustained third-year BRICS engagement under India's chairship across 20+ ministerial meetings on finance, trade, AI, climate, and anti-corruption, advancing New Development Bank accession preparations. On March 26, President Taye Atske-Selassie attended the OACPS Summit in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea.¹⁷ Finally, on March 25, Ethiopia marked the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and backed a UN resolution declaring the Transatlantic Slave Trade “the gravest crime against humanity,” leveraging its anti-colonial legacy.¹⁸

Domestically, the launch of voter registration for the seventh general election marked a critical institutional milestone, signaling a transition toward more structured electoral governance.¹⁹ Supported by digital systems, the process is intended to enhance procedural legitimacy and public trust. However, the political environment surrounding this process remains contested.

Parallel governance developments reinforced a strategy of visible state performance. Corridor development projects inaugurated by the Prime Minister, MESOB one-stop service

¹² Fana Media Corporation. 2026. “Ethiopia Welcomes AU Pre-Election Mission, Pledges Full Cooperation.” March 17, 2026.

¹³ Ministry of Economy and Finance (Italy). 2026. “Agreement Signed Between Italy and Ethiopia for the Restructuring of Ethiopia's Debt.” March 18, 2026.

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (Italy). 2026. “Undersecretary Tripodi in Addis Ababa for Business Forum on Urban Regeneration and Infrastructure.” March 26, 2026.

¹⁵ Arab News. 2026. “Saudi FM Arrives in Ethiopia to Discuss Regional Developments.” February 11, 2026.

¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (Italy). 2026. “Undersecretary Tripodi in Addis Ababa for Business Forum on Urban Regeneration and Infrastructure.” March 26, 2026.

¹⁷ Ethiopian News Agency. 2026. “Ethiopia's President Taye Arrives in Malabo for 11th OACPS Summit.” March 26, 2026.

¹⁸ Embassy of Ethiopia, Canada. 2026. “Enslavement of Africans During the Transatlantic Slave Trade Recognized as the Gravest Crime Against Humanity.” 2026.

¹⁹ Ethiopian News Agency. 2026. “Ethiopia on Forward Trajectory Anchored with Immense Renewable Energy.” March 28, 2026.

centers,²⁰ and urban modernization initiatives in Dire Dawa and Harar were showcased as tangible “peace dividends.”²¹ The inauguration of the Niin Lee Palm Lodge in Afar further illustrated how development is being used as a political instrument to consolidate legitimacy in historically marginalized regions.²² At the same time, internal cohesion was actively managed through messaging: calls for opposition reintegration into the Prosperity Party, denials of regional fractures in Somali State, and heightened security warnings in southern regions all point to a pre-election environment where stability is being carefully curated.²³

Security dynamics throughout the month suggested a “managed fragility.” While no major escalation occurred, low-level instability persisted in Amhara and Tigray, with Fano activity and displacement concerns continuing in the background.²⁴ The intervention of Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, urging political solutions over renewed conflict, underscored sustained international concern about relapse risks. ²⁵Complementing this, the National Intelligence and Security Service introduced a new digital reporting platform, signaling a shift toward technologically integrated security management and early-warning systems.²⁶

Compounding domestic pressures, Ethiopia confronted an acute fuel crisis in late March, triggered by escalating Middle East conflict that disrupted Red Sea shipping routes and long-term supply contracts. Over 180,000 metric tons of contracted petroleum failed to arrive, halving daily white diesel availability from 9.2 million to just 4.5 million liters and sparking long queues at stations. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed appealed directly for conservation, urging citizens, distributors, and service stations to prioritize essential services and use fuel sparingly “until the situation is resolved and normal supply is restored.”²⁷ Trade and Regional Integration Minister Kassahun Gofe delivered a stark warning, declaring fuel a strategic scarce resource and announcing emergency rationing, priority allocation for public transport and critical sectors, plus strict enforcement against hoarding and diversion.²⁸ The shock, exacerbated by soaring global prices, immediately threatened transportation, freight, and urban mobility, prompting measures such as mandatory leave for non-essential public servants, while risking accelerated inflation, depleted foreign reserves, and erosion of the

²⁰ Fana Media Corporation. 2026. “Harar’s Mesob One-Stop Service Center Enhances Integrated Public Service Delivery: PM Abiy.” 2026.

²¹ Embassy of Ethiopia, Canada. 2026. “Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Visits Dire Dawa and Harar, Reviews Development Initiatives.” 2026.

²² AllAfrica. 2026. “Africa: All of Africa Today.” March 23, 2026. By Melody Chironda. *allAfrica.com*.

²³ Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation. 2026. “Prosperity Party Vows to Strengthen Democratic Foundations Ahead of Next Election.” February 21, 2026. *EBC English News*.

²⁴ Addis Standard. 2026. “Analysis: How National Army Battlefield Report, Fano Statements in Feb–March Lay Bare the Persistence and Intensity of Ongoing War in Amhara Region.” March 4, 2026. *Addis Standard*.

²⁵ Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (DrTedros.Official). 2026. Facebook Post, March 2026. “Since the conflict began in the Amhara Region of Ethiopia, there are disturbing reports” Facebook.

²⁶ Fana Media Corporation. 2026. “NISS Launches Digital Platform to Enhance Public Engagement and National Security Information Flow.” *Fana Media Corporation*.

²⁷ Geeska. 2026. “Ethiopia Imposes Fuel Rationing as Global Oil Disruptions Bite.” March 30, 2026. *Geeska.com*.

²⁸ AllAfrica. 2026. “Ethiopia Urges Fuel Conservation as Middle East Tensions Disrupt Global Supply.” March 17, 2026. Shabelle Media Network. *allAfrica.com*.

government's showcased "peace dividends" ahead of elections.

A notable dimension of March's developments was the intersection between external shocks and domestic policy responses. The global oil supply disruption linked to Middle East tensions prompted Abiy Ahmed to call for nationwide fuel prudence. This response, framed as collective discipline, reflected a governance approach that seeks to convert external vulnerability into internal cohesion.

Taken together, the month reveals a coherent strategic pattern. Ethiopia is simultaneously consolidating internal governance, managing fragile post-conflict dynamics, and expanding its diplomatic footprint across competing global and regional axes. Its engagements with the Gulf, Iran crisis dynamics, United States, and Russia demonstrate a clear commitment to strategic autonomy in an increasingly polarized world. The overarching implication is that Ethiopia is no longer operating as a reactive actor but as an emerging diplomatic hub linking the Horn of Africa to the Middle East and beyond. However, the sustainability of this positioning ultimately hinges on internal stability. If electoral processes, post-conflict reconciliation, and regional grievances are effectively managed, Ethiopia's external gains could translate into lasting geopolitical leverage. If not, the coexistence of diplomatic expansion and domestic fragility may remain the defining paradox of its current trajectory.

1.2 Eritrea: Persistent Tensions with Ethiopia, Regional Alignments, and the Narrative Contest

Ethiopia-Eritrea Relations and the Prospect of War

Evidence of Eritrean military infiltration into northern Ethiopia continued to accumulate through March. The Africa Defence Forum, citing reporting from The Africa Report, detailed accounts from local residents and military sources placing Eritrean soldiers in sensitive areas including Mekelle, Adigrat, and Zalambessa.²⁹ According to the report, Eritrean personnel have entered through multiple border routes and in some instances operated in Ethiopian Defence Forces uniforms, a practice that significantly complicates attribution and signals a deliberate effort to obscure Asmara's operational footprint.

A New York Times report on March 4 attributed rising tensions primarily to Ethiopia's pursuit of Red Sea access, framing Addis Ababa's interest in the port of Assab as the central driver of the confrontation.³⁰ The framing drew criticism for downplaying Eritrea's documented pattern of infiltration and armed actor support in northern Ethiopia, a pattern

²⁹ Africa Defense Forum. "Tensions Bubble Along Eritrea-Ethiopia Border." March 3, 2026.

³⁰ Bigg, Matthew Mpoke. "Ethiopia's Demand for Red Sea Access Drives Fears of New War With Eritrea." The New York Times, March 4, 2026.

that predates and extends well beyond the maritime access question, and one with direct roots in Eritrea's conduct during and after the 2020-2022 Tigray conflict.

On March 4, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed issued his sharpest public warning to date in a Tigrigna-language interview, stating that any further attempt to harm Ethiopia would "be the last."³¹ The statement framed Eritrea's sustained destabilisation activities as a direct threat to Ethiopian sovereignty and signalled that Addis Ababa's patience with Asmara's conduct in the north has neared its limit.

A further development reported by Africa Intelligence on March 23 confirmed that a small Eritrean military delegation, led by Brigadier General Eyob Fesehaye, travelled to Mekelle in late February for talks with TPLF officials, including General Fisseha Kidanu, a senior figure in the faction's reconstituted military command organised in mid-2025 in preparation for a potential renewed confrontation with Addis Ababa.³² The talks failed to produce an agreed position, with the Eritrean side reportedly viewing TPLF force estimates as significantly inflated relative to Asmara's own intelligence. The meeting nonetheless confirms a sustained Eritrean effort to cultivate operational relationships with armed actors inside Ethiopia, a pattern consistent with Asmara's posture since the end of the Tigray conflict.

Academic Kjetil Tronvoll, speaking on March 13, warned that overlapping alliances, proxy relationships, and existing regional crises could transform a bilateral confrontation into a broader regional war, which he described as potentially "Africa's World War II."³³ A Deutsche Welle report on March 24, examining shifting alliances against the backdrop of the US-Israel-Iran conflict, suggested that the absorption of regional powers into the Middle East theatre reduces the immediate likelihood of war between Addis Ababa and Asmara, though the underlying conditions driving the rivalry remain intact.³⁴ The war speculation has now persisted across international media for over a year, and March added fresh evidence to the file without resolving the central question of whether either capital is prepared to cross the threshold.

Sudan, Iran, and the Transregional Supply Network

Eritrea's role in Sudan's civil war was confirmed in greater detail this month. A Sudan Times report published on March 9 identified more than twelve armed factions fighting alongside the Sudanese Armed Forces that have been trained and equipped in Eritrea³⁵. Among them, the East Sudan Liberation Movement held its founding conference on Eritrean soil in 2024 and now fields roughly 2,000 combatants. Darfuri factions operating under the Juba Peace

³¹ Abiy Ahmed Ali. "An Interview Conducted with ENA in Tigrinya." Interview by Ethiopian News Agency. YouTube, March 3, 2026.

³² Africa Intelligence. "'Strategic' Leadership in Tigray Gears Up for Potential War." March 23, 2026.

³³ Incekaya, Gulsum. "A New Ethiopia-Eritrea War Could Trigger 'Africa's Second World War,' Expert Warns." Anadolu Agency, March 13, 2026.

³⁴ Firew, Eskinder. "Shifting Alliances Shape Horn of Africa Tensions." Deutsche Welle, March 24, 2026.

³⁵ The Sudan Times. "Over 12 Eritrea-Backed Militias Fighting Alongside SAF." March 9, 2026.

Agreement are also believed to have trained in Eritrean camps. The report reinforces an established pattern of proxy engagement across a corridor of direct strategic relevance to Asmara's rivalry with Addis Ababa. Sudan's Ambassador to Eritrea, Osama Ahmed Abdul Bari, a representative of the SAF in Asmara, gave the relationship public expression on March 24, publishing an op-ed on the Eritrean Ministry of Information's website that portrayed Asmara as a stabilising regional actor and principled opponent of foreign interference.³⁶ The choice of a regime-controlled platform signals coordinated messaging, reflecting a relationship that has matured to the point where both sides are prepared to publicly perform their alignment.

The Iranian dimension of Eritrea's regional posture acquired renewed operational visibility this month. OSINT analysis placed the U.S. Treasury-sanctioned LPG tanker CLIFTON at Massawa port, confirmed through satellite imagery dated March 13.³⁷ The vessel is linked to Iran's IRGC-Quds Force and has been sanctioned for facilitating Iranian oil and gas shipments in evasion of international sanctions. With Iran selectively controlling passage through the Strait of Hormuz amid the ongoing conflict, preferential access to Iranian energy shipments carries tangible strategic value, and the docking at Massawa points to the operational dimension of the longstanding asymmetric alignment between Tehran and Asmara, a relationship that has historically provided Eritrea with diplomatic cover and material support in exchange for Red Sea access and regional positioning.

A separate OSINT report traced the general cargo vessel GREENWAY from Tekirdağ, Türkiye, docked at Massawa on March 19.³⁸ Tekirdağ hosts facilities associated with Turkish drone manufacturer Baykar, prompting two plausible readings. Given Ankara's backing of Khartoum and the increasingly drone-intensive character of Sudan's civil war, the shipment may represent a Turkish-facilitated transfer of equipment destined for the SAF through Eritrean territory. Alternatively, the cargo could reflect a direct Eritrean procurement, a reading that complicates the picture considerably given Türkiye's concurrent strategic partnership with Ethiopia. No official confirmation exists, and the voyage is consistent with routine general cargo movements.

Late-month intelligence pointed to an active transregional supply network channelling weapons and logistical support to the Houthi movement through Sudan and Eritrea.³⁹ Staging operations are concentrated near Port Sudan and Suakin, with Eritrea serving as a transit corridor for onward distribution to Yemen, a configuration that mirrors arrangements documented between 2012 and 2013. Sudan's role draws on the historical capacity of the Yarmouk Military Industrial Complex, while Eritrea's centralised governance enables tightly

³⁶ Abdul Bari, Osama Ahmed. "The Sudan in the Eye of the Storm – An Internal War and a Struggle for Influence over the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea." Shabait, March 24, 2026.

³⁷ Dinlas (@Dinlas3). X post on the OFAC-sanctioned vessel 'CLIFTON' spotted at Massawa, Eritrea, March 18, 2026.

³⁸ Rich Tedd (@AfriMEOSINT). X post on the cargo vessel GREENWAY sailing from Tekirdağ, Turkey to Massawa, Eritrea, March 21, 2026.

³⁹ Horn Review (@hornreview). Sudan, Eritrea, and the Strategic Depth of Iran's Houthi Supply. X. March 29, 2026.

controlled transit operations that limit external visibility. The network's distributed architecture is designed for resilience and deniability, and its sustained operation positions the Horn of Africa as an embedded node within a wider Iranian-aligned conflict system, with direct implications for Red Sea security and the Bab el-Mandeb chokepoint. The Deutsche Welle report of March 24 made no reference to these Iranian-aligned relationships, a significant omission given the weight of that dimension in Eritrea's current regional posture.

The Narrative Contest

March saw the Eritrean regime mount a visible effort to manage the terms on which it is discussed internationally. On March 13, a gathering of senior officials, scholars, and foreign diplomats convened in Asmara, described officially as aimed at deepening understanding of Eritrea's "true history."⁴⁰ The presence of foreign nationals at what amounted to a regime-curated framing exercise signals an attempt to shape diplomatic perceptions at a moment of sustained external scrutiny.

Information Minister Yemane Gebremeskel continued his public campaign against analysis he deemed unflattering, denouncing on March 13 a Horn Review publication on Eritrea's ties with Iran.⁴¹ He rejected the portrayal of Eritrea as a "malleable proxy" of external forces, warning that such narratives harm regional peace and stability. The response reflects the regime's frustration at its diminishing ability to contain the narrative around its clandestine relationships and regional conduct, particularly as OSINT reporting, academic analysis, and investigative journalism have continued to close the gap between what Asmara asserts and what the evidence supports.

Human Rights and Domestic Developments

The Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect released an updated Eritrea country profile on March 16, maintaining the country among its populations at risk.⁴² The report found that core repressive policies, including indefinite national service, arbitrary detention, and collective punishment, remain in place with no meaningful reform since the UN Commission of Inquiry's 2016 findings. On the regional dimension, the profile flagged Eritrea's formal rejection of Ethiopia's Red Sea claims as a factor further entrenching domestic repression, and noted that Eritrean forces continue to operate in Ethiopian border areas in violation of the 2022 Cessation of Hostilities Agreement. The Centre called for targeted sanctions against senior PFDJ officials and urged support for the UN Special Rapporteur's mandate ahead of the June Human Rights Council session.

⁴⁰ Eri Link. "Stop distorting our history! Shattering False Narratives." YouTube, March 15, 2026.

⁴¹ Yemane G. Meskel (@hawelti). "The Potemkin Party's boringly sterile campaign of disinformation against Eritrea..." X post, March 13, 2026.

⁴² Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. "Eritrea." Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, March 16, 2026.

Against this backdrop, the reported release of satirical cartoonist Biniam Solomon after fifteen years of detention offered an isolated point of contrast.⁴³ His release follows a December 2025 release of thirteen individuals held since 2007. Whether these releases represent a tactical concession ahead of the June Human Rights Council session or a more durable shift in the regime's detention practices remains to be seen.

Indian Ambassador Raj Kamal met with Hagos Ghebrehiwet, Head of the PFDJ's Economic Affairs Department, on March 26.⁴⁴ Hagos oversees the PFDJ's financial apparatus, including the Red Sea Trading Corporation, the state entity managing Eritrea's import and export operations and serving as the primary commercial vehicle for the regime's mining sector revenues. The meeting signals that New Delhi is prepared to engage Asmara on the PFDJ's own institutional terms, a posture with implications for the international pressure calculus that human rights bodies and Western governments are attempting to construct around the regime.

Conclusion

March 2026 confirmed the lines of confrontation that have defined the Ethiopia-Eritrea relationship since the end of the Tigray conflict, without resolving any of them. Infiltration reports, military-to-military contacts between Eritrean officers and TPLF commanders, and a prime ministerial warning that left little room for ambiguity all point to a rivalry that has settled into a persistent and managed hostility. The threshold for armed conflict has not been crossed, but the structural conditions sustaining the rivalry, contested borders, Eritrean proxy engagement in northern Ethiopia, and Addis Ababa's unresolved maritime ambitions, remain fully intact.

Eritrea's transregional entanglements grew more visible. Its role as a supply corridor and proxy trainer in Sudan's civil war is now extensively documented, and the emerging picture of a weapons network running from Iran through Sudan and Eritrea to the Houthis consolidates Asmara's position as an operational node within a wider Iranian-aligned conflict architecture. The OSINT trail at Massawa, pointing to both Iranian-linked and potentially Turkish-linked vessel movements, reflects a regime active across multiple overlapping supply and alignment relationships simultaneously.

The regime's narrative campaign, from the Asmara diplomatic gathering to Gebremeskel's public rebuttals, signals awareness that the information environment is shifting against it. The selective release of long-held detainees may be read in the same register: tactical adjustments made under sustained pressure, aimed at managing international scrutiny rather than signalling genuine reform.

⁴³ Bekit, Teklemariam. "Cartoonist Freed after 15 Years in Prison without Charge in Eritrea." BBC Tigrinya, March 12, 2026.

⁴⁴ India in Eritrea (@IndiaEritrea). "Amb Mr Raj Kamal met HE Mr Hagos Ghebrehiwet, Head of Economic Affairs Dept of PFDJ & Red Sea Trading Corp of Eritrea..." X post, March 29, 2026.

1.3 Djibouti: Electoral Continuity, Regional Crisis Diplomacy, and Strategic Balancing at the Bab el-Mandeb

Domestic Politics and Elections

The presidential election campaign formally began on March 27, initiating a 15-day period of political activity leading to the April 10 vote. The Minister of the Interior confirmed that 256,467 voters are registered for the election. Authorities called on all candidates to conduct ethical and responsible campaigns. President Ismail Omar Guelleh, the candidate for the ruling Union for the Presidential Majority (UMP) seeking a sixth term, formally entered the race and pledged to maintain stability while pursuing broader economic reforms.⁴⁵

On March 26, Djibouti's political parties, including the ruling UMP and opposition groups such as the CDU, alongside media organizations, signed a landmark charter brokered by the National Communication Commission (CNC). The agreement commits to equal airtime, impartial coverage, and transparent campaigning throughout the electoral period. Authorities described the initiative as a step to build public trust and ensure an orderly democratic process, reflecting coordinated efforts between the National Electoral Commission (CENI) and the CNC to strengthen electoral transparency.⁴⁶

On March 29, President Ismail Omar Guelleh held a working meeting at the Palais de la République in Djibouti with principal government officials. The gathering was framed as part of executive coordination during the active phase of the presidential campaign.⁴⁷

During the opening of Djibouti's first ordinary parliamentary session of the year on March 2, Speaker Dileita Mohamed Dileita called on lawmakers to support President Ismail Omar Guelleh's candidacy in the upcoming presidential election scheduled for April 10, 2026.⁴⁸ The endorsement follows constitutional amendments approved earlier that removed the presidential age limit, thereby permitting President Guelleh to seek another term. The session was attended by Prime Minister Abdoukader Kamil Mohamed, government ministers, diplomatic corps representatives, and international observers.

Official notices released this week confirmed that the upcoming April 2026 presidential election will feature only one challenger with limited political infrastructure against President Ismail Omar Guelleh.⁴⁹ President Guelleh, who has held office since 1999 and is eligible for a sixth term following constitutional reforms in 2025, is expected to face minimal opposition. The rejection of a former adviser's candidacy further illustrates the restricted political space and the tightly managed electoral environment.

⁴⁵ Dawan Africa. 2026. "Djibouti Election Campaign Begins, Over 256,000 Voters Registered." March 27.

⁴⁶ Dawan Africa. 2026. "Djibouti Parties, Media Sign Charter for Fair Presidential Campaign." March 26.

⁴⁷ Agence Djiboutienne d'Information (ADI). 2026. "Nouvelle réunion autour du Président Guelleh sur l'état de situation de notre pays, à l'aune de la guerre au Moyen-Orient." March 29.

⁴⁸ Dawan Africa. 2026. "Djibouti Parliament Urged to Back Guelleh Re-election Bid." March 2.

⁴⁹ Africanews (via related reports). 2026. "Djibouti's Guelleh Faces Only Low-Profile Rival in Presidential Ballot." March 19.

President Ismail Omar Guelleh formally submitted his candidacy for the upcoming presidential election scheduled for April 10, 2026. The Interior Ministry confirmed the filing, which follows recent constitutional amendments that removed previous age limits for candidates. This development marks President Guelleh's bid for a sixth term in office, extending his tenure which began in 1999. The announcement has garnered support from his governing coalition, though it has also drawn expressions of concern from opposition figures regarding the pace and nature of political transition.⁵⁰

Security, Counterterrorism, and Force Protection

On the night of March 24, a traditional galba-type vessel carrying approximately 320 migrants and refugees capsized off Djibouti's northern coast near Guehere, north of Obock, while attempting to cross the Bab el-Mandeb Strait toward Yemen. At least nine individuals died, 45 remained missing, and Djiboutian coast guard rescue operations recovered 266 survivors. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) described the incident as the first major shipwreck of 2026 on the Eastern Route, warning that the deadliest season was just beginning amid ongoing regional conflicts and migration pressures.⁵¹

The U.S. Embassy in Djibouti issued a security alert citing ongoing regional tensions emanating from the Middle East conflict and specific public threats against U.S. interests. The alert advised increased caution in areas near the U.S. Embassy and Camp Lemonnier, the sole permanent U.S. military base in Africa hosting approximately 4,000 personnel. The embassy implemented a reduced onsite presence, cancelled routine consular services, and remains operational for emergencies only.⁵²

Djibouti's Battalion 13 has deployed to Beledweyne and Bulo Burde, Somalia, as part of the African Union Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). The deployment is intended to reinforce ongoing counterterrorism operations against Al-Shabaab and to strengthen regional security coordination between Djibouti, Somalia, and Ethiopia.⁵³

Reports dated March 22 indicated that the United States quietly pre-positioned Airborne special forces at Camp Lemonnier, the sole permanent U.S. military base in Africa, located adjacent to the Bab el-Mandeb strait. The personnel arrived via a Boeing 747 flight from Fort Liberty on March 19. The deployment was framed in coverage as a precautionary measure amid ongoing regional threats including instability in the Red Sea and heightened tensions involving Iranian-aligned actors and Houthi forces.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ People Daily Digital. 2026. "Djibouti President Omar Guelleh Files Candidacy for Sixth Term." March 10.

⁵¹ International Organization for Migration (IOM). 2026. "Nine Dead, 45 Missing in First Shipwreck of 2026 Off Djibouti." March 26.

⁵² U.S. Embassy Djibouti. 2026. "Security Alert: U.S. Embassy Djibouti – March 10, 2026." March 10.

⁵³ Hiiraan Online. 2026. "Djiboutian AUSSOM Troops Deploy to Beledweyne, Replace Outgoing Battalion." March 19.

⁵⁴ Times of India. 2026. "Failed to Secure Hormuz, US Now Moves Forces Right Next to the Second Chokepoint." Video

In a rare public statement, President Guelleh rebuked U.S. drone and air strikes targeting Al-Shabaab and ISIS elements in Somalia. He characterized the operations as "blind" and warned that actions undertaken without adequate regional consultation risked civilian casualties and could undermine counterterrorism efforts. The criticism is notable given Djibouti's hosting of Camp Lemonnier and its role as a partner in U.S. counterterrorism operations in the region.⁵⁵

Diplomacy and International Engagements

Djibouti hosted a trilateral meeting convening President Guelleh, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, and Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud. The leaders gathered at President Guelleh's private residence in Haramous for consultations framed around strengthening regional coordination. Discussions encompassed peace and security in the Horn of Africa, the road of economic integration among sub-regional states, and shared responses to prevailing political and security challenges.⁵⁶

Foreign Minister Abdulkader Houssein Omar held a telephone conversation with Egyptian Foreign Minister Dr. Badr Abdelatty, focusing on strengthening bilateral relations and exchanging views on key regional issues. The discussion scored the positive momentum in Egyptian-Djiboutian ties with emphasis on expanding economic, trade, and investment cooperation, particularly in infrastructure, logistics zones, energy, and agriculture. On regional matters, the two ministers affirmed the importance of preserving state sovereignty and territorial integrity, with the Egyptian minister explicitly rejecting recognition of "Somaliland" and expressing full support for the unity of the Federal Republic of Somalia.⁵⁷

In a separate diplomatic initiative, Foreign Minister Omar held a phone call with his Iraqi counterpart Fuad Hussein to discuss escalating military developments in the Middle East. The minister expressed Djibouti's solidarity with Iraq, warned of the risks of wider regional conflict, and stressed the importance of sustained diplomatic efforts to achieve ceasefire and stability.⁵⁸

Ambassador Aden Mohamed Dileita, Djibouti's representative in Brussels, attended the 11th summit of the Organisation des États d'Afrique, des Caraïbes et du Pacifique (OEACP) held in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea from March 27 to 29. On behalf of President Guelleh, the ambassador reaffirmed Djibouti's full support for the summit's outcomes, which called for strengthened South-South cooperation and an overhaul of development models.⁵⁹

report, March 22

⁵⁵ Somalia Today. 2026. "Djibouti President Blasts US Strikes in Somalia as 'Blind'." March 3.

⁵⁶ Addis Standard. 2026. "Leaders of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia Hold Tripartite Talks on Regional Peace, Security." March 12.

⁵⁷ Egypt Today Magazine. 2026. "During a Phone Call with His Djiboutian Counterpart, Abdoukader Hussein Omar.

⁵⁸ Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2026. "Fuad Hussein and Djiboutian Counterpart Discuss Regional War Implications and Warn of Escalating Consequences." March 10.

⁵⁹ Agence Djiboutienne d'Information (ADI). 2026. "A Malabo, l'ambassadeur Aden Dileita réaffirme la ligne diplomatique de

Foreign Minister and Government Spokesperson Abdoukader Houssein Omar participated via videoconference in the 165th ordinary ministerial session of the Council of the League of Arab States, convened under Bahrain's presidency. During the session, Djibouti called for respect for the sovereignty of Arab states amid regional tensions.⁶⁰

Rwandan officials conducted targeted diplomatic outreach to Djibouti this week to secure support for the re-election of Louise Mushikiwabo as Secretary-General of the International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF). The engagement underscores the importance of Djibouti's vote within African and Francophone blocs, highlighting efforts by Rwanda to consolidate regional backing ahead of the leadership vote.⁶¹

President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh conducted a series of telephone conversations with regional leaders during the week, reaffirming Djibouti's positions amid the escalating Iran conflict. With Kuwait, President Guelleh issued a statement condemning Iranian airstrikes on Kuwaiti territory and expressed solidarity with the Kuwaiti leadership during a phone call with the Crown Prince, emphasizing Djibouti's commitment to Gulf security and regional stability. In a conversation with King Abdullah II of Jordan, President Guelleh expressed support for Jordan amid deepening regional tensions, with discussions focusing on de-escalation efforts and diplomatic solutions to the ongoing crisis. President Guelleh also spoke with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, voicing solidarity with Saudi Arabia following Iranian strikes on Gulf states, with the call showing Djibouti's alignment with Gulf partners and addressing shared concerns about Horn of Africa vulnerabilities.⁶²

Economic and Development Partnerships

In a series of high-level economic diplomacy engagements, Djibouti Ports and Free Zones Authority (DPFZA) Chairman Aboubaker Omar Hadi met with Nicolas Sartini, Senior Vice President of Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC), to discuss plans to expand the Doraleh Container Terminal's capacity to 5 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs). The discussions addressed current global supply chain disruptions and security challenges in the Red Sea region. A follow-up summit with MSC President Diego Aponte is scheduled for March 25 to focus on financing arrangements, reflecting Djibouti's continued efforts to deepen international maritime partnerships and expand its role as a regional logistics hub.⁶³

A memorandum of understanding was concluded between Djiboutian authorities and French investors to launch a large-scale sustainable fishing project in Djiboutian waters. The initiative aims to develop the fisheries sector, create employment opportunities, and promote

Djibouti." March 29.

⁶⁰ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et de la Coopération Internationale de Djibouti. 2026. "Djibouti Appelle au Respect de la Souveraineté des États Arabes face aux Tensions Régionales." March 29

⁶¹ Dawan Africa. 2026. "Rwanda Seeks Djibouti's Backing for Mushikiwabo Re-Election to Francophonie Post." March 17.

⁶² Royal Hashemite Court (Jordan). 2026. "King Receives Call from Djibouti President." March 5.

⁶³ Agence Djiboutienne d'Information (ADI). 2026. "Transbordement : L'APZFD et MSC en Discussions pour un Projet d'Extension Majeure." March 17.

environmental standards. The agreement aligns with Djibouti's broader economic diversification strategy, which seeks to reduce reliance on port revenues by developing other productive sectors.⁶⁴

Prime Minister Abdoukader Kamil Mohamed convened with a high-level delegation from UNICEF to discuss expanded cooperation on child welfare, education, health, and social protection programs. The meeting focused on deepening development partnerships and addressing humanitarian needs within Djibouti's population. Both sides reaffirmed commitment to advancing child rights and improving social service delivery in line with national development priorities.⁶⁵

1.4 Somalia and Somaliland

Somalia: Constitutional Crisis, Federal-State Confrontation, Sustained Counterterrorism Operations and Deepening Diplomatic Realignments

Security and Counterterrorism

On March 3, Somali pirates hijacked a Chinese owned fishing vessel off the coast of Puntland. The Chinese Embassy in Mogadishu subsequently confirmed that the crew was rescued.⁶⁶ The incident underlined the persistent threat of maritime insecurity in Somali territorial waters despite years of international naval patrols and highlighted the vulnerability of foreign commercial and fishing vessels operating in the region without adequate escort or private security.

Somali National Army forces, supported by Ugandan troops under the African Union Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia continued offensive operations in Lower Shabelle region. Between late February and March 2, joint forces recaptured the strategic militant strongholds of Daarusalaam and Mubarak.⁶⁷ Reports indicated Al-Shabaab elements fled the advancing forces though the group retained freedom of movement in other parts of southern and central Somalia.

The National Intelligence and Security Agency, in coordination with international partners neutralized a senior Al-Shabaab commander during the first week of March.⁶⁸ The individual was reportedly linked to attacks on NISA facilities and civilian casualties in previous

⁶⁴ Dawan Africa. 2026. "Djibouti, French Investors Sign Preliminary Deal for Sustainable Fishing Project." March 4.

⁶⁵ Agence Djiboutienne d'Information. "Le Premier Ministre Reçoit la Directrice Régionale de l'UNICEF." March 2, 2026.

⁶⁶ Somali Guardian. "Pirates Hijack Chinese Fishing Vessel off Somalia's Puntland Coast; Crew Rescued." Somali Guardian, March 3, 2026.

⁶⁷ African Union Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). "SNAF and AUSSOM Recover Two Strategic Cities in Coordinated Assault Against Al-Shabaab." AUSSOM Press Release, March 2, 2026.

⁶⁸ Somaliland Standard. "NISA Has Successfully Eliminated the Al-Shabab Leader Responsible for Coordinating Terrorist Attacks in Mogadishu." Somaliland Standard, March 3, 2026.

months. The strike was part of a campaign to degrade the group's command structure.

In response to recent militant movements, Somali authorities announced the launch of "Operation Lightning," aimed at dismantling remaining Al-Shabaab positions in Lower Shabelle.⁶⁹ The Armed Forces Commander also directed military assets to assist in delivering aid to famine-affected civilian populations signalling a dual role for the military in active combat zones and humanitarian support.

The operational tempo against Al-Shabaab remained high throughout the second week of March. The United States Africa Command conducted airstrikes in coordination with the Federal Government of Somalia targeting militant positions as part of sustained counterterrorism efforts.⁷⁰ Concurrently, the Somali National Army advanced ground operations under the banner of "Operation Badar," successfully seizing a key militant hideout in the Xawaadley area of Middle Shabelle. The Ministry of Defense highlighted this as a gain in clearing insurgent strongholds. Further south in the Hiran and Mudug regions, NISA, with international backing, executed two operations that resulted in the elimination of 22 Al-Shabaab fighters, including individuals reportedly involved in planning future attacks.⁷¹

During the third week of March, the United States Africa Command conducted multiple airstrikes in coordination with the Federal Government of Somalia. A strike was conducted targeting Al-Shabaab on March 15.⁷² A separate strike was conducted targeting ISIS-Somalia in the Golis Mountains area, southeast of Bossaso in the Puntland region, on March 16. A precision airstrike was conducted targeting Al-Shabaab positions on March 19.⁷³ The operations were part of ongoing efforts to degrade the capabilities of both terrorist organizations.

On March 22, Al-Shabaab released an Eid-themed video featuring the group's spokesman, Ali Mohamud Rage (Ali Dhere).⁷⁴ The video depicted the spokesman sending his son on what the group characterized as a deadly mission in Mogadishu, serving as a propaganda tool to demonstrate the group's commitment to its insurgency.

Despite ongoing efforts and tensions, security forces continued counterterrorism operations. NISA in coordination with international partners announced the elimination of two senior Al-Shabaab figures: a senior liaison officer involved in international networks and Suleyman Omar Fidow described as the leader of the group's suicide bombing unit. Later in the week,

⁶⁹ FTL Somalia. "Somali Forces Launch 'Operation Lightning' in Lower Shabelle." FTL Somalia, March 1, 2026.

⁷⁰ Garowe Online. "Somalia: SNA Forces Seize Al-Shabaab Hideout in Middle Shabelle." Garowe Online, March 12, 2026.

⁷¹ Anadolu Agency. "Twin Operations in Somalia Kill More Than 22 al-Shabaab Terrorists." Anadolu Agency, March 15, 2026.

⁷² U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM). "U.S. Forces Conduct Strike Targeting al-Shabaab." AFRICOM Press Release, March 16, 2026.

⁷³ U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM). "U.S. Forces Conduct Strikes Targeting ISIS-Somalia." AFRICOM Press Release, March 18, 2026.

⁷⁴ Somali Guardian. "Somalia: Al-Shabaab Video Shows Spokesman Sending Son on Deadly Mogadishu Mission." Somali Guardian, March 22, 2026.

NISA released a list of 14 high-ranking Al-Shabaab leaders killed in operations conducted over the past ten months (June 2025–March 2026).⁷⁵

In Lower Shabelle region, joint Somali National Army and AUSSOM forces repelled an Al-Shabaab attempt to retake the town of Mubarak killing over 42 militants.⁷⁶ In the Bay region, Somali forces conducted operations in the Daynunay area near Baidoa, clearing terrorist roadblocks and reportedly killing over 20 Al-Shabaab fighters.⁷⁷ The federal government leveraged these operations to level accusations against Southwest State leaders, claiming that President Laftagareen and the newly elected regional parliamentary speaker maintain direct links with Al-Shabaab, a charge Southwest officials dismissed as misinformation and propaganda.⁷⁸

On March 24, the Somali National Army dismissed media reports alleging a helicopter crash in Baidoa, urging the public to rely on official sources for information.⁷⁹

Political and Domestic Affairs

On March 4 and 5, Somalia's bicameral federal parliament passed amendments to the provisional constitution, including revisions to chapters governing power sharing and electoral processes. The move was immediately contested by opposition figures and regional leaders, particularly from Puntland, who boycotted the sessions and described the process as "illegal."⁸⁰ Reports emerged of flight diversions and movement restrictions that prevented some MPs and regional representatives from reaching Mogadishu to participate in or observe the proceedings.

In a national address following the parliamentary vote, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud praised the approval of the constitutional amendments as a historic day, declaring the formal end of Somalia's transitional governance era. He framed the move as the completion of a long-delayed national process transitioning the country to a permanent constitutional framework. The president's remarks were met with skepticism by opposition figures, who viewed the amendments as a unilateral consolidation of power.⁸¹

Somali police confirmed the arrest of a senior adviser to Puntland President Saeed Deni while he was in Mogadishu. The arrest occurred against rising political tensions between the

⁷⁵ Somali National News Agency (SONNA). "Somalia Releases List of 14 Al-Shabaab Leaders Killed Over the Past 10 Months." SONNA, March 29, 2026.

⁷⁶ Diplomat News Network. "Somali Army Defeats Militants in Mubarak." Diplomat.so, March 26, 2026.

⁷⁷ Radio Mogadishu (via official channels). "Somali National Forces Conduct Military Operation Against Kharijites (Al-Shabaab) in Daynunay." March 29, 2026.

⁷⁸ Dawan Africa. "Somalia Government Accuses South West State President of Al-Shabaab Links." Dawan Africa, March 29.

⁷⁹ Somaliland Standard. "Somali Military Command Denies Reports of Helicopter Downed in Baidoa Amidst Rising Political Tensions." Somaliland Standard, March 24, 2026.

⁸⁰ Garowe Online. "Somalia's Federal Parliament Passes Controversial Constitutional Amendments Despite Puntland Boycott." Garowe Online, March 5, 2026.

⁸¹ Somali Guardian. "Somalia's President Hails Constitutional Amendments as Historic End to Country's Transition." Somali Guardian, March 5, 2026.

federal government and Puntland particularly following Puntland's withdrawal from federal processes earlier in the year. The detention was likely to exacerbate existing mistrust and could provoke further friction ahead of planned national elections.⁸²

The formal endorsement of revised constitutional provisions by President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud precipitated a political schism. The move, which transitioned the national charter from a provisional framework, drew immediate and severe criticism from key stakeholders. Former President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo publicly condemned the action, asserting that it threatened national cohesion and governance structures.⁸³ This sentiment was echoed by the Federal Member States of Puntland and Jubbaland, which warned that the process risked excessive centralization of power and unilateral mandate extensions. The Somali Future Council also weighed in, declaring its opposition to any extension of the presidential and parliamentary terms, signalling the potential for a protracted legal and political standoff.

Puntland signaled its intention to proceed with regional elections independently should national consensus fail by the mandated deadlines. This development scored the growing centrifugal forces within the federal system and the potential for a de facto fragmentation of the electoral process, further complicating the national political landscape.⁸⁴

Southwest State Confrontation

The period under review saw an escalation in the Somalia's federal system centered on the relationship between the Federal Government of Somalia and the Southwest State administration. On March 17, Southwest State officially suspended all cooperation and relations with the central government. President Abdiiaziz Hassan Mohamed Laftagareen cited alleged federal interference in regional affairs as the basis for this decision, which effectively aligned Southwest State with Puntland and Jubbaland in suspending ties with Mogadishu.⁸⁵ The move was interpreted as a direct challenge to President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's administration and a rejection of recent constitutional amendments, which Southwest State and other federal member states criticized as non-inclusive and a threat to the federal system.

In a show of defiance, President Laftagareen returned to the Southwest State capital, Baidoa, on March 17 via an Ethiopian military helicopter, circumventing a travel ban reportedly imposed by the federal government. His return showed the deepening rift. In subsequent statements, Laftagareen formally resigned as deputy chairman of the ruling union of parties and warned against unilateral federal actions that he argued would undermine federalism.⁸⁶

⁸² Somali Guardian. "Somalia Arrests Puntland Presidential Adviser in Mogadishu Amid Rising Tensions." Somali Guardian, March 4, 2026.

⁸³ Somali Guardian. "Farmajo Warns Somalia's New Constitution Threatens Unity and Governance." Somali Guardian, March 9, 2026.

⁸⁴ Garowe Online. "Puntland Vows Independent Regional Elections if National Consensus Fails." Garowe Online, March 8.

⁸⁵ Reuters. "Somalia's South West State Says It Has Severed Ties with the Federal Government." Reuters, March 17, 2026.

⁸⁶ Somali Guardian. "Somalia's Southwest President Returns to Baidoa, Defying Federal Travel Ban and Cutting Ties." Somali

He accused the FGS of interference in regional governance and rejected the recently approved constitutional amendments as illegitimate.

Tensions escalated rapidly from rhetoric to military posturing. The FGS airlifted hundreds of elite Haramcad (Cheetah) special police units from Mogadishu to Barawe, the administrative capital of Southwest State, with subsequent deployments of Somali National Army forces reported.⁸⁷ Sources indicated thousands of troops overall, including plans for more than 1,100 SNA reinforcements and Turkish-trained Haram'ad units specifically, plus airlifts to Buurhakaba (Burhakaba) as recently as March 22.⁸⁸ The FGS characterized the deployment as an effort to assert federal control, while Southwest State officials condemned it as an act of destabilization aimed at undermining the regional administration. Pro-Mogadishu forces reportedly took control of several towns, including Barawe, Buur Hakaba, and Huddur, with operations appearing to advance toward Baidoa.

Adding to the political crisis, the Speaker of the Southwest State Assembly, Dr. Ali Said Fiqi, alleged that small arms donated by the Egyptian government for national counterterrorism efforts had been diverted to local militias in the Burhakaba district. The Speaker claimed these weapons were being used in an internal conflict against the Southwest State administration, characterizing the diversion as a dangerous violation of the original aid agreement.⁸⁹

The rift resulted in a political realignment. A coalition of opposition leaders and regional figures publicly endorsed President Laftagreen, further isolating the administration of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud. The backing of Southwest State by key opposition and other regional actors highlighted the growing national consensus against the federal government's handling of constitutional reforms and federal-state relations.⁹⁰

The central political crisis of the final week of March centered on the escalating confrontation between the FGS and the Southwest State administration. Tensions began on March 23 when Southwest State President Abdiasis Husein Mohamed Laftagreen appointed a regional election committee to oversee an indirect, clan-based vote, directly defying the federal government's push for a unified system of direct popular suffrage.⁹¹ The following day, Somalia's Ministry of Interior, Federal Affairs and Reconciliation declared that the mandates of President Laftagreen and his administration had expired, stating it would no

Guardian, March 17, 2026.

⁸⁷ Somalia Today. 2026. "Somalia Deploys Elite Forces to South West State as Tensions Rise." March 19.

⁸⁸ Somaliland Standard. 2026. "Somali Federal Government Has Recently Deployed Additional Troops to the Buurhakaba District through an Airlift Operation." March 22.

⁸⁹ Addis Standard. 2026. "Amid Deepening Rift Southwest State Accuses Somalia's Fed Govt of Diverting Egyptian Weapons to Militias." March 24.

⁹⁰ Somali Guardian. 2026. "Somalia's Southwest President Re-Elected in Vote Rejected by Federal Government." March 28

⁹¹ Somali Guardian. 2026. "Southwest Leader Appoints Election Committee, Defying Somalia Federal Government." March 23.

longer recognize appointments or decisions made by the regional leadership.⁹²

On March 28, the Southwest State parliament, formed through the contested indirect process, re-elected President Laftagareen to a second term in Baidoa. The vote which saw Laftagareen secure 66 votes against challenger Abdullahi Haji Hassan's 13, also resulted in the re-election of Ali Said Fiqi as Speaker of the parliament.⁹³ The federal government swiftly rejected the outcome, characterizing the proceedings as a "premeditated appointment," an "unlawful pseudo-election," and a violation of the national constitution and prior consultative agreements. The Southwest State presidency subsequently denied reports that Laftagareen had requested formal talks with President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, signaling a continued posture of defiance.⁹⁴

On March 30, 2026, Somali National Army forces entered Baidoa, the capital of South West State, following clashes with regional forces loyal to the state president. The move came after the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) labeled recent regional elections as illegal and accused the state leader of overstaying his mandate (which expired in 2022). Fighting occurred about 6 km from the city, with local forces reportedly fleeing.⁹⁵

Abdiaziz Hassan Mohamed Laftagareen announced his resignation effective March 30, 2026, via a Facebook post. This followed the federal takeover and earlier tensions including the state's decision on March 17 to sever ties with the FGS over alleged interference and constitutional disputes. The events mark the start of a political transition in the state.⁹⁶

Amid the regional crisis, domestic political fissures emerged at the federal level. On March 26, Abdirahman Odowa, the Secretary General of the ruling Justice and Solidarity Party, resigned. Odowa cited concerns that President Mohamud was sidelining dissent and undermining institutional integrity, exposing a rift within the party leadership.⁹⁷ Separately, Speaker of the Federal Parliament Aden Mohamed Nur (Aadan Madoobe) declined to accept an impeachment motion against President Mohamud despite claims that over 120 lawmakers had supported the initiative.⁹⁸ Concurrently, a bloc of over 130 federal lawmakers issued a joint statement endorsing Southwest State's decision to conduct its own elections, highlighting legislative divisions over the federal government's electoral reform agenda.

On March 25, the Council of Ministers approved the appointment of General Mohamed Sheikh Hassan Hamud as the new commander of the Somali Custodial Corps (prison

⁹² Yeni Şafak. 2026. "Somalia Says South West State President's Mandate Expired as Tensions Escalate." March 23.

⁹³ Hiiraan Online. 2026. "Abdiaziz Laftagareen Re-Elected Southwest State President for Five-Year Term." March 28.

⁹⁴ FTL Somalia. 2026. "Federal Government Rejects South West State Election as an 'Illegal Pseudo-Election'." March 28

⁹⁵ NAMPA. 2026. "Somali Troops Enter Key City Ruled by Renegade Leader." March 30, 2026.

⁹⁶ Al Jazeera. 2026. "Somali Army Takes Over Key City in Southwest as State Leader Resigns." March 31, 2026.

⁹⁷ Garowe Online. 2026. "Top Party Official Resigns as Political Isolation Grows for Somali President." March 25.

⁹⁸ Garowe Online. 2026. "Somali Parliamentary Speaker Rejects Impeachment Motion against President." March 29

service), replacing General Mahad Abdirahman.⁹⁹ The outgoing commander was reportedly placed under house arrest by President Mohamud the same day.¹⁰⁰

On March 26, traders at Bakaro Market, Somalia's largest commercial place, staged a major protest in Mogadishu against government plans to evict them and sell the market to wealthy investors.¹⁰¹

Diplomatic and International Engagements

On March 2, the Federal Government of Somalia issued a statement condemning recent Iranian attacks on Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, Bahrain, and Oman. The statement described the attacks as "gross and flagrant violations" of sovereignty and international law and a threat to regional stability. Somalia expressed full solidarity with the affected countries and affirmed their right to self-defense and protective measures but notably omitted any reference to the United Arab Emirates. The omission was consistent with the severance of diplomatic ties between Mogadishu and Abu Dhabi in January 2026, reflecting continued bilateral strain. The statement reinforced Somalia's alignment with its current Gulf partners while underscoring the deepening rift with the UAE.¹⁰²

President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud traveled to Arusha, Tanzania, to participate in the 25th East African Community Heads of State Summit. Somalia's participation demonstrated commitment to regional economic integration and diplomatic engagement with neighbouring states. The visit also provided an opportunity to discuss bilateral trade, infrastructure, and security cooperation with fellow EAC members.¹⁰³

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty held talks regarding the Horn of Africa with a focus on Somalia's sovereignty and the security of the Red Sea. Egypt reiterated its commitment to contributing troops to the AUSSOM mission, reinforcing Cairo's growing security presence in Somalia.¹⁰⁴

On the international front, Somalia's Foreign Minister Abdisalam Abdi Ali engaged in diplomatic outreach holding a phone conversation with his Azerbaijani counterpart, Jeyhun Bayramov. During the call, the Minister condemned recent drone strikes on Azerbaijani territory, reaffirming Somalia's solidarity and its commitment to the principles of sovereignty and international law. This act served as a clear articulation of Somalia's foreign policy

⁹⁹ Hiiraan Online. 2026. "Somalia Appoints New Custodial Corps Commander as Federal-Southwest Tensions Escalate." March 25.

¹⁰⁰ Garowe Online. 2026. "Somalia: Custodial Corps Chief Assumes Office as Predecessor Remains under House Arrest." March 29.

¹⁰¹ Garowe Online. 2026. "Traders Protest Eviction Order at Bakara Market in Somalia." March 25–26.

¹⁰² Somali Guardian. 2026. "Somalia Omits UAE in Statement Condemning Iran Attacks on Gulf Countries." March 2

¹⁰³ Somali Guardian. 2026. "Somalia President Arrives in Tanzania for East African Community Summit." March 7.

¹⁰⁴ Hiiraan Online. 2026. "U.S. and Egypt Hold Talks on Somalia and Red Sea Stability." March 12.

stance regarding state-on-state aggression.¹⁰⁵

Ambassador Abdikarim Ahmed Mohamed, Somalia's ambassador to Sweden, presented his credentials to Finnish President Alexander Stubb. This appointment marked the first time Somalia had appointed an ambassador to Finland, an advancement welcomed by the Somali community in Finland as a step that would streamline access to embassy services.¹⁰⁶

As the crisis between the FGS and Southwest State intensified, the federal government engaged in diplomatic outreach. Officials reportedly reached out to members of President Laftagareen's family in an attempt to establish communication channels.¹⁰⁷

The escalating federal-Southwest standoff drew concerted appeals for restraint from the international community. The African Union Commission Chairperson, the United Nations mission in Somalia (UNSOM), and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development each issued statements urging maximum restraint, constructive dialogue and a peaceful resolution, warning that further escalation could undermine national stability and unity.¹⁰⁸ The European Union, through Ambassador Francesca Di Mauro, similarly expressed concern and called for differences to be resolved through dialogue. The United Kingdom's Embassy in Mogadishu also urged de-escalation and restraint, echoing concerns over potential regional destabilization.¹⁰⁹

On March 29, Puntland President Said Abdullahi Deni held a high-level meeting in Garowe with Ethiopian Consul Major General Tagesse Lambamo Dombore, who was accompanied by senior Ethiopian military officials.¹¹⁰

On March 24, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation extended condolences on the passing of Ambassador Hussein Haji Ahmed in Ankara, Türkiye.¹¹¹ Later in the week, Somalia and Spain signed a Memorandum of Understanding establishing a framework for regular political dialogue. The agreement, formalized through meetings between Somali Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Ali Mohamed Omar and Spanish Secretary of State Diego Martínez Belío, covered cooperation in security, economic development, maritime affairs, and multilateral issues.¹¹²

Between March 5 and 6, Mogadishu experienced a sharp increase in fuel prices, with gasoline leaping from approximately \$0.65 to \$1.15 per liter, a 77 percent rise. The spike was attributed to escalating regional tensions in the Middle East and global oil market

¹⁰⁵ SONNA. 2026. "Somalia Expresses Solidarity with Azerbaijan." March 9.

¹⁰⁶ SONNA. 2026. "New Era: Somalia's First Ambassador to Finland Presents Credentials." March 21.

¹⁰⁷ Garowe Online. 2026. "Somalia: Southwest Presidency Denies Dialogue Requests with FGS Following Laftagareen's Re-Election." March 29.

¹⁰⁸ Hiiraan Online. 2026. "AU, UN Urge Dialogue and Restraint as Federal-Southwest Tensions Escalate." March 29.

¹⁰⁹ Hiiraan Online. 2026. "UK Urges Restraint as Tensions Rise Between Federal Government and Southwest State." March 27.

¹¹⁰ Somaliland Standard. 2026. "President of Puntland Held a High-Level Meeting with a Delegation from Ethiopia." March 29.

¹¹¹ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Somalia). 2026. "Somalia-Spain Sign Political Consultations MoU Madrid." March 26.

¹¹² Horn Observer. 2026. "Somalia and Spain Sign Agreement to Deepen Diplomatic and Economic Ties." March 26

volatility. The price hike led to long queues at filling stations and triggered increases in transportation and commodity costs, placing additional economic strain on households.¹¹³

Somaliland: Alignment with Israel and Escalating Sovereignty Claims amid Regional Security Pressures

Diplomatic and International Engagements

On March 2, Somaliland President Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi Irro held a telephone conversation with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. According to a statement from the Somaliland Ministry of Foreign Affairs, discussions centered on regional security dynamics amid the escalating Iran conflict. President Irro expressed concern over recent developments in the Middle East and emphasized that "the protection of civilians must remain the absolute priority." The call followed Somaliland's earlier condemnation of Iranian strikes on Gulf states and reported discussions regarding potential Israeli access to the Berbera port facility. The engagement represented the highest-level confirmed contact between Hargeisa and Jerusalem to date.¹¹⁴

The accelerated pace of engagement between the Somaliland administration and the State of Israel marked a diplomatic development. Following Israel's formal recognition of Somaliland in late 2025, the third week of March saw moves toward deeper ties. The Somaliland administration publicly extended an invitation for Israel to establish a presence at the Berbera port emphasizing its location on the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb corridor. This invitation followed high-level exchanges, including a January visit by Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar and the exchange of ambassadors. The administration framed this as a mutual opportunity for economic and security cooperation signalling a shift toward operationalizing the recent diplomatic recognition.¹¹⁵

Reports from February 2026 had indicated that Somaliland President Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi (Irro) was planning an official visit to Israel at the end of March 2026, which would have marked his first announced official trip following Israel's recognition of Somaliland. However, no confirmation of the visit occurring during the March 23–29 reporting period appeared in available coverage. The visit may have been scheduled for later in the month or early April.¹¹⁶

On March 20, Somaliland-focused advocacy efforts received visibility in U.S. media, showing ongoing engagement with American political circles. These efforts centered on

¹¹³ Radio Dalsan. 2026. "Surging Conflict in Middle East Triggers 77% Fuel Price Hike in Somalia." March 7.

¹¹⁴ Somali Guardian. 2026. "Somaliland President Holds Phone Call with Netanyahu amid Iran War." March 2.

¹¹⁵ Israel.com. 2026. "Somaliland Invites Israel to Establish Presence in Strategic Red Sea Port." March 12.

¹¹⁶ i24NEWS. 2026. "Somaliland President to Make First Official Visit to Israel Next Month." February 25.

promoting Somaliland's pro-Western alignment and advancing support for the Republic of Somaliland Independence Act (H.R. 3992), a bill introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives.¹¹⁷

In a related development, the Central Bank of Somaliland issued an official statement praising a U.S. Congressional bill understood to be associated with broader financial integration and recognition efforts as a historic step toward ending Somaliland's economic isolation. The statement, carried by the Somaliland Standard on March 22, characterized the legislative initiative as a potential gateway to connecting Somaliland with global financial systems.¹¹⁸ The Central Bank's endorsement framed the measure as a critical component of Somaliland's broader push for international legitimacy, linking it to recent diplomatic engagements, including recognition-related developments involving Israel. The statement emphasized that financial integration would serve as a foundation for sustainable economic development and enhanced international cooperation.

The Governor of the Bank of Somaliland hailed the introduction of H.R. 7993, the Somaliland Economic Access and Opportunity Act, as a historic step toward global financial inclusion and integration for the territory. The bipartisan legislation, introduced in the United States Congress, directed the U.S. Department of the Treasury to produce a report on barriers to Somaliland's access to the American financial system. Officials viewed the bill as a potential catalyst for unlocking investment opportunities and establishing banking pathways, building upon earlier momentum in bilateral relations between the United States and Somaliland during 2026.¹¹⁹

Sovereignty Disputes and International Law

In an escalation of its sovereignty claims, the Somaliland administration announced it had lodged a formal complaint with United Nations agencies regarding the administration of its airspace. This legal move asserted its right to full control over aviation management and directly challenged the Federal Government of Somalia's authority in this domain. This action represented a new front in the dispute, seeking international adjudication or intervention on a core attribute of statehood.¹²⁰

Security Implications and Regional Stability

Multiple think-tank analyses and media reports on the Iran conflict explicitly identified Somaliland's Berbera port as a potential flashpoint. The assessments noted the presence of

¹¹⁷ Congress.gov. 2025 (ongoing 2026 attention). "H.R.3992 - Republic of Somaliland Independence Act.

¹¹⁸ Somaliland Standard. 2026. "Somaliland's Central Bank Governor Hails U.S. Bill H.R.7993 as Path to Global Financial Inclusion." March 23.

¹¹⁹ Somaliland Standard. 2026. "Somaliland Central Bank Welcomes U.S. Congressional Bill as Historic Step toward Global Financial Integration." March 22.

¹²⁰ Somaliland Current. 2026. "Somaliland Administration Files International Case Against Somalia Over Airspace Control." March 11.

UAE and presumed Israeli facilities at the Red Sea, citing Houthi threats issued following Israel's recognition of Somaliland. Western officials quoted in an report from March 2 were described as assuming some level of Israeli military or security presence already existed at the facility, though no official confirmation was provided by involved parties.¹²¹

Parallel to diplomatic overtures, reports emerged detailing discussions regarding a potential Israeli security or military presence in Somaliland. Citing sources familiar with the matter, these reports suggested Israel was exploring coastal sites, potentially including elevated terrain west of Berbera, for intelligence gathering and possible operational capabilities against Iran-aligned Houthi forces across the Gulf of Aden. Somaliland officials confirmed ongoing discussions without denying the potential for a security component, framing any such arrangement as contributing to regional stability.¹²²

The Federal Government of Somalia issued a formal warning against any establishment of a foreign military facility in Somaliland. Somalia's State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ali Omar, stated that such an action on what it considered Somali territory would lack legal standing without the federal government's consent and would risk regional destabilization and external confrontations. This statement presented a firm diplomatic counter to the reported Israel-Somaliland discussions and reasserted Mogadishu's claim of sovereignty over the territory, setting the stage for a potential international legal and diplomatic conflict.¹²³

Domestic Affairs and Economic Policy

The Government of Somaliland introduced a fixed fuel price cap during the final week of March in response to price volatility stemming from ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, which affected global oil markets and regional supply chains. The measure, aimed at stabilizing domestic costs and shielding citizens from external economic pressures, established a ceiling for petrol prices denominated in Somaliland Shillings, with diesel similarly controlled.¹²⁴

1.5 Sudan: Escalating Multi-Theatre Warfare, Drone Proliferation, and the Entrenchment of a War Economy

March confirmed Sudan's trajectory as a protracted and increasingly complex conflict defined by multi-theatre military contestation, the normalization of drone warfare, and deepening integration into regional geopolitical and illicit economic systems. Rather than stabilizing into fixed frontlines, the war continued to evolve into a fluid, technologically

¹²¹ Arab News. 2026. "Somaliland's Israel Deal Could Put Berbera Port at Risk." March 4.

¹²² Bloomberg. 2026. "Israel Eyes Red Sea Base in Somaliland to Fight Iran-Backed Houthis." March 11.

¹²³ Al Jazeera. 2026. "Somalia Warns against Any Israeli Base Plans on Somaliland." March 12.

¹²⁴ Hiraan Online. 2026. "Somaliland Sets New Fuel Prices amid Rising Global Oil Costs." March 26.

mediated, and geographically diffuse confrontation, with expanding civilian exposure and growing cross-border implications.

Battlefield Fluidity and the Rise of Drone-Centric Warfare

Battlefield dynamics during the month were marked by sustained offensives and counteroffensives across Kordofan, Darfur, and Blue Nile, reflecting a strategic shift toward mobility and logistical disruption rather than decisive territorial consolidation. The Sudanese Armed Forces' recapture of Bara in North Kordofan¹²⁵ early in the month briefly strengthened its positioning around El Obeid and disrupted the Rapid Support Forces' supply routes linking Darfur to central Sudan. However, subsequent fighting across the same axis highlighted the volatility of these gains, with key regions repeatedly changing hands.¹²⁶ Parallel RSF offensives, supported by coordinated artillery and drone operations, reinforced their hold in western Sudan while targeting SAF supply lines in central and southeastern regions, particularly along the Blue Nile region.¹²⁷

This pattern extended into South Kordofan and Blue Nile, where the RSF-SPLM-N alignment expanded operations following the capture of Kurmuk,¹²⁸ pushing toward strategically sensitive areas near Ed Damazin and critical infrastructure corridors. These advances, coupled with SAF counteroperations, underscore a war increasingly centered on control over logistical nodes and transit routes rather than urban control alone. The result is a persistent state of military balance, in which neither side achieves decisive dominance, but both retain the capacity for sustained escalation.

Drone warfare¹²⁹ emerged as the defining operational characteristic of the conflict. Throughout the month, unmanned aerial strikes targeted markets, schools, residential areas, and medical facilities,¹³⁰ resulting in high civilian casualties and reinforcing the war's shift toward long-range, low-cost strike capabilities.

According to United Nations report, more than 500 civilians have been killed in drone strikes between January 1 and March 15, with more than 277 of those deaths occurring in the first two weeks of March and majority of the casualties occurred in the strategic Kordofan region.¹³¹

¹²⁵ "Sudanese Army Retakes Bara, Secures El-Obeid in North Kordofan." Al Jazeera, March 6, 2026.

¹²⁶ "Sudan Crisis Update: Increasing Violence Targeting Civilians in Kordofan, Blue Nile and White Nile States." Suwra, March 19, 2026.

¹²⁷ "Sudan Army Says Repels Attack in Blue Nile Region." Sudan Tribune, March 29, 2026.

¹²⁸ "Sudan's paramilitary RSF claims controlling strategic border town amid escalating fighting." Xinhua News Agency, March 25, 2026.

¹²⁹ "Sudan: Sharp Increase in Civilian Deaths the Result of Growing Drone Warfare." Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), March 2026.

¹³⁰ "Sudan: Deadly Escalation in Drone Strikes on Civilian Areas Must End." ReliefWeb.

¹³¹ "Sudan: 500 Civilians Killed in Drone Strikes over Three Months." APA News.

Civilian Exposure and the Deepening Humanitarian Crisis

The repeated targeting of civilian gatherings and essential infrastructure indicates that aerial systems are not only tactical tools but also instruments of psychological pressure and population disruption. The strike on a hospital in East Darfur, which killed dozens, including children,¹³² illustrates the erosion of previously protected humanitarian spaces and signals a broader disregard for international humanitarian norms.

Civilian exposure to violence has intensified in parallel with these operational shifts. Indiscriminate shelling in South Kordofan,¹³³ attacks on markets, and the systematic targeting of health infrastructure point to a conflict environment in which civilian harm is embedded within military strategy rather than incidental.¹³⁴ At the same time, the documented use of sexual violence as a weapon of war¹³⁵ and the continued detention of journalists¹³⁶ reflect a broader collapse of protective and accountability mechanisms.

Humanitarian conditions deteriorated further under the combined pressures of displacement, access constraints, and service collapse. Large-scale population movements continued across Darfur, Kordofan, and Blue Nile, with thousands displaced following military operations around Kurmuk and surrounding regions.¹³⁷ Cross-border flows into neighboring states, particularly Chad and Ethiopia, intensified, while refugee conditions remained acute. In Chad, the majority of Sudanese refugee children remain outside the educational system, underscoring the long-term social impact of the conflict.¹³⁸

Warfare Regionalization and War Economy

The regionalization of the conflict became increasingly pronounced. Cross-border incidents, including a drone strike that reportedly caused casualties inside Chad, triggered military responses and heightened tensions along the border.¹³⁹ Chadian reinforcements and disarmament campaigns reflect a shift from indirect spillover to direct security implications for neighboring states. Along the Ethiopia border, Sudanese accusations regarding drone launches and troop movements,¹⁴⁰ though unverified, signal rising perceptions inside Khartoum that external territories are being used as operational depth for armed groups. These dynamics, combined with continued arms flows and external support to both sides, highlight the extent to which Sudan's war is embedded within broader regional rivalries.

¹³² “Devastating Sudan Hospital Attack.” Health Policy Watch.

¹³³ “14 Civilians Killed in RSF Shelling of Sudan’s South Kordofan: Medics.” Anadolu Agency.

¹³⁴ “Sudan Crisis Situation Analysis (09/03/26–15/03/26).” ReliefWeb.

¹³⁵ “‘There Is Something I Want to Tell You’: Surviving Sexual Violence in the Crisis in Darfur.” ReliefWeb.

¹³⁶ “RSF Paramilitary Group Detains 3 Female Journalists in Sudan’s Darfur.” Committee to Protect Journalists, March 2026.

¹³⁷ “Sudan’s Blue Nile Displacement Reaches 73,000 after Kurmuk Attack.” Sudan Tribune, March 26, 2026.

¹³⁸ “Sudan: 76% of Sudanese Refugee Children Out of School – UNHCR.” AllAfrica, March 16, 2026.

¹³⁹ “Chad warns Sudan it will retaliate after drone strike on mourners kills 17.” BBC News, March 19, 2026.

¹⁴⁰ “Sudan Province Governor Accuses Ethiopia of Backing RSF Offensive near Border.” Martin Plaut Blog, March 26, 2026.

Geopolitical positioning around the conflict also intensified. Sudanese leadership sought to avoid entanglement in wider Middle Eastern tensions, with explicit warnings against alignment with Iran and reaffirmation of support for Gulf security interests.¹⁴¹ At the same time, discussions linking Sudan to Saudi Iranian diplomatic dynamics and Red Sea security underscore how the conflict is increasingly viewed as part of a wider geopolitical bargaining environment.¹⁴² External actors are not only shaping battlefield dynamics through indirect support but also positioning themselves for influence over eventual political settlement and reconstruction processes.

This forward-looking position is evident in emerging economic and diplomatic signals. China's announcement of its readiness to participate in reconstruction reflects early competition over post-conflict economic influence, particularly in infrastructure and energy sectors.¹⁴³ Parallel discussions around Sudan's Red Sea ports highlight both the country's strategic potential and its structural limitations. While Port Sudan could gain more importance in the event of disruptions to regional shipping routes, current infrastructure constraints limit its ability to function as a major maritime hub without substantial investment and political stabilization.

At the same time, Sudan's internal economic structure is undergoing significant transformation under wartime conditions. The emergence of industrial-scale Captagon production marks a critical shift in the war economy, linking Sudan to transnational narcotics networks previously centered in the Levant. Production facilities with large-scale output capacity, combined with the expansion of drug trading hubs in RSF-controlled regions such as Nyala and Al Daein, indicate the consolidation of illicit economies alongside traditional resource extraction. The reported use of stimulants by fighters further embeds narcotics within the conflict's operational logic, with potential implications for combat behavior and patterns of violence.¹⁴⁴

Gold markets and fuel dynamics further illustrate wartime distortions. Rising domestic gold prices amid reduced supply and continued large-scale smuggling underscore the erosion of formal economic governance, while fuel shortages and infrastructure disruptions highlight the vulnerability of essential supply systems to aerial attacks and regional uncertainty.¹⁴⁵

Diplomatic efforts remained active but structurally disconnected from battlefield realities. Proposals for humanitarian ceasefires and political road maps, including initiatives involving regional actors, continue to face resistance from both SAF and RSF, whose positions remain tied to military victory rather than negotiated compromise. Internal political fragmentation

¹⁴¹ Tsega'ab Amare, "Sudan's Shadow Alignment: Military Dependence and Diplomatic Denial Amid a Middle East War." Horn Review, March 30.

¹⁴² "Sudan: Another Tradeable Chip in the Saudi Iranian Rapprochement?" Modern Diplomacy, March 13, 2026.

¹⁴³ "Beijing Signals Readiness to Back Sudan Post-War Reconstruction." Sudan Tribune, March 15, 2026.

¹⁴⁴ "The Profits of Collapse: Sudan's Civil War and the Rise of an Industrial Narco-Economy." Horn Review, March 17, 2026.

¹⁴⁵ "Sudan Gold Prices Rise against Global Trend as New Markets Open." Sudan Tribune, March 26, 2026.

further complicates these efforts, as disputes over representation and legitimacy, including controversies surrounding parallel governance structures, undermine the coherence of external mediation initiatives.

Taken together, developments in March point to a conflict that is not only persisting but evolving in complexity. The convergence of mobile warfare, drone-driven escalation, expanding illicit economies, and deepening regional entanglement suggests a war increasingly resistant to containment. Without alignment between internal actors and external stakeholders, Sudan is likely to remain an axis of instability, where military confrontation, economic fragmentation, and geopolitical competition reinforce one another and prolong the trajectory of conflict.

1.6 South Sudan: Fragmented Transition, Localized Violence, and Structural Fragility

March underscored the persistent fragility of South Sudan's transitional framework, where localized violence, elite political tensions, and structural governance deficits continue to interact in ways that undermine long-term stability. While large-scale civil war has not resumed, the country's trajectory remains defined by a fragile equilibrium sustained by incomplete political implementation, weak institutional capacity, and recurring subnational conflict dynamics.

Localized Conflict Systems and Humanitarian Disruption

Violence in Jonglei State emerged as the central driver of instability throughout the month, reflecting both the limits of state authority and the volatility of localized conflict systems.¹⁴⁶ Escalating tensions around Akobo, triggered by a government evacuation order issued in early March ahead of planned military operations, led to large-scale displacement under chaotic and unprotected conditions.¹⁴⁷ The directive, which also affected humanitarian actors, resulted in the suspension of aid operations and the rapid collapse of local service provision. Civilians fled toward neighboring regions and across borders, including into Ethiopia, often without access to organized humanitarian support. Akobo had previously hosted tens of thousands of internally displaced persons, and its destabilization triggered a wider humanitarian shock across central and northern Jonglei. Subsequent assessments indicate that hundreds of thousands have been affected by displacement, loss of services, and deteriorating access conditions, reinforcing how military decision-making can rapidly generate large-scale humanitarian crises in already vulnerable regions.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ "South Sudan Conflict: Jonglei State Flash Update No. 14 (26 March 2026)." ReliefWeb, March 26, 2026.

¹⁴⁷ "South Sudan: Evacuation Order Removes Humanitarian Support for over 200,000 People." Oxfam Ireland.

¹⁴⁸ "Ethiopia: New Influx of South Sudanese Asylum Seekers in Gambella Region (DG ECHO Daily Flash)." ReliefWeb, March 11, 2026.

The humanitarian dimension deteriorated in parallel with these security dynamics. Access constraints, insecurity, and funding shortfalls forced aid organizations to scale back or suspend operations across affected regions. The disappearance of humanitarian personnel, including medical staff, illustrates the increasingly hostile operating environment, with dozens reported missing following clashes in Jonglei.¹⁴⁹ The suspension of health and protection services left large populations without basic care, with some estimates indicating that hundreds of thousands faced gaps in medical access. Displaced populations were left without food assistance, healthcare, or protection mechanisms, often sheltering in open areas under extremely precarious conditions. These pressures were compounded by broader structural vulnerabilities, including chronic food insecurity and the spillover effects of displacement from Sudan, which continue to strain limited national capacity.

Beyond Jonglei, incidents of large-scale communal violence reinforced concerns about civilian protection and the state's limited reach. A major massacre in Ruweng Administrative Area early in the month, which resulted in the killing of over 178 people and mass displacement,¹⁵⁰ highlighted the continuation of localized violence as a systemic feature rather than an isolated event. Similar patterns of intercommunal clashes and cattle-related violence persisted across multiple regions. While government announcements of military trials for implicated soldiers signal an attempt to project accountability,¹⁵¹ historical patterns of limited enforcement raise questions about the credibility and deterrent effect of such measures.

Political Fragmentation and the Limits of the Transitional Framework

At the political level, the transitional power-sharing arrangement showed further signs of erosion. Tensions linked to the continued detention or restriction of opposition figures, including senior political leaders, have deepened mistrust within the political system. These developments have been accompanied by fragmentation within opposition movements and efforts by some factions to consolidate coordination outside formal transitional structures. This reflects a broader crisis of confidence among political elites, where competition for influence continues to outweigh commitment to implementing the provisions of the 2018 Revitalized Peace Agreement.

The sustainability of the transition remains closely tied to elite-level relations, particularly between President Salva Kiir and First Vice President Riek Machar. Continued restrictions on Machar and unresolved tensions stemming from earlier clashes have reinforced the highly personalized nature of the peace process.¹⁵² Diplomatic engagement throughout the month emphasized that South Sudan's stability remains dependent on elite accommodation rather

¹⁴⁹ "Renewed Fighting in South Sudan Displaces Thousands, UN Warns." UN News, February 2026.

¹⁵⁰ "Mass Grave Discovered amid South Sudan Violence." BBC News.

¹⁵¹ "Council of States Condemns Attacks on Abiemnhom County." South Sudan Broadcasting Corporation (SSBC).

¹⁵² "The Shattered Peace: The collapse of the power-sharing agreement...as symptomatic of regional destabilisation." Alephas, March 11, 2026.

than institutional resilience, increasing vulnerability to sudden political shifts.

Debates over electoral preparations further exposed the gap between formal political timelines and on-the-ground realities. While officials continued to signal progress toward planned elections in late 2026, analysts and civil society actors widely questioned their feasibility. Persistent insecurity, incomplete institutional reforms, and a lack of key prerequisites such as a census and a constitutional framework raise significant concerns about electoral credibility. Premature elections risk exacerbating political tensions rather than consolidating stability, highlighting the disconnect between formal commitments and structural readiness.¹⁵³

Economic Dependence and Structural Vulnerability

Economic pressures also played a significant role in shaping the political environment. The government's efforts to secure substantial payments from oil companies underscore the state's continued fiscal dependence on the oil sector,¹⁵⁴ which accounts for the vast majority of public revenue. At the same time, disruptions linked to regional instability and infrastructure vulnerabilities continue to affect production and export capacity. Reliance on resource-backed infrastructure financing further highlights challenges related to transparency, debt sustainability, and long-term economic governance. While such arrangements may offer short-term gains, they risk reinforcing structural weaknesses in the context of limited institutional oversight.

Regionally and diplomatically, South Sudan pursued a strategy of cautious engagement aimed at maintaining external support while projecting progress. High-level diplomatic interactions, including engagement with South Africa, focused on electoral processes, trade cooperation, and political backing.¹⁵⁵ These efforts signal an attempt to secure legitimacy and investment amid domestic uncertainty. At the same time, the country's broader regional integration trajectory, including its participation in the East African Community,¹⁵⁶ continues to face scrutiny given the gap between institutional commitments and domestic capacity.¹⁵⁷

External security dynamics also remain relevant. Reports of continued regional involvement, including from Uganda, highlight the persistence of external security linkages that shape internal conflict dynamics.¹⁵⁸ While such involvement may provide short-term stability for government forces, it also introduces additional complexity into an already fragmented security environment.

¹⁵³ "Race against Time to Stabilise South Sudan as Elections Loom." Institute for Security Studies (ISS Africa).

¹⁵⁴ "South Sudan Pushes to Raise Oil Output despite Export Disruptions." Ecofin Agency, March 27, 2026.

¹⁵⁵ "South Sudan Steadfast on December 2026 Elections Schedule, Kiir Tells Ramaphosa." Pulse of Africa, Mar 20, 2026.

¹⁵⁶ "Opinion: Joining Too Soon? South Sudan, the East African Community and the Cost of Premature Accession." Radio Tamazuj, March 7, 2026.

¹⁵⁷ "Opinion: New East African Community and Implications for South Sudan." Radio Tamazuj, March 15, 2026.

¹⁵⁸ "UPDF Rubbishes UN Report on Bombardment of Civilians in South Sudan." Nile Post, March 11, 2026.

Social and political mobilization patterns further illustrate the state's fragility. The emergence of narratives rooted in identity, symbolism, and historical claims reflects how political competition increasingly extends beyond formal institutions.¹⁵⁹ These dynamics can reinforce group cohesion but also risk intensifying divisions and legitimizing confrontation in non-institutional forms, particularly in areas where state authority remains weak.

Across all these dimensions, a consistent pattern emerges: the coexistence of formal peace structures with persistent informal instability. Localized violence, humanitarian strain, political fragmentation, and economic vulnerability are interconnected elements that reinforce one another. The absence of large-scale war reflects not the resolution of underlying conflicts but their containment within a fragmented and unstable equilibrium.

Overall, developments in March highlight a transition process that remains incomplete and increasingly strained. The continuation of violence in Jonglei, the deterioration of humanitarian conditions, and the erosion of political cohesion point to a system under pressure from both internal fragmentation and structural weakness. Without renewed political commitment to genuine power-sharing, strengthened institutional capacity, and meaningful economic reform, South Sudan is likely to remain caught in a cycle of localized conflict and fragile stability, with the risk of broader instability continuing to loom.

1.7 Kenya: Persistent Terror Threats, Strategic Adaptation, and Global Spillovers

Kenya sustained a period of layered pressure where security operations, diplomatic maneuvering, and domestic governance challenges evolved side by side. Across the month, the country remained anchored in a high-alert posture shaped primarily by the enduring threat from Al-Shabaab, even as new and less conventional risks emerged from both within and beyond the region. What stands out is not escalation in the traditional sense, but the persistence and adaptation of threats, and Kenya's attempt to respond with a similarly adaptive and multidimensional strategy.

At the operational level, Kenyan security forces maintained consistent counterterrorism pressure, particularly in the northeastern counties of Mandera and Wajir.¹⁶⁰ These areas remained focal points for targeted raids, arrests of suspected militants, and the seizure of weapons and explosives. Security agencies also disrupted recruitment pipelines linked to extremist networks, indicating that the state's efforts are not only reactive but increasingly preventive.

Intelligence patterns indicate that Al-Shabaab has adapted rather than weakened,

¹⁵⁹ "Country Report: South Sudan 2026." European Country of Origin Information Network (ECOI), 2026.

¹⁶⁰ Hiiraan Online. "Kenyan Forces Kill Two Suspected Al-Shabab Militants Near Somalia Border." March 26, 2026.

transitioning from high-profile strikes to a decentralized, embedded presence in under-governed rural and semi-arid zones.¹⁶¹ By conducting ambushes and coercing local populations, the group has shifted the conflict's focus from territorial gain to exerting influence over marginalized communities. Kenya has responded with a dual strategy: complementing military operations with community outreach and trust-building programs. This approach recognizes that long-term stability requires both neutralizing militants and addressing the underlying social conditions that facilitate their operations.¹⁶²

Border security remained a central concern throughout the month, Kenya continued to strengthen surveillance and monitoring along its frontier with Somalia, aiming to prevent infiltration by militants despite ongoing instability across the border. Security forces maintained patrols and coordinated intelligence efforts to detect and disrupt cross-border movements early. This sustained vigilance is deeply informed by past experiences, particularly the legacy of attacks such as the Garissa University College attack,¹⁶³ which continues to shape national security thinking. Even in the absence of new large-scale incidents, the memory of such events reinforces a doctrine centered on prevention and rapid response.

Regionally, Kenya continued to assert its role as a key security actor in East Africa.¹⁶⁴ Its involvement in the African Union Mission in Somalia remained central to its external military engagement, while diplomatic coordination with Somalia and Ethiopia focused on intelligence sharing, joint operations, and border management. These engagements, though not always visible in public reporting, are critical to containing cross-border threats and maintaining regional stability. Kenya's partnerships extended beyond the region as well, with continued engagement from the United Nations and the United States providing support in the form of training, logistics, and humanitarian programs.¹⁶⁵ These relationships reinforce Kenya's position as both a frontline state and a strategic partner in global counterterrorism efforts.

However, these security measures are taking place within a complex domestic context. Throughout the month, it remained evident that counterterrorism operations intersect with longstanding grievances in border regions, including issues of marginalization, resource distribution, and political representation. These underlying tensions complicate enforcement efforts and create a risk that heavy-handed approaches could deepen local resentment. Kenya's emphasis on community engagement reflects an awareness of this challenge, but it

¹⁶¹ ACLED. "Kenya-Somalia Border: Rising Al-Shabaab Threat in the Wake of ATMIS Drawdown." Special Report, March 2026.

¹⁶² Ministry of Defence of Kenya, "Civil – Military Cooperation Outreach Activities in Damasa," 2026.

¹⁶³ National Counter Terrorism Centre. "Remembering those we lost in the Garissa University attack in 2015: A story of triumph over adversity." June 20, 2024.

¹⁶⁴ People Daily. "Kenya, US deepen defence partnership to tackle East Africa security threats." March 26, 2026.

¹⁶⁵ U.S. Army Southern European Task Force, Africa. "US, Kenya forces strengthen tactical readiness during Justified Accord 2026." March 17, 2026.

also highlights the difficulty of balancing immediate security needs with long-term social cohesion.

Beyond the Horn of Africa, Kenya's security environment was significantly influenced by developments in the Middle East. As tensions escalated, the government moved quickly to protect its citizens abroad, issuing travel advisories and activating emergency response mechanisms through embassies and consulates.¹⁶⁶ Helplines were established, evacuation plans were prepared, and coordination with airlines was initiated to facilitate the safe return of Kenyan nationals. This response underscores the scale of Kenya's diaspora in the Gulf and the extent to which external crises now directly affect domestic policy. Nairobi also expressed concern about the potential expansion of the conflict and the risk it could pose to critical infrastructure, reflecting a broader awareness of how global instability can translate into national vulnerability.¹⁶⁷

At the same time, Iranian diplomatic channels in Nairobi sought to reassure Kenya that it was not a target of the confrontation, emphasizing that the country does not host strategic infrastructure that would draw it into the conflict,¹⁶⁸ while also responding to circulating concerns about possible spillover risks. This exchange highlights Kenya's positioning as a diplomatically engaged but non-aligned actor navigating heightened global polarization. At the policy level, senior Kenyan leadership publicly called for restraint and de-escalation, warning that the expansion of hostilities in the Middle East could have destabilizing effects far beyond the immediate theatre of war, including implications for international peace, global trade routes, and regional security architectures.¹⁶⁹

Beyond diplomatic signaling, the conflict carried tangible security and economic implications for Kenya. The disruption of global oil markets linked to the hostilities compounded by the functional closure of the Strait of Hormuz in early 2026 created upward pressure on fuel prices and supply chains, exposing Kenya's vulnerability as a net importer of petroleum products and heightening concerns about energy security and inflationary pressures within the domestic economy.¹⁷⁰ Key sectors such as aviation and horticulture were also affected, with flight routing adjustments over the Middle East increasing operational costs and logistical complexity for airlines, while export-dependent industries, particularly the flower sector,¹⁷¹ experienced delays and revenue losses due to altered cargo routes and heightened insurance and transport costs.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁶ Capital FM. "Kenya issues security advisory for citizens in the Middle East amid Iran strikes." March 1, 2026.

¹⁶⁷ Pulse Kenya. "Kenya issues urgent advisory to 500,000 citizens in the Middle East as conflict escalates." March 5, 2026

¹⁶⁸ Capital News. "Iran Envoy says Tehran will not target Kenya in retaliatory strikes against US-Israeli attacks." March 2, 2026.

¹⁶⁹ KBC Digital. "Middle East conflict: Mudavadi urges quick, peaceful resolution." March 1, 2026.

¹⁷⁰ Kenya News Updates. "Kenya Fuel Shortage 2026: How Middle East War Is Disrupting Supply." March 24, 2026.

¹⁷¹ Xinhua News Agency. "Kenya's flower exporters lose 4.8 mln USD as Middle East conflict persists." March 26, 2026.

¹⁷² The Star, "KQ losing Sh2.6m per flight as war in the Middle East disrupts routes." March 23, 2026.

Crucially, this maritime blockade has transformed the Port of Lamu from a quiet developmental project into a critical strategic redundancy hub. As primary Gulf corridors became inaccessible, Lamu emerged as a "port of last resort," seeing a massive surge in transshipment activity including the diversion of thousands of vehicles and containerized cargo originally destined for Middle Eastern hubs like Jebel Ali.¹⁷³ This shift underscores how the LAPSET corridor is being recoded from a long-term development scheme into a vital security buffer, offering a safe, deep-water alternative that insulates regional trade from the volatility of distant geopolitical chokepoints.¹⁷⁴

There were also growing concerns during the month about the indirect consequences of Middle East instability for the Horn of Africa. Reporting highlighted the possibility that Gulf states might reduce their engagement in the region if their attention shifts elsewhere.¹⁷⁵ Such a development could affect investment flows, humanitarian support, and broader security cooperation, introducing new uncertainties into Kenya's external environment. This dimension of risk is less immediate than terrorism but equally significant in shaping the country's strategic outlook.

One of the most notable diplomatic developments involved Kenya's agreement with Russia to halt the recruitment of Kenyan nationals into the war in Ukraine.¹⁷⁶ Reports that hundreds of Kenyans had been drawn into military contracts, often through deceptive job offers, triggered widespread concern and domestic pressure. In response, Foreign Minister Musalia Mudavadi confirmed that no new enlistments would be allowed and that consular support would be provided to those already involved.¹⁷⁷

Domestically, security challenges extended beyond terrorism into other persistent issues. In Turkana County, authorities issued a two-week ultimatum for the surrender of illegal firearms, reflecting ongoing concerns about small arms proliferation and localized violence in the northwest.¹⁷⁸ These dynamics, though less visible internationally, remain significant drivers of insecurity and can intersect with broader regional tensions.

Kenya's strategic path also included major economic and infrastructure developments with clear security implications. A revival of the China-backed extension of the Standard Gauge Railway toward the Ugandan border marked a significant step forward after a prolonged financing pause.¹⁷⁹ By adopting a revenue securitization model, the government sought to

¹⁷³ The Maritime Executive. "Lamu Port's Cargo Throughput Jumps by 900%, Buoyed by Shipping Disruption." March 22, 2026.

¹⁷⁴ The Horn Review. "Ports of Last Resort: Lamu Port and the New Logic of Redundancy in the Indian Ocean." March 23, 2026.

¹⁷⁵ Martin Plaut. "The Horn and the Gulf: How a New Geopolitical Confluence is Emerging." February 24, 2026.

¹⁷⁶ Al Jazeera. "Kenya and Russia agree no Kenyans will be recruited for the Ukraine war." March 16, 2026.

¹⁷⁷ Business Insider Africa. "Kenya's foreign minister announces amnesty for citizens fighting in the Russia-Ukraine conflict." March 23, 2026.

¹⁷⁸ Kenya News Agency. "County Commissioner issues two-week ultimatum to illegal firearm holders." March 14, 2026.

¹⁷⁹ Citizen Digital. "Inside the revived Naivasha to Malaba SGR extension project." March 19, 2026.

advance the project without increasing debt burdens. This initiative is not only about economic growth but also about strengthening regional connectivity and stabilizing trade corridors that are vital to both economic and security interests.

At the same time, Kenya continued to pursue an active international role in security affairs, including its planned leadership of the multinational mission in Haiti.¹⁸⁰ This engagement reflects Nairobi's ambition to position itself as a global contributor to peacekeeping and stabilization efforts, extending its influence beyond East Africa.

Internally, the political environment throughout remained relatively stable but not without underlying tension. Periodic protests, policing controversies, and public dissatisfaction linked to economic conditions continued to shape the domestic landscape. These issues did not escalate into widespread unrest during the month, but they remain part of a broader context that security agencies must manage carefully. The challenge lies in maintaining a balance between enforcing order and addressing legitimate public concerns, particularly in a climate where economic pressures can amplify social tensions.

Section Two: MENA Region, Gulf, and Global Engagement

2.1 Egypt: Balancing Mediation, Energy Security, and Regional Stability

Egypt's Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty launched an intensive round of phone diplomacy in early March 2026, contacting GCC counterparts, Jordan, and Iraq to urge Iran to halt attacks on Arab states while expressing solidarity and calling for restraint.¹⁸¹ This outreach reflected Cairo's core strategic calculus: regional stability is not abstract but existential, directly shielding Suez Canal revenues that is vital amid trade disruptions and Gulf alliances that bankroll infrastructure. By framing escalation as a shared threat, Egypt reinforced its role as an Arab stabilizer without alienating Tehran, preserving historical channels that counterbalance US-Israeli influence and mitigate risks of Sinai spillover or energy import shocks.

These initial contacts seamlessly evolved into coordinated de-escalation efforts, exemplified by Abdelatty's March engagements with Oman's Foreign Minister¹⁸² emphasizing diplomatic channels to avert catastrophe. Leveraging longstanding ties, Egypt positioned itself as a neutral broker capable of bridging divides, a move that enhanced its leverage in Arab forums while insulating domestic energy supplies from potential Strait of Hormuz closures. This mediation pivot was not reactive but calculated, transforming vulnerability into influence by keeping lines open to both Gulf patrons and Iran, thereby reducing the likelihood of proxy

¹⁸⁰ Citizen Digital. "Haiti Mission: The change of guard and how the Kenya-led force flopped." March 18, 2026

¹⁸¹ "Egyptian FM Urges De-escalation in Phone Calls with Regional Counterparts." Xinhua, March 11, 2026.

¹⁸² "FM discusses regional de-escalation efforts with Oman." State Information Service, March 16, 2026.

flare-ups that could inflame Egypt's borders or tourism-dependent economy.

Central to Cairo's response was an urgent focus on energy resilience. On March 4, President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi directed enhancements to gas reserves,¹⁸³ renewable capacity, and a new memorandum of understanding with Libya for petroleum cooperation,¹⁸⁴ explicitly addressing war-induced volatility and suspended Israeli supplies. This proactive pivot exposed Egypt's acute exposure which is reliant on imported fuels, heavy subsidies, and volatile Brent prices while underscoring a deeper strategic imperative: self-reliance as a buffer against inflation, social unrest, and fiscal strain. By diversifying partnerships, Egypt not only insulated its economy but signaled to global actors that its stability hinged on swift conflict resolution.

Egypt's mediation ambitions deepened through back-channel facilitation between Washington and Tehran, including intelligence-enabled proposals for a five-day pause in hostilities coordinated with Turkey and Pakistan.¹⁸⁵ These parallel tracks, relaying messages between US envoy Steve Witkoff and Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, positioned Cairo as an indispensable conduit, reportedly influencing US decisions to defer strikes on Iranian infrastructure. Far from altruism, this role advanced Egypt's interests by courting US economic and military support while courting Tehran to neutralize Houthi threats to Red Sea shipping, all while avoiding direct entanglement that could trigger refugee influxes or militant spillovers.

Complementing these efforts, Abdelatty's March 26 phone call with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio addressed Iranian threats and facilitated evacuations of US citizens,¹⁸⁶ balancing pragmatic cooperation with underlying frictions evident in Egyptian media. This engagement exemplified Cairo's nuanced hedging: protesting the US "depart now" alert issued March 2 which included Egypt¹⁸⁷ despite its non-involvement and sparked official backlash over tourism losses estimated at \$18 billion annually while securing Washington's backing. The alert's inclusion threatened foreign currency reserves critical for debt management, highlighting Egypt's priority to project stability amid currency slides and import surges.

The diplomatic crescendo came on March 19 when President El-Sisi conducted brief visits to the UAE and Qatar, unequivocally condemning Iranian assaults and declaring Gulf security an extension of Egypt's national interests.¹⁸⁸ Affirming readiness for all necessary support alongside de-escalation calls, these trips fortified economic lifelines with wealthy partners

¹⁸³ "President El-Sisi reviews Egypt gas supply plans amid escalating regional tensions." *Ahram Online*, March 4, 2026.

¹⁸⁴ "Egypt turns to Libya for oil as Iran war chokes Gulf supplies." *The New Arab*, March 31, 2026.

¹⁸⁵ "Türkiye, Pakistan, Egypt mediated Iran-US talks: Report." *Daily Sabah*, March 23, 2026.

¹⁸⁶ "Secretary Rubio's Call with Egyptian Foreign Minister Abdelatty." *U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson*, March 26, 2026.

¹⁸⁷ "US urges citizens to immediately leave over a dozen Middle East countries." *Al Jazeera*, March 3, 2026.

¹⁸⁸ "Egypt's Sisi visits UAE, Qatar, says Gulf security is extension of national security." *Daily News Egypt*, March 19, 2026.

while countering non-Arab threats. This Gulf solidarity flowed directly into broader Arab coordination, including calls with Iraq, Jordan, Syria, and Qatar, plus a trilateral foreign ministers' meeting in Islamabad with Saudi Arabia and Turkey, forging unified stances to isolate unilateralism and amplify leverage in global forums.

Linking Gulf security to Palestinian stability, Egypt maintained resolute opposition to Gaza displacement,¹⁸⁹ viewing it as a direct threat to Sinai security, resource strain, and extremism risks. President Sisi advanced an Arab-endorsed reconstruction plan featuring a temporary technocratic committee to manage aid before Palestinian Authority reintegration, ensuring Palestinians remain on their land. This consistent stance as border guardian and mediator interconnected with Iran-related diplomacy, preventing demographic shifts or Israeli pretexts that could destabilize Egypt's eastern flank and undermine its regional influence.

Collectively, Egypt's March 2026 engagements reveal a sophisticated grand strategy: harnessing acute economic vulnerabilities—energy shocks, Suez tolls, tourism, and subsidies—to drive assertive yet balanced diplomacy. By emerging as a pivotal back-channel facilitator and Arab convener, Cairo not only averted immediate fallout but cultivated post-conflict leverage, diversifying alliances beyond Gulf dependency while extracting US aid and Iranian goodwill. This approach transcends crisis management; it positions Egypt as an indispensable stabilizer in a volatile neighborhood, safeguarding territorial integrity and resource access through calculated neutrality that masks deeper ambitions for enhanced Middle Eastern sway. In an era of great-power retrenchment, Cairo's maneuvers demonstrate how middle powers can weaponize interdependence to shape outcomes far exceeding their material weight.

2.2 Israel/USA – Iran War

The US-Israeli campaign against Iran opened March with precision strikes that devastated key targets in Tehran, including the IRIB state television headquarters and zones near Mehrabad airport, while simultaneously hitting the underground nuclear facility at Minzadehei, the Assembly of Experts building in Qom, and the Natanz uranium enrichment site.¹⁹⁰ These coordinated air operations signaled a deliberate focus on dismantling Iran's nuclear infrastructure and leadership nodes early, aiming to prevent any rapid reconstitution of weapons-related programs amid the broader offensive.

Iran's swift same-day retaliation deployed armed drones against the US embassy compound in Riyadh, sparking a minor fire, and the consulate in Dubai, while broader missile and drone

¹⁸⁹ “Arab leaders endorse Egypt’s Gaza reconstruction plan.” *Al Jazeera*, March 4, 2025.

¹⁹⁰ Albright, David, Sarah Burkhard, Spencer Faragasso, and the Good ISIS Team. “Alleged Minzadehei (aka Min-Zadayi) Nuclear Weapons Development Compound.” *ISIS Reports*, Institute for Science and International Security, March 4, 2026.

volleys targeted several Gulf Arab states.¹⁹¹ Kuwait's air defenses, already engaged for consecutive days, intercepted incoming threats but suffered debris that injured two refinery workers, illustrating how Iran's asymmetric response sought to internationalize the conflict and strain coalition partners through spillover effects.

This retaliatory phase exposed coordination frictions when Kuwaiti systems mistakenly downed three US F-15 fighter jets in an apparent friendly-fire incident during overlapping Iranian attacks,¹⁹² though all six American crew members ejected safely and were recovered without serious injury. US Central Command framed the event as an unintended consequence of simultaneous threats,¹⁹³ underscoring the complexities of integrated air defenses in a multi-actor battlespace.

Concurrently, Iran's ally Hezbollah escalated by launching rockets and drones into northern Israel from southern Lebanon, prompting immediate Israeli air raids and heavy bombardment of Hezbollah positions around Beirut and southern Lebanon¹⁹⁴ that produced dense smoke plumes and civilian evacuations. Israel ordered thousands of villagers in south Lebanon to relocate northward, while the US drew down embassy staff in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Lebanon amid persistent missile and drone warnings, revealing how the conflict rapidly expanded into a multi-front proxy war that complicated regional stability and forced defensive reallocations.

By March 3, Iran formally acknowledged the Natanz strike through its envoy at the Vienna nuclear agency,¹⁹⁵ confirming the campaign's success in degrading enrichment capabilities without immediate radiation leaks. Israeli ground advances into southern Lebanon the same day, supported by reinforcements pushing northward, displaced approximately 30,000 Lebanese civilians including 9,000 children, according to the UN,¹⁹⁶ as Israel's military leadership vowed sustained operations until Hezbollah's disarmament. These developments interconnected the northern front with the Iranian theater, creating parallel pressures that stretched Israeli resources while amplifying humanitarian costs and refugee flows across borders. Turkey's interception of an Iranian ballistic missile approaching its airspace marked NATO's first direct involvement, though no collective-defense clause was invoked,¹⁹⁷ highlighting spillover risks that drew in additional alliance assets without full escalation.

Israel announced the war's entry into a "second phase" on March 5, shifting air strikes to underground ballistic missile storage sites after claiming destruction of hundreds of surface-

¹⁹¹ Christou, William. "Iran Continues to Hit Back at US-Israeli Strikes as Trump Says It Is Too Late to Talk." *The Guardian*, March 3, 2026.

¹⁹² BBC News. "Kuwait Shoots Down Three US Jets in Friendly-Fire Incident, US CENTCOM Says." March 2, 2026.

¹⁹³ "Three U.S. F-15s Downed by Kuwaiti Air Defence in Friendly Fire Incident, U.S. Military Says." *Reuters*, March 2, 2026.

¹⁹⁴ BBC News. "Israel Strikes Lebanon After Hezbollah Rocket Fire as Iran Conflict Widens." March 2, 2026.

¹⁹⁵ Reuters. "Iran Says Natanz Nuclear Site Hit in US-Israeli Strikes." *Reuters*, March 2, 2026.

¹⁹⁶ "More than 30,000 Displaced in Lebanon by Middle East War: UN." *AL-Monitor*, March 3, 2026.

¹⁹⁷ "For the Fourth Time: Iranian Missile That Penetrated Turkish Airspace Intercepted." *Ynetnews*, March 2026.

to-air and surface-to-surface launchers.¹⁹⁸ Iranian counterstrikes that day included ballistic missiles targeting Israel, the UAE, and Qatar, igniting a large but extinguished fire at a Bahrain refinery and claimed drone hits on an opposition camp in Iraqi Kurdistan plus a US-operated oil facility.¹⁹⁹ US forces reported striking at least 30 Iranian vessels, including a major drone carrier, while deploying B-2 stealth bombers with dozens of 2,000-pound bunker-buster munitions against buried sites,²⁰⁰ affirming robust munitions reserves to sustain prolonged operations. These exchanges illustrated a pattern of attrition where coalition precision strikes progressively eroded Iran's retaliatory infrastructure, even as Tehran sought to impose costs through dispersed, multi-domain responses.

Global diplomatic and moral voices emerged amid the fighting, with Pope Francis issuing a video appeal urging leaders to reject war as a resolution tool and abandon "projects of death,"²⁰¹ echoed by Vatican criticism of the US-Israeli preventive campaign on legal grounds. On the northern front, Israel intensified operations against Hezbollah with airstrikes on command centers, rocket sites, and an airborne commando raid in eastern Lebanon, issuing stern warnings of severe consequences for continued cross-border attacks.²⁰² Israel's Home Front Command relaxed some safety measures as US assessments noted declining Iranian missile launches, reflecting successful erosion of Tehran's arsenal and operational capacity through sustained bombardment.

Iran's internal political consolidation between March 7 and 8 saw the Assembly of Experts appoint Mojtaba Khamenei, the hardline son of the late Ali Khamenei killed in opening strikes, as the new Supreme Leader,²⁰³ entrenching hardliner control and countering any US hopes of influencing succession. This transition occurred against a backdrop of mounting US casualties, including a seventh service member succumbing to wounds from early Iranian strikes, prompting further embassy evacuations of non-essential staff from Riyadh, Amman, Doha, Kuwait City, and Manama.²⁰⁴ Economic repercussions surfaced as oil prices surged over 20 percent and briefly exceeded \$100 per barrel due to Gulf supply fears, though President Trump characterized elevated fuel costs as a "small price" for security, amid volatility on commodity exchanges.²⁰⁵

Iran's defiant rhetoric persisted under the new leadership, with threats to target Israel's

¹⁹⁸ Reuters. "Israel to Attack Iran's Underground Missile Sites in Second Phase of War, Sources Say." *Reuters*, March 5, 2026.

¹⁹⁹ Al Jazeera Staff. "Iran Fires More Missiles, Drones Across Gulf Region Amid US-Israeli Attacks." *Al Jazeera*, March 5, 2026.

²⁰⁰ Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). "U.S. Says More Than 30 Iranian Vessels Sunk as Missile and Drone Attacks Decline." *SANA*, March 6, 2026.

²⁰¹ Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). "U.S. Says More Than 30 Iranian Vessels Sunk as Missile and Drone Attacks Decline." *SANA*, March 6, 2026.

²⁰² Al Jazeera Staff. "At Least 41 Killed in Israeli Air Attacks on Lebanon's Bekaa." *Al Jazeera*, March 7, 2026.

²⁰³ Gambrell, Jon, Sam Metz, Kareem Chehayeb, and Samy Magdy. "Iran Names Mojtaba Khamenei to Succeed His Father as Supreme Leader and Saudi Sharpens Warning." *AP News*, March 9, 2026.

²⁰⁴ Palmer, Kathryn. "Seventh American Service Member Dies in Iran War, Pentagon Says." *USA Today*, March 8, 2026.

²⁰⁵ Geman, Ben. "Oil Tops \$100 a Barrel as Iran War Escalates." *Axios*, March 9, 2026.

Dimona nuclear reactor if regime change efforts continued. Mojtaba Khamenei's inaugural message which was read on state television without his personal appearance, fueling speculation about his condition, demanded national unity, vowed endless revenge, and declared the Strait of Hormuz closed to Western vessels as leverage²⁰⁶.

Broader spillover drew NATO responses as Turkey intercepted additional Iranian ballistic missiles and later,²⁰⁷ while Gulf states quietly sought Ukrainian anti-drone expertise. The UN Security Council adopted a resolution condemning Iran's attacks on neighbors in a 13-0-2 vote, with China and Russia abstaining, even as human rights experts denounced US-Israeli strikes as unlawful aggression.²⁰⁸ Prime Minister Netanyahu's veiled threat against Iranian leadership figures reinforced Israel's intent to target command structures amid two-front pressure.²⁰⁹ Humanitarian tolls mounted, with UNICEF reporting over 1,100 children killed or injured region-wide since late February, Iranian claims of more than 2,000 total deaths mostly civilians, and specific incidents like a March 14 Isfahan factory airstrike killing fifteen workers.²¹⁰ Iran cracked down internally by detaining suspected collaborators and dismantling an armed anti-regime cell in Kurdistan Province, while the US suffered six airmen killed in a March 12 mid-air collision of two KC-135 tankers over Iraq.²¹¹

Diplomatic overtures in late March showed tentative de-escalation signals yet yielded little progress. On March 23, President Trump claimed strong talks with a top Iranian leader and extended the Hormuz deadline to April 6, assertions immediately dismissed by Iranian officials as fabricated.²¹² Regional actors including Pakistan hosted foreign ministers from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt on March 30-31, while back-channel proposals clashed: the US demanded an end to enrichment and handover of enriched uranium, countered by Iran's calls for reparations and Strait sovereignty recognition.²¹³

Thus, The March 2026 US-Israeli-Iran war, which erupted in the final days of February and consumed the entire month of March, exposed the fragility of deterrence in an era of precision strikes and proxy networks while demonstrating the enduring resilience of asymmetric powers. What began as a lightning campaign of devastating US-Israeli airstrikes on Tehran's command nodes, Natanz and other nuclear sites, underground missile caches, and leadership targets rapidly metastasized into a multi-front attrition conflict: Iran's immediate drone and missile barrages hit Gulf targets, Hezbollah and later the Houthis

²⁰⁶ "Iran's New Leader Issues First Statement: Strait of Hormuz Must Remain Closed until War Ends." The Hill, March 8, 2026.

²⁰⁷ "Turkey Says NATO Defences Down Missile from Iran." Reuters, March 30, 2026.

²⁰⁸ Kivilcim, Elvan. "U.N. Security Council Condemns Iran's 'Egregious Attacks'." The Wall Street Journal, March 12, 2026

²⁰⁹ "Humanitarian Crisis for Children Deepens After One Month of War in the Middle East." UNICEF, March 30, 2026. "Netanyahu Threatens Iran New Leader, Says Government Collapse Uncertain." Reuters, March 12, 2026.

²¹⁰ "Iran Warns of Death Penalty, Asset Seizures for Spying, Aiding Enemies." Reuters, March 31, 2026.

²¹¹ "Iran War Shock Drives Steepest Hike Yet in Oil Price Forecasts." Reuters, March 31, 2026.

²¹² Burke, Jason, and Lorenzo Tondo. "Trump Claims 'Productive' Talks with Iran but Tehran Denies Contact." *The Guardian*, March 23, 2026.

²¹³ Al Arabiya English. "Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt Discuss Ways to Bring Permanent End to Iran War." *Al Arabiya*, March 29, 2026.

opened northern and southern fronts, and friendly-fire incidents underscored the chaos of integrated air defenses. Iran's swift appointment of Mojtaba Khamenei as Supreme Leader, closure of the Strait of Hormuz, and continued daily ballistic-missile waves proved that leadership decapitation and infrastructure degradation could not collapse the regime or silence its retaliatory capacity. Instead, the month revealed the high costs of escalation—over 1,900 Iranian civilian deaths, 19 Israeli fatalities, more than 1,000 Lebanese civilians killed, thousands displaced, oil briefly topping \$100 a barrel, and global market volatility—while diplomacy (Trump's extended deadlines, Pakistan-hosted talks, UN resolutions) produced only rhetorical theater and mutual denial.

By April 1 the conflict had settled into a bloody stalemate of tit-for-tat strikes, limited humanitarian corridors, and mounting regional spillover that drew in NATO assets without triggering Article 5. Looking ahead, the coming weeks are likely to test whether the April 6 Hormuz deadline forces a decisive escalation or whether back-channel exhaustion finally yields a fragile ceasefire; either outcome will reshape Middle Eastern security architecture for years, proving that modern great-power limited wars still carry the risk of uncontrolled regional conflagration and that no side has yet discovered a clean path to victory.

2.3 Türkiye: Balancing Defense and Diplomacy amid regional escalation

In early March 2026, NATO air defenses in Turkey intercepted multiple Iranian ballistic missiles that had crossed Iraqi and Syrian airspace, with the first incident leaving debris in Hatay's Dörtyol district and subsequent strikes near Gaziantep.²¹⁴ No casualties occurred, yet the events exposed Turkey's eastern provinces to direct spillover from Iran's retaliatory campaign against U.S.-Israeli strikes. Ankara responded by deploying additional Patriot batteries, including at Incirlik Air Base, while coordinating with allies to safeguard sovereign territory without invoking Article 5.²¹⁵ This demonstrated NATO's operational solidarity but also underscored Ankara's vulnerability as a frontline state, forcing a calibrated mix of deterrence and restraint to prevent broader entanglement.

Turkey immediately summoned Iran's ambassador to protest the airspace violations and conveyed strong objections through Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, who urged Tehran to exercise restraint during direct calls.²¹⁶ Officials publicly attributed the missiles while noting Iran's denials, creating diplomatic ambiguity that necessitated back-channel verification. By framing the incidents as unacceptable threats rather than declarations of hostility, Ankara preserved channels for dialogue, signaling that its NATO obligations did not preclude independent engagement with regional powers and thereby positioned itself as a stabilizer

²¹⁴ "Turkey says NATO defences down missile from Iran." Reuters, March 30, 2026.

²¹⁵ "Ankara says NATO deploys new Patriot battery at south Turkey air base." Euractiv, March 19, 2026.

²¹⁶ "Turkey tells Iran violation of its airspace unacceptable." Reuters, March 10, 2026.

rather than an escalator.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan intensified this diplomatic activism through intensive phone calls with U.S. President Donald Trump, the Qatari Emir, UAE President, Saudi Crown Prince, and EU leaders, advocating de-escalation and offering Turkey's mediation services.²¹⁷ Foreign Minister Fidan complemented these efforts by engaging counterparts from Qatar, Greece, Iraq's KRG, the UK, and UAE, while confirming Ankara's role relaying messages between Washington and Tehran. Erdoğan further reached out to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov via Fidan, reiterating Turkey's readiness to host Russia-Ukraine talks.²¹⁸ These parallel initiatives highlighted Ankara's self-image as a neutral bridge-builder, linking Middle East stability to Eurasian security and mitigating risks of diverted international attention.

NATO's response reinforced Turkey's defensive posture without drawing it deeper into combat.²¹⁹ The alliance condemned Iran's actions, deployed additional U.S. Patriot systems alongside existing Spanish units at Incirlik, and augmented air defenses across the eastern Mediterranean. The U.S. State Department ordered non-essential diplomats and families to depart the Adana consulate, citing proximity to NATO installations.²²⁰ These measures illustrated collective security benefits for Ankara while exposing the limits of alliance dependence, as Turkey balanced enhanced interoperability with its preference for strategic autonomy.

On the ground, Turkey heightened alert along its 534-kilometer border with Iran, placed military units on standby for migration and public-order contingencies, and mutually suspended day-trip passenger crossings with Tehran while keeping commercial freight operational.²²¹ Flight suspensions to Middle Eastern destinations followed airspace closures, and travel advisories urged citizens to avoid non-essential trips to Iraq. These practical steps reflected Ankara's prioritization of citizen safety and economic continuity, insulating domestic stability from potential refugee surges or cross-border incidents that could politicize the crisis.

Economic pressures compounded the security challenges as oil prices surged and energy costs threatened inflation. The Central Bank sold approximately 22 tons of gold outright and swapped 34-60 tons more—the largest drawdown in years—to defend the lira. Energy Minister Alparslan Bayraktar confirmed uninterrupted Iranian natural gas flows via the South Pars pipeline and denied supply disruptions.²²² Concurrently, Ankara advanced nuclear

²¹⁷ Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications. "Erdoğan Holds Talks with Leaders of the US, Qatar, and UAE (IRNA)." March 1, 2026.

²¹⁸ "Turkey offers to host Russia-Ukraine peace talks as Erdogan hosts Zelensky." Al Jazeera, March 8, 2024.

²¹⁹ "Turkey says NATO defences down missile from Iran." Reuters, March 30, 2026.

²²⁰ "U.S. Orders Diplomats to Leave Consulate in Southern Turkey." The New York Times, March 10, 2026.

²²¹ "Turkey says day-trip crossings suspended at Iran border." Turkish Minute, March 2, 2026.

²²² "Turkish minister denies reports of Iranian gas halt after strike." Turkish Minute, March 25, 2026.

power negotiations with South Korea, Canada, China, and Russia for reactors in Sinop and Thrace,²²³ while the EU proposed Turkey's inclusion in the SEPA payments system to reduce euro transfer costs.²²⁴ These moves revealed a forward-looking strategy to diversify energy sources and deepen selective Western integration despite stalled accession talks, buffering against Hormuz-related vulnerabilities.

Domestically, the crisis intersected with persistent political tensions. Large protests in Istanbul supported jailed Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu amid his high-profile corruption trial,²²⁵ while authorities detained Uşak Mayor Özkan Yalım of the CHP on bribery charges and pursued a defamation suit against CHP leader Özgür Özel. Media freedom concerns intensified with the blocking of an AFP correspondent's X account and arrests of journalists on disinformation charges.²²⁶ Freedom House's 2026 report delivered Turkey its lowest-ever due-process score and designated it Europe's only "Not Free" country since 2018, amplifying EU and NATO scrutiny over judicial independence.²²⁷ These developments tested Ankara's domestic legitimacy at a moment when national security dominated headlines, reminding observers that internal cohesion underpins credible foreign policy.

To sustain long-term resilience, Turkey signed a multibillion-pound training and support contract with the UK for 20 Eurofighter Typhoon jets, advancing its integration into the program and bolstering NATO's eastern flank capabilities.²²⁸ U.S.-Turkey coordination on Syria's transitional government continued, navigating Kurdish policy sensitivities.²²⁹ Yet congressional criticism from figures like Rep. Rob Menendez over Turkey's Cyprus posture illustrated enduring alliance frictions. Collectively, these threads reveal Ankara's calculated hedging: leveraging NATO assets for immediate defense while pursuing diversified partnerships and asserting mediation primacy to safeguard electoral prospects and regional influence.

In sum, March 2026 positioned Turkey as a pivotal yet exposed actor—strengthening air defenses and technical attribution claims while sustaining outreach to adversaries and allies alike. By rejecting escalation and disinformation narratives, prioritizing citizen security, and linking Iran mediation to Ukraine diplomacy, Ankara pursued a higher-order objective: insulating its territory and economy from wider instability without sacrificing strategic autonomy. This balancing act, however, carries risks; sustained spillover or domestic polarization could erode its mediator credibility, underscoring that Turkey's influence hinges on translating tactical deterrence into durable regional stability.

²²³ "Turkey in nuclear power talks with South Korea, Canada, China, Russia, minister says." Reuters, March 18, 2026.

²²⁴ "EU proposes Turkey join SEPA payments system: report." Turkish Minute, March 19, 2026.

²²⁵ "Turkey: Thousands of Imamoğlu supporters rally in Istanbul." DW, March 18, 2026.

²²⁶ "Rights Group Says Turkish Journalist's Arrest Shows Govt 'Fears Free Press'." Balkan Insight, March 23, 2026.

²²⁷ "2024 Human Rights and Democracy in the World (country reports)." European External Action Service, February 9, 2026.

²²⁸ Yaylali, Cem Devrim. "Turkey, UK Sign Training and Support Deal for Multibillion-Dollar Eurofighter Order." *Defense News*, March 25, 2026

²²⁹ Security Council Report. "Syria, March 2026 Monthly Forecast." *Security Council Report*, March 2, 2026.

2.4 The Gulf: War, Economic Strains and Limits of Balance

The Gulf Region

March 2026 was defined by the expanding human and economic costs of the US-Israeli campaign against Iran, as Gulf states absorbed sustained missile and drone strikes while managing the compounding pressures of energy disruption, investment retrenchment, and a deepening reassessment of their security arrangements with Washington. Iran's effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz concentrated Gulf oil exports through Saudi Arabia's East-West pipeline and the Red Sea port of Yanbu, a workaround that became existentially significant when the Houthis entered the conflict on March 29, threatening to bring the Bab el-Mandeb under the same Iranian-aligned pressure as Hormuz. The strikes dismantled in weeks the Beijing-brokered Saudi-Iran rapprochement of 2023, with both Riyadh and Doha expelling Iranian military attachés, while Abu Dhabi moved to freeze Iranian assets and shut down IRGC-linked institutions in Dubai. Gulf states responded by accelerating defence diversification, signing a series of cooperation agreements with Ukraine covering counter-drone expertise, co-production, and procurement, while pre-existing hedging strategies toward Türkiye, Pakistan, China, and European partners acquired renewed salience. Oman's Foreign Minister offered the sharpest regional critique of Washington's conduct, arguing publicly that the United States had lost control of its own foreign policy, a signal of the depth of Gulf disillusionment that a post-conflict reassessment of the American security umbrella will need to address.

The Military Dimension

Iran's campaign of missile and drone strikes against Gulf infrastructure continued through March, maintaining pressure on states hosting US and Israeli assets while testing available air defence systems. A wave of attacks on March 13-14 struck multiple Gulf states simultaneously. The UAE intercepted nine ballistic missiles and 33 drones, though debris ignited a fire at the Fujairah oil bunkering hub. Qatar intercepted four ballistic missiles over Doha, prompting evacuations. Kuwait sustained material damage at the Ahmed al-Jaber Air Base and radar infrastructure at Kuwait International Airport. Jordan intercepted 79 of 85 projectiles. The geographic spread of the attacks demonstrated that Iran's campaign retains both ambition and reach.

The strikes prompted Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain to declare force majeure on oil and gas shipments, citing infrastructure damage and threats to Strait of Hormuz passage.²³⁰ Key facilities shuttered across the region include Qatar's LNG plants, Saudi Arabia's Ras Tanura refinery, and Iraqi Kurdistan oil fields, concentrating economic damage at the region's most

²³⁰ Milisic, Alma. "Force Majeure: What Is It and Why Have Some Gulf Countries Invoked It?" Al Jazeera, March 13, 2026.

exposed points.

Iranian messaging remained internally contradictory. President Pezeshkian publicly apologised early in the war to neighbouring states and indicated strikes would cease unless attacks originated from Gulf soil. IRGC elements simultaneously signalled operations would continue – as they did - as long as Gulf states permitted US forces on their territory, pointing to real divisions within Tehran's decision-making architecture.²³¹

Twelve Arab and Muslim foreign ministers convened in Riyadh on March 19, asserting the right to self-defence under Article 51 and collectively condemning Iranian strikes on civilian and economic targets. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan left little ambiguity about Gulf states' willingness to act, while Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan characterised the gathering as a final warning to Tehran.²³² The IRGC framed its response as the opening of a new phase of warfare. By month's end, the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan met in a further coordinated signal, centering discussions on escalation, navigation security, and energy flows.²³³

Security Architecture and the American Umbrella

The sustained strikes have forced a visible reassessment of the security arrangements governing Gulf-US relations. The central perception is that American bases have functioned as targets rather than deterrents, drawing Iranian fire while delivering uncertain protection. Reports that Gulf capitals received no prior consultation before the US-Israeli campaign launched compounded the grievance.²³⁴ Oman's Foreign Minister wrote in *The Economist* that Washington has lost control of its own foreign policy.²³⁵ Deep military integration makes swift realignment structurally difficult, but pre-existing hedging strategies toward Türkiye, Pakistan, China, and European partners have acquired renewed salience. The deployment of Ukrainian drone defence experts to Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia during March illustrated the broader international dimension of that confrontation.²³⁶

Economic Pressures and Regional Spill over

Energy shutdowns, force majeure declarations, and surging oil and gas prices have strained Gulf budgets while defence spending rises. Sovereign wealth fund commitments and major infrastructure projects are under review across the region. Disruptions to maritime traffic through the Strait of Hormuz have slowed imports, raised shipping costs, and drawn warnings of food price inflation and pressure on desalination-dependent water supplies. For

²³¹ Al Jazeera. "Why Are Iranian Leaders Sending Mixed Messages on Gulf Attacks?" Al Jazeera, March 8, 2026.

²³² Al Jazeera. "What Did Arab and Muslim Ministers Discuss in Riyadh Meeting on Iran?" Al Jazeera, March 19, 2026.

²³³ Arab News. "Leaders of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan Discuss Military Escalation in the Region." *Eurasia Review*, March 31, 2026.

²³⁴ Paley, Abram. "How the Iran War Could Change the US Relationship with Gulf States." Atlantic Council, March 25, 2026.

²³⁵ Albusaidi, Badr. "America's Friends Must Help Extricate It from an Unlawful War." *The Economist*, March 18, 2026.

²³⁶ FRANCE 24 English. "Ukraine Sends Drone Experts to Gulf, Viewing an 'Opportunity'." YouTube, March 11, 2026.

the Horn of Africa, a sustained Gulf investment retrenchment carries direct consequences: Gulf states are among the region's primary investors and financiers, and prolonged budget pressure could weaken the financial architecture underpinning several Horn economies.

African Diplomatic Signalling

Ethiopia's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Hadera Abera, held a concentrated series of meetings with Gulf ambassadors and chargés d'affaires in Addis Ababa during the second week of March, engaging representatives from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, and the UAE in rapid succession.^{237,238} The outreach reflects Addis Ababa's recognition that the Gulf crisis carries direct consequences for Ethiopia's economic relationships, and that the moment calls for active engagement with partners whose attention is heavily consumed by the immediate conflict.

Saudi Arabia

Under Fire: The Strike Campaign and Air Defence

Iranian strikes on Saudi territory have been sustained and concentrated since the conflict began on February 28. By the third week of March, Saudi air defences had intercepted a cumulative total of approximately 575 drones and 49 missiles, with 51 drones intercepted in the first five hours of March 21 alone. Attacks have focused on the Eastern Province, home to Saudi Arabia's principal oil fields and refineries. A drone struck the Aramco-Exxon SAMREF refinery near Yanbu, disrupting oil loadings at the Red Sea port that has become the kingdom's primary export outlet following Iran's effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz.²³⁹ An Iranian missile and drone strike on Prince Sultan Air Base on March 27 injured at least 15 US troops, two seriously, and damaged at least two KC-135 aerial refuelling aircraft, marking one of the most serious breaches of American air defences since the conflict began.²⁴⁰ The American Embassy in Riyadh was also struck in the opening days of the conflict, prompting Saudi condemnation.²⁴¹

Diplomatic Deterioration and the Saudi-Iran Rapprochement

Saudi Arabia expelled Iran's military attaché and four embassy staff on March 21, giving them 24 hours to leave the kingdom. Qatar took a similar step days earlier.²⁴² The expulsions

²³⁷ Hadera Abera Admassu (@SMHaderaAbera). "I was pleased to receive H.E. Abdullah Hassen Alzahrani, the newly appointed Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to Ethiopia..." X post, March 9, 2026.

²³⁸ Hadera Abera Admassu (@SMHaderaAbera). "Today, I held separate meetings with Saad bin Mubarak Al Nuaimi, Ambassador of Qatar; Afkar Nadhim Al Farsi, Ambassador of Oman; Abdulaziz Hamadah, Chargé d'Affaires of Kuwait and Rashed Abdulla Alzoy Alshehhi, Chargé d'Affaires of the United Arab Emirates..." X post, March 10, 2026.

²³⁹ Abdul, Nazrin. "Saudi Aramco Refinery Hit by Drone Attack amid Iran Tensions." *Azernews*, March 19, 2026.

²⁴⁰ Al Jazeera. "At Least 15 US Troops Wounded in Iran Strike on Saudi Airbase: Reports." Al Jazeera, March 28, 2026.

²⁴¹ Azhari, Timour. "US Embassy in Riyadh Hit by Drones, Saudi Defence Ministry Says." Reuters, March 3, 2026.

²⁴² Al Jazeera Staff and Reuters. "Saudi Arabia Expels Iran Military Attache, Four Team Members." Al Jazeera, March 21, 2026.

mark a concrete and significant deterioration of the Beijing-brokered Saudi-Iran rapprochement concluded three years ago; a diplomatic achievement that has been effectively dismantled by the conflict. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan held a phone at the end of February, describing ongoing Iranian attacks as a dangerous escalation while affirming their commitment to defend their territories.²⁴³ Egyptian President Sisi conducted a regional tour on March 21, meeting MBS in Jeddah and reaffirming Cairo's solidarity with the Gulf position, reflecting Cairo's continued dependence on the Gulf Monarchies.²⁴⁴

Defence Realignment and New Partnerships

Saudi Arabia's defence posture through March pointed toward deliberate diversification. Ukrainian President Zelenskyy offered counter-drone expertise to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the opening week of March, and by March 27, Kyiv and Riyadh had signed a defence memorandum covering procurement, technological cooperation, and investment during Zelenskyy's visit to the kingdom.²⁴⁵ Ukraine, which has deployed 201 anti-drone experts to the Middle East and emerged as a leading low-cost interceptor drone producer through its war with Russia, is positioning itself as a partner of direct operational relevance. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait separately held discussions on enhanced military cooperation, agreeing to deepen joint defence mechanisms and interoperability.²⁴⁶ The accumulation of new defence partnerships reflects Riyadh's effort to supplement arrangements with Washington that have proven costly and, in some respects, insufficient.

Pakistan's position through the period illustrated the wider diplomatic pressures the conflict is generating. Islamabad has maintained formal neutrality while managing its Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement with Riyadh, with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif meeting MBS in Jeddah on March 12 to reaffirm bilateral commitments.²⁴⁷ How long that neutrality holds as the conflict persists remains an open question.

African Energy and Economic Resilience

Saudi Arabia's East-West pipeline, bypassing the Strait of Hormuz, is operating at full capacity of seven million barrels per day, with crude exports through Yanbu reaching five million barrels per day. The pipeline has become the kingdom's primary export lifeline, and tanker flotillas have redirected to Yanbu to collect shipments.²⁴⁸ The bypass has helped

²⁴³ National Media Authority. "UAE President Receives Phone Call from Saudi Crown Prince on Regional Developments and Their Repercussions on Security and Stability." National Media Authority, February, 2026.

²⁴⁴ Frantzman, Seth J. "Egypt Backs Saudi Arabia as Sisi Condemns Iran Attacks on Gulf States." *The Jerusalem Post*, March 22, 2026.

²⁴⁵ The Independent. "Zelensky Makes Surprise Saudi Arabia Trip for 'Important Meetings' as Ukraine Steps Up Middle East Support." *The Independent*, March 27, 2026.

²⁴⁶ Middle East Eye. "Saudi Arabia and Kuwait Discuss Military Cooperation." Live blog, March 7, 2026.

²⁴⁷ Al Arabiya English. "Pakistan PM Sharif Arrives in Saudi Arabia." Al Arabiya English, March 12, 2026.

²⁴⁸ Onyango, Daniel. "Saudi Arabia Maxes Out East-West Pipeline to Bypass Strait of Hormuz." *Pipeline Journal*, March 30, 2026.

moderate oil prices, though it only partially offsets the roughly fifteen million barrels per day that transited Hormuz before the conflict. The route's continued viability faces a prospective new threat: the Houthis have signalled entry into the war, raising the prospect of the Red Sea becoming an additional front. The Bab el-Mandeb, through which Yanbu's exports must pass, falls within direct Houthi reach, and its disruption would effectively close the last functioning export corridor for Gulf oil.

Ethiopia's Finance Minister Ahmed Shide met with the Chief Executive of the Saudi Fund for Development in Riyadh on March 25, with discussions focused on advancing debt restructuring under the G20 Common Framework and exploring financing for the planned Bishoftu International Airport.²⁴⁹ The meeting reflects Addis Ababa's active diplomatic push to consolidate its debt restructuring process at a moment when Gulf attention and resources are under significant strain.

United Arab Emirates

Ethiopia the UAE

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed visited the UAE during the second week of March, meeting both President Mohammed bin Zayed and Vice President Mohammed bin Rashid. The visit consolidates a partnership that has deepened steadily since 2018, anchored in sustained political dialogue and close leadership ties. Amid heightened Gulf tensions, Addis Ababa's preference has been for quiet diplomatic engagement with key partners rather than public positioning, a posture consistent with Ethiopia's broader approach to the crisis.

Under Fire: The Strike Campaign

The UAE has absorbed more Iranian missiles and drones than any other Gulf state since the conflict began on February 28, with cumulative intercepts exceeding 1,900 projectiles by the third week of March. Strikes have targeted a deliberate spread of economic and symbolic infrastructure. A drone struck the Ruwais industrial zone on March 10, home to the UAE's largest refinery with over 900,000 barrels per day capacity.²⁵⁰ A separate attack near fuel storage at Dubai International Airport caused fires and temporary flight suspensions.²⁵¹ On March 13, an Iranian-linked drone struck the Dubai International Financial Centre, with Iran having previously warned it could target Western financial infrastructure in the Gulf.²⁵² Strikes on March 16 targeted Fujairah port and Dubai International Airport simultaneously, with UAE air defences intercepting six ballistic missiles and 21 drones on that day alone.

²⁴⁹ Addis Standard. "Ethiopia Discusses Debt Restructuring under G20 Common Framework with Saudi Arabia." *Addis Standard*, March 26, 2026.

²⁵⁰ El Wardany, Salma, and Anthony Di Paola. "UAE Says Drone Attack Causes Fire in Zone That Houses Refinery." *Bloomberg*, March 10, 2026.

²⁵¹ Reuters. "Fire Breaks Out in Vicinity of Dubai International Airport after Drone Attack, Dubai Authorities Say." *Reuters*, March 16, 2026.

²⁵² Middle East Eye. "Dubai Financial Hub Hit by Intercepted Drone after Iran Threatens Banks." *Live blog*, March 13, 2026.

Iran's targeting of Fujairah carries particular strategic logic: positioned on the Gulf of Oman outside the Strait of Hormuz, the port serves as the UAE's primary energy export channel while Iran maintains its blockade of the strait. Closing that alternative route has become a visible Iranian objective. By month's end, IRGC strikes hit Emirates Global Aluminium in Abu Dhabi, injuring eight people and signalling an Iranian effort to extend pressure beyond oil and military targets into industrial supply chains.²⁵³

President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed described the UAE as being in a "period of war" in a March 7 address, praising the armed forces and affirming that the country would not be an easy target.²⁵⁴ UAE officials separately denied Israeli media reports that Abu Dhabi had struck a desalination facility inside Iran, characterising the claims as fabricated and reiterating that the UAE acts in self-defence and does not target civilian infrastructure abroad.²⁵⁵ A leaked message attributed to former Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif, describing the UAE as equivalent to Israel and arguing that Tehran should concentrate attacks on Emirati targets alongside US and Israeli interests, reflected the depth of hostility driving Iran's posture toward Abu Dhabi.²⁵⁶

Hardening Posture and Strategic Signalling

Abu Dhabi's public positioning hardened through March in ways that mark a departure from the UAE's early restraint. UAE Ambassador to the United States Yousef Al Otaiba published an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal on March 25, offering the most direct official articulation of Abu Dhabi's position since the conflict began. Otaiba argued that a ceasefire alone is insufficient and that any settlement must address Iran's nuclear capabilities, missile and drone arsenal, proxy networks, and blockade of international sea lanes. He reaffirmed the UAE's 1.4 trillion-dollar investment commitment to the United States and signalled Abu Dhabi's readiness to join an international initiative to reopen the Strait of Hormuz.²⁵⁷ The piece reflects a deliberate effort by Abu Dhabi to shape the terms of any eventual settlement rather than simply absorb the conflict's costs.

A Wall Street Journal report on March 24 indicated that the UAE has moved to shut down Iranian-linked institutions in Dubai and is warning it could freeze billions of dollars in Iranian assets, targeting IRGC-linked entities in measures that would significantly restrict Iran's access to foreign currency and trade.²⁵⁸ Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia remain cautious about direct combat roles, but the trajectory reflects a hardening posture as Iranian strikes on infrastructure and urban centres continue to mount.

²⁵³ Al Jazeera. "Iran's IRGC Claim Attacks on UAE, Bahrain Facilities Linked to US War." Al Jazeera, March 29, 2026.

²⁵⁴ The National. "President Sheikh Mohamed Visits Survivors of Iranian Attacks and Says the UAE Is 'No Easy Prey.'" *The National*, March 7, 2026.

²⁵⁵ MEE Staff. "UAE Officials Deny Israeli Reports of Strike Inside Iran." *Middle East Eye*, March 8, 2026.

²⁵⁶ Iran International. "UAE and Israel Are 'One and the Same', Zarif Says in Leaked Message." Iran International, March 6, 2026.

²⁵⁷ Al Otaiba, Yousef. "The U.A.E. Stands Up to Iran." *The Wall Street Journal*, March 26, 2026.

²⁵⁸ Bloomberg News. "Saudis and UAE Take Steps Toward Joining Iran War, WSJ Says." Bloomberg, March 24, 2026.

Defence Partnerships and Ukraine

The UAE signed a defence and security cooperation agreement with Ukraine during President Zelenskyy's March 28 visit, forming part of a broader ten-year framework Kyiv is establishing across the Gulf encompassing co-production arrangements, joint investments, and drone and missile defence expertise.²⁵⁹ Ukraine has deployed anti-drone experts to the UAE as part of the arrangement, and Zelenskyy indicated that contracts across the three Gulf states visited are worth billions of dollars. Kyiv has proposed swapping its interceptor drones for the Patriot missiles Gulf states are deploying against Iranian attacks, positioning Ukraine as a partner of direct operational relevance to states absorbing sustained aerial assault.

Sudan and the Regional Shadow

A Le Monde investigation published during the third week of March alleged that the UAE is reorganising its arms supply network to Sudan's Rapid Support Forces, developing new logistical routes through Ethiopia and the Central African Republic as existing corridors face greater scrutiny.²⁶⁰ The report traces cargo aircraft allegedly linked to a conglomerate partly owned by a brother of UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed, operating under a recently registered freight company with apparent ties to a previously flagged Emirati air cargo operator. Libya's Cyrenaica, controlled by Khalifa Haftar, allegedly remains a primary corridor, with around 600 flights said to have connected Abu Dhabi to a south-eastern Libyan airbase in 2025. Egypt, backing Sudan's regular army, has reportedly deployed drones to strike RSF-linked convoys near the border. The report, emerging while Abu Dhabi is absorbed in managing Iranian strikes on its own territory, points to the persistence of the UAE's Sudan posture regardless of the immediate conflict's demands.

Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman

Kuwait: Sustained Strikes and Critical Infrastructure

Kuwait has absorbed a sustained Iranian aerial campaign through March, with cumulative intercepts since February 28 reaching 307 ballistic missiles, 616 drones, and two cruise missiles by month's end. A wave of attacks on March 29 saw 14 ballistic missiles and 12 drones detected in Kuwaiti airspace, with several striking a military camp and injuring ten soldiers, and logistics warehouses sustaining material damage. The following day, an Iranian strike on a power and water desalination plant killed one Indian worker and caused significant structural damage. The attack on water infrastructure carries particular weight in one of the world's most water-scarce regions, and signals an Iranian willingness to expand its target set beyond military installations and energy facilities into the utilities underpinning civilian life.²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ Le Monde with AFP. "Zelensky Agrees Defense Cooperation with UAE, Qatar on Gulf Tour." *Le Monde*, March 28, 2026.

²⁶⁰ Mas, Liselotte, and Benjamin Roger. "The UAE Reorganizes Its Arms Supply Network for Sudanese Paramilitaries." *Le Monde Africa*, March 22, 2026.

²⁶¹ Al Jazeera. "Iranian Attack Damages Kuwait Power and Desalination Plant, Kills Worker." *Al Jazeera*, March 30, 2026.

Qatar: Defence Cooperation and Gulf Alignment

Ukraine signed a ten-year defence agreement with Qatar during President Zelenskyy's visit to Doha on March 28, the final stop on a Gulf tour that also produced cooperation arrangements with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.²⁶² The agreements cover co-production, joint investment, and the exchange of drone and missile defence expertise, with Ukraine having deployed over 200 anti-drone specialists across the region. Kyiv has positioned its battlefield-tested air defence capabilities as a strategic asset, proposing to exchange interceptor drones for the Patriot systems Gulf states are deploying against Iranian attacks. Qatar holds additional significance for Kyiv as a mediator on humanitarian issues, having facilitated the return of Ukrainian children deported by Russia and the exchange of prisoners of war.

The UAE President received the Emir of Qatar in Abu Dhabi on March 31 in a visit that carried strategic weight beyond diplomatic courtesy.²⁶³ With talks centred on military escalation, maritime security, and the global economy, the meeting functioned as a public signal of Gulf coordination at a moment of regional volatility, projecting alignment to limit spillover risk, reassure markets, and present a unified Arab position on crisis management.

Oman: Washington's Sharpest Gulf Critic

Omani Foreign Minister Badr Albusaidi published an op-ed in *The Economist* on March 19 that offered the most direct critique of Washington's conduct to emerge from any Gulf capital since the conflict began.²⁶⁴ Albusaidi argued that the United States had lost control of its foreign policy and entered a war that was its own making, noting that joint US-Israeli strikes on Iran were launched hours after what he described as the most substantive round of nuclear negotiations to date. He contended that Israel had persuaded Washington that Iran's weakened state would produce swift capitulation, a miscalculation now evident in the conflict's trajectory, and argued that achieving Israel's stated objectives would require a prolonged ground campaign of the kind Trump had previously vowed to avoid. The piece was significant both for its substance and its source: Oman has thus far served as a back-channel between Washington and Tehran, and Muscat's willingness to publicly frame the conflict as a US policy failure signals the depth of Gulf disillusionment with American strategic judgment.

Yemen

Strategic Restraint and the Calculus of Entry

Through the first three weeks of March, the Houthis maintained a studied restraint, refraining from joining the conflict despite repeated rhetorical affirmations of support for Iran. Senior

²⁶² Le Monde with AFP. "Zelensky Agrees Defense Cooperation with UAE, Qatar on Gulf Tour." *Le Monde*, March 28, 2026.

²⁶³ "UAE President Receives Emir of Qatar on Fraternal Visit." *Economy Middle East*, March 31, 2026.

²⁶⁴ Albusaidi, Badr. "America's Friends Must Help Extricate It from an Unlawful War." *The Economist*, March 18, 2026.

Houthi officials stated that their "hands are on the trigger," but launched no new offensive operations against Gulf or Israeli targets. Analysts characterised the posture as deliberate, with the group weighing the risks of direct US and Israeli retaliation against the leverage that holding back preserved.²⁶⁵ A Wall Street Journal analysis published March 21 framed the Houthis as Iran's most consequential unused lever in the conflict.²⁶⁶ With Iran having effectively closed the Strait of Hormuz, Saudi Arabia's primary export workaround runs through Yanbu and the Red Sea, routing crude along hundreds of miles of Houthi-controlled coastline before passing through the Bab el-Mandeb. Houthi entry would place both chokepoints under effective Iranian influence, threatening the last viable energy export corridor in the region. Saudi Arabia, aware of the stakes, was actively working to maintain its 2022 detente with the group through the period.

Entry and Its Consequences

The Houthis entered the conflict on March 29, launching two missile and drone attacks on Israel within 24 hours and pledging continued operations in support of resistance fronts across Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran.²⁶⁷ Both attacks were intercepted by Israeli air defences. The decision ends five weeks of restraint and opens a significant new front, with the Bab el-Mandeb now a live pressure point alongside the Strait of Hormuz. The combination of Iranian control over Hormuz and Houthi reach over the Red Sea passage would, if sustained, effectively sever the last functioning export corridor for Gulf oil.

The internationally recognised Yemeni government issued a categorical rejection of the Houthi entry on March 30, accusing Iran of dragging Yemen into hostilities through proxies operating outside state authority. The Presidential Leadership Council described the attacks as a direct threat to Yemeni sovereignty, stressed that decisions of war and peace remain the exclusive prerogative of state institutions, and warned that continued Iranian interference risks deepening Yemen's humanitarian crisis and raising energy and food costs in a country already among the world's most acutely affected. UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg issued a parallel statement on March 29 expressing grave concern, warning that the escalation risks prolonging civilian suffering and stressing that no single actor holds the right to unilaterally draw the country into a wider conflict.²⁶⁸

Conclusion

March 2026 clarified the structural stakes of the Gulf conflict in ways the opening weeks had obscured. Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz forced a rapid rerouting of Gulf oil exports through Saudi Arabia's overland pipeline, and the Houthi entry into the conflict at month's

²⁶⁵ Al-Basha, Mohammed. "The Houthis' Quiet Restraint in the Arabian Gulf." *Basha Report* (Substack), March 9, 2026.

²⁶⁶ Abdel-Baqi, Omar, Stephen Kalin, and Saleh al-Batati. "Iran's Houthi Allies Lie in Wait on Another Key Oil Route: the Red Sea." *The Wall Street Journal*, March 21, 2026.

²⁶⁷ Nagi, Ahmed. "The Houthis Enter the Middle East War: What Comes Next?" *International Crisis Group*, March 2026.

²⁶⁸ Yemen Online. "UN Envoy to Yemen Warns of Escalation after Houthi Attacks on Israel." Yemen Online Special Reports, March 30, 2026.

end placed that alternative corridor under threat, raising the prospect of simultaneous closure of both chokepoints and the transmission of energy shocks across every economy dependent on Gulf oil. The Beijing-brokered Saudi-Iran rapprochement has been effectively dismantled, the American security umbrella exposed as costly and insufficient, and the defence agreements signed with Ukraine across three Gulf states signal the practical direction of the reassessment now underway. For Yemen, the Houthi entry marks a return to the regional conflict architecture the 2022 detente had partially suspended, complicating Saudi Arabia's southern strategy at the moment it was most needed and adding further pressure to a humanitarian situation with no capacity to absorb new shocks. The month's developments point to a regional order under sustained and compounding stress, with the adjustments now visible across Gulf capitals in defence partnerships, investment postures, and diplomatic alignments reflecting a shared calculation that the post-conflict order will look meaningfully different from the one that preceded February 28.

Section Three: International/Regional Organizations and Global Powers Engagement

African Union Leadership Amid Continental Transitions and Expanding Mandates

During March 2026, the African Union operated across three interlocking tracks: organizational consolidation, active conflict management, and strategic diplomatic expansion. This pattern reflected an organization recalibrating its authority under the 2026 Bureau while navigating simultaneous crises across the continent.

The opening phase of the month was defined by legitimacy-building exercises. The 20th anniversary of the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights in Arusha was not merely ceremonial²⁶⁹ it reinforced the AU's judicial architecture at a time when governance deficits and constitutional disruptions remain widespread. Parallel high-level consultations with Mokgweetsi Masisi²⁷⁰ and Abdulqawi Ahmed Yusuf²⁷¹ indicated an intentional effort to anchor AU diplomacy within both continental mediation frameworks and international legal expertise. Simultaneously, the Peace and Security Council, under Eswatini's rotating chairship²⁷², focused on internal coherence through induction of new members a critical but often-overlooked step in maintaining decision-making continuity within the AU's primary security organ.

²⁶⁹ "African Court Marks 20th Anniversary, Opens 2026 Judicial Year and Launches New Website with Renewed Calls for Ratification and Implementation of its Mandate." African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (AfCHPR). March 3, 2026.

²⁷⁰ H.E. Mahmoud Ali Youssouf. "AUC Chairperson this afternoon received H.E. Mokgweetsi Masisi, former President of the Republic of Botswana & African Union Facilitator for the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) process." African Union Commission. March 3, 2026.

²⁷¹ H.E. Mahmoud Ali Youssouf. "AUC Chairperson received H.E. Abdulqawi Ahmed Yusuf, Former President of the International Court of Justice. African Union Commission." March 4, 2026

²⁷² "Provisional Programme of Work of the Peace and Security Council for March 2026." Amani Africa. March 2026.

Security developments during this period exposed the AU's persistent challenge of managing geographically dispersed but interconnected conflicts. Briefings on the escalating situation in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo²⁷³, including drone activity targeting M23²⁷⁴, underscored the increasing technological sophistication of African conflicts and the limitations of existing peace frameworks²⁷⁵. At the same time, the AU's response to terrorist attacks in Benin²⁷⁶ highlighted strategic concern over the southward diffusion of Sahel-based extremism into coastal West Africa, effectively expanding the continent's primary terrorism belt. These developments revealed a widening security arc that strains response capacity and necessitates stronger regional coordination.

By mid-March, the AU shifted toward operational engagement. The deployment of an Election Observation Mission to the Republic of the Congo²⁷⁷ reaffirmed its normative role in electoral governance. Concurrently, the AU became more assertive in crisis mediation: it addressed the political rupture in Madagascar²⁷⁸ following the dismissal of the government, condemned civilian attacks in Goma²⁷⁹, and continued implementing its stabilization mission in Somalia²⁸⁰. These actions demonstrated a consistent pattern AU interventions remain advisory rather than coercive, relying heavily on political signaling rather than enforcement mechanisms.

At the diplomatic level, the AU expanded its external engagement footprint. Statements on Persian Gulf²⁸¹ security and coordinated advocacy with Arab institutions regarding Al-Aqsa²⁸² indicated a deliberate attempt to position the organization within broader Afro-Arab and Global South geopolitical alignments. This outward-facing posture reflected a gradual shift from continental isolation toward a more interconnected diplomatic identity, though its practical influence in these theaters remains limited.

The third week of March marked a transition toward normative integration. The AU's endorsement of peaceful border resolution efforts between Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra

²⁷³ "Provisional Programme of Work of the Peace and Security Council for March 2026." Amani Africa. March 2026.

²⁷⁴ H.E. Mahmoud Ali Youssouf. "AUC Chairperson Condemns Attack on Civilians in Goma, Reaffirms Commitment to Peace in Eastern DRC." African Union Commission. March 12, 2026.

²⁷⁵ "African Union Deploys Election Observation Mission to Republic of Congo Ahead of March 15 Vote." Fana Media Corporation. March 13, 2026.

²⁷⁶ "Terrorist Attacks in Benin." African Union Commission. March 6.

²⁷⁷ "Announcement of the arrival of the African Union Election Observation Mission to the 15 March 2026 Presidential election in the Republic of Congo." African Union - Peace and Security Department. March 18, 2026.

²⁷⁸ "COMMUNIQUÉ." Peace and Security Council, African Union. March 10, 2026.

²⁷⁹ H.E. Mahmoud Ali Youssouf. "AUC Chairperson Condemns Attack on Civilians in Goma, Reaffirms Commitment to Peace in Eastern DRC. African Union Commission." March 12, 2026.

²⁸⁰ H.E. Mahmoud Ali Youssouf. "The African Union Commission Chairperson Urges Dialogue and Restraint in Somalia." African Union Commission. March 29, 2026.

²⁸¹ AUC Chairperson. "Statement by the Chairperson of the African Union Commission on the Situation in the Persian Gulf." African Union Commission. March 9, 2026.

²⁸² "The General Secretariat of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States, and the African Union Commission Condemn the continued closure of Al-Aqsa Mosque by the Israeli occupying authorities." African Union Commission. March 13, 2026.

Leone²⁸³ under the Mano River Union²⁸⁴ framework illustrated a preference for preventive diplomacy in historically volatile regions. Simultaneously, the AU deepened its engagement with non-traditional security dimensions gender justice, anti-trafficking frameworks, and humanitarian assessments²⁸⁵ particularly in Madagascar²⁸⁶ and conflict-affected zones. The continued monitoring of Guinea-Bissau's transition²⁸⁷ further reflected the organization's sustained role in safeguarding constitutional order in fragile states.

In the final phase of the month, the AU moved toward strategic positioning and leadership consolidation. The appointment of Jakaya Kikwete as High Representative for the Horn of Africa on March 27²⁸⁸ signaled an attempt to centralize and elevate diplomatic engagement in one of the continent's most geopolitically sensitive regions, especially amid Red Sea tensions and shifting alliances. Additional envoy appointments²⁸⁹ and PSC transition processes further indicated an effort to ensure continuity and expand mediation capacity.

The AU maintained active diplomatic engagement throughout, including mediation appeals in Somalia's South West State²⁹⁰, coordination with European partners²⁹¹, and symbolic alignment with global justice initiatives such as the recognition of slavery as a crime against humanity²⁹². These actions reinforced a dual strategy combining immediate crisis response with long-term normative positioning.

Overall, March 2026 reveals an AU that is operationally active but implementation-constrained. While it demonstrates range engaging in elections, conflict mediation, counterterrorism, and global diplomacy its effectiveness remains uneven, often limited by reliance on member state cooperation and the absence of enforcement tools. Nevertheless, the month highlights a clear evolution: the AU is incrementally moving from a responsive political body toward a more strategically oriented actor seeking relevance not only within

²⁸³ H.E. Mahmoud Ali Youssouf. "AU Commission Chairperson commends the agreed decision to pursue peaceful and diplomatic settlement of border disputes among Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone." African Union Commission, March 18, 2026.

²⁸⁴ "Mano River leaders commit to diplomacy over border frictions." APAnews - African Press Agency, 17 March 2026.

²⁸⁵ "African Union Convenes High Level Side Events on the Margins of CSW70 to End Violence and Exploitation against Girls." African Union Commission, March 19, 2026.

²⁸⁶ "African Union Commission Concludes Humanitarian Assessment Mission to Madagascar." African Union Commission, March 23, 2026.

²⁸⁷ "Communiqué of the 1333rd meeting of the PSC held on 5 March 2026, on an update on the situation in Guinea-Bissau." Peace and Security Council of the African Union, 5 March 2026.

²⁸⁸ H.E. Mahmoud Ali Youssouf. "Chairperson of the AU Commission Appoints President Jakaya Kikwete as the AU High Representative for the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea." African Union Commission, March 25, 2026.

²⁸⁹ H.E. Mahmoud Ali Youssouf. "Appointment of an African Union Special Envoy for Gabon and Equatorial Guinea." African Union Commission, March 25, 2026.

²⁹⁰ H.E. Mahmoud Ali Youssouf. "The African Union Commission Chairperson Urges Dialogue and Restraint in Somalia." African Union Commission, March 29, 2026.

²⁹¹ "EU-African Union Space Dialogue Strengthens Strategic Partnership for Innovation and Sustainable Development." Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space, March 24, 2026.

²⁹² H.E. Mahmoud Ali Youssouf. "Statement of the Chairperson of the AU Commission on the Adoption of UN General Assembly Resolution A/80/L.48 declaring the trafficking of enslaved Africans and racialized chattel enslavement of Africans as the gravest crime against humanity." African Union Commission, March 26, 2026.

Africa but across interconnected global security and diplomatic landscapes.

United Nations Security Council: Sanctions, Accountability, and Escalation Management

During March 2026, the United Nations Security Council, under the presidency of the United States for most of the month, operated in an environment defined by high-intensity geopolitical confrontation, particularly in the Middle East, alongside continued engagement in protracted crises across Africa and beyond. The Council's activities reveal both its centrality in global crisis management and its persistent procedural limitations, particularly the fragmentation among permanent members.

The period from March 8–15 marked a decisive escalation in Council activity, dominated by the Middle East crisis. The adoption of Resolution 2817²⁹³ on March 11 condemning Iran's missile and drone attacks against Gulf states²⁹⁴ represented a rare instance of collective action amid deep divisions. However, the abstentions by Russia²⁹⁵ and China²⁹⁶, alongside the failure of a competing Russian draft resolution calling for a generalized ceasefire, underscored the entrenched geopolitical polarization shaping Council outcomes. This divergence reflected a broader contest over narrative framing: whether to assign direct responsibility or pursue neutral de-escalation language.

Beyond the Middle East, the Council maintained its regular oversight functions. The quarterly²⁹⁷ briefing on Afghanistan highlighted the continued international impasse over Taliban governance²⁹⁸, particularly restrictions on women and girls, which remain a primary barrier to normalization. Simultaneously, new disclosures regarding undeclared chemical weapons-related sites in Syria²⁹⁹ intensified scrutiny of non-proliferation compliance, raising concerns about verification gaps in long-standing disarmament frameworks.

Security briefings during this period further illustrated the Council's multi-theater engagement. Discussions on Lebanon emphasized the risk of regional spillover, with members warning against the use of Lebanese territory as a proxy battlefield in the Iran-Israel confrontation. Parallel debates on Iran's nuclear program exposed legal and procedural

²⁹³ “UN Security Council Adopts Resolution 2817 (2026) Condemning Iran’s Attacks as Middle East Violence Escalates.” America Times News Service, March 12, 2026.

²⁹⁴ “United Nations S/RES/2817 (2026) Security Council Distr.: General 11 March 2026 Resolution 2817 (2026).” United Nations Security Council, March 11, 2026.

²⁹⁵ Permanent Representative Vassily Nebenzia. “Explanation of Vote by Permanent Representative Vassily Nebenzia after UNSC Vote on Bahraini Draft Resolution on Iran's Strikes on Gulf Cooperation Council Countries.” Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations. March 11, 2026.

²⁹⁶ Dr. Nadia Helmy. “Behind China’s Abstention: The Calculus of Not Condemning Iran’s Gulf Strikes. Modern Diplomacy.” March 22, 2026.

²⁹⁷ “Afghanistan: Quarterly Meeting.” Security Council Report. March 7, 2025.

²⁹⁸ Merve Gül Aydoğan Ağlarıcı. “UN warns that Afghanistan faces deepening crisis as regional 'instability' tightens grip.” Anadolu Agency. March 10, 2026.

²⁹⁹ Merve Aydoğan. “Over 100 sites in Syria may be linked to Assad regime's chemical weapons program, UN warns.” Anadolu Agency. March 10, 2026.

disputes over the "snapback" sanctions mechanism, with Russia and China challenging its legitimacy again highlighting systemic divisions within the Council. In Africa, the submission of the Sudan Panel of Experts report and ongoing deliberations regarding South Sudan signaled continued attention to conflict and humanitarian crises, though without decisive enforcement outcomes.

Simultaneously the UNSC entered a phase of sustained crisis management and mandate adjustments. The unanimous adoption of Resolution 2818 on March 16³⁰⁰, extending the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan until June 17, 2026, demonstrated procedural consensus even amid broader political disagreements. However, the short-term nature of the extension reflects underlying uncertainty regarding the mission's future scope and structure.

During this same period, the Council remained heavily engaged in the evolving Middle East confrontation, with briefings warning of potential regional expansion into neighboring theaters. These discussions incorporated not only immediate military dynamics but also legal considerations related to the use of force, reflecting an increasingly complex intersection between law and geopolitics in Council deliberations.

The Council also maintained focus on non-proliferation and humanitarian crises. Briefings under Resolution 1540 emphasized the risk of weapons of mass destruction falling into non-state hands, a concern heightened by ongoing conflicts³⁰¹. Meanwhile, deteriorating humanitarian conditions in Sudan and funding gaps in South Sudan underscored the widening gap between Council awareness and operational response capacity³⁰². Despite repeated warnings, the Council's ability to translate concern into enforceable action remained constrained.

In the final phase of March, the UNSC expanded its agenda to include multiple high-priority conflict zones, reflecting its global scope but also its overstretched focus. The high-level briefing on Ukraine highlighted the continued deterioration of the conflict, with calls for accountability and increased attention to civilian protection, particularly children³⁰³. However, as with other major conflicts, political divisions limited the prospect of unified Council action.

In Africa, the Council addressed the worsening security situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, including deliberations regarding the future of the MONUSCO mission³⁰⁴. These discussions reflect a broader trend toward reassessing long-standing peacekeeping

³⁰⁰ Rabia Iclal Turan. "UN Security Council unanimously extends UN mission in Afghanistan for 3 months." Anadolu Agency. March 16, 2026.

³⁰¹ Security Council Report. "Non-Proliferation: Briefing on the Work of the 1540 Committee." What's in Blue, March 2026.

³⁰² United Nations Secretary-General. "Sudan." Highlights, March 25, 2026.

³⁰³ UN News. "UN Warns of Escalating Threats to Transport Infrastructure." March 23, 2026.

³⁰⁴ Security Council Report. "Democratic Republic of the Congo: Briefing and Consultations." What's in Blue, March 2026

operations amid questions about effectiveness and exit strategies. Simultaneously, ongoing monitoring of Sudan and South Sudan reinforced the Council's sustained engagement with the Horn of Africa and adjacent regions, albeit largely through reporting and sanctions mechanisms rather than direct intervention.

Middle East tensions remained a constant throughout the final week, including closed-door discussions on Iranian military activity and broader instability in Gaza and the West Bank³⁰⁵. References to Resolution 2334 and calls for humanitarian access illustrate the Council's continued reliance on existing normative frameworks, even as conditions on the ground deteriorate. The monitoring of Syria's fragile transition further highlights the long-term nature of conflicts on the Council's agenda, where stabilization remains incremental and uncertain.

Institutionally, March 2026 also saw renewed momentum around UNSC reform. Efforts led by Japan and African states to advance the "Pact for the Future" reflect growing pressure to address the Council's representational imbalance, particularly Africa's lack of permanent membership³⁰⁶. While these discussions gained visibility, they remain politically sensitive and face significant resistance from entrenched powers.

Overall, March 2026 underscores a fundamental paradox within the UNSC: it remains the central platform for global security governance, yet its effectiveness is increasingly shaped and constrained by geopolitical rivalry among its permanent members. While the Council demonstrated capacity for coordinated action in specific instances, such as Resolution 2817 and procedural mandate renewals, its broader record reflects fragmentation, selective engagement, and limited enforcement capability.

The cumulative developments of the month suggest that the UNSC is not disengaged, but rather procedurally functional yet politically fragmented actively managing crises across multiple regions while struggling to impose coherent, unified solutions in an increasingly polarized international system.

IGAD: Re-engagement, Security Coordination, and Economic Harmonization

During March 2026, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development operated across a multidimensional agenda combining conflict mediation, regional integration, and resilience-building. The organization's activities reveal a deliberate shift toward consolidating its role as the primary sub-regional security and political platform in the Horn of Africa, while simultaneously addressing vulnerabilities linked to climate shocks, migration, and governance fragility.

The first phase of the month was characterized by institutional reactivation and strategic

³⁰⁵ Xinhua News Agency. "Xi's Time: Global Food Crisis Concerns Rise." March 9, 2026.

³⁰⁶ Amani Africa. "Concept Note and Agenda: Amani Japan, UNSC Reform." March 4, 2026.

alignment. Sudan's reintegration into IGAD following a two-year diplomatic freeze³⁰⁷ marked a critical turning point, enabling the bloc to reclaim a central mediating role in the Sudanese conflict through the "Forum of Special Envoys,"³⁰⁸ coordinated alongside the AU and UN. Parallel engagements, including high-level consultations with the African Union in Addis Ababa³⁰⁹, underscored an effort to harmonize continental and sub-regional approaches to peace enforcement and mediation. At the same time, IGAD's forward-looking agenda was reflected in ongoing consultations on the 2026–2030 strategy, signaling a transition from fragmented national responses toward integrated regional governance frameworks. Complementing this, the emphasis on gender-inclusive peacebuilding highlighted during International Women's Day³¹⁰ demonstrated a gradual mainstreaming of social dimensions into security discourse.

Security dynamics during this period exposed persistent fragilities within IGAD's core conflict theaters. In South Sudan, continued violations of the Revitalized Agreement prompted heightened monitoring and warnings from IGAD, reflecting concerns over potential relapse into civil war³¹¹. Simultaneously, the bloc advanced discussions on a transnational strategy to counter violent extremism, emphasizing a development-oriented approach rather than purely militarized responses. This reflected IGAD's evolving security doctrine, which increasingly links instability to governance deficits, economic marginalization, and environmental stressors.

From March 8–15, IGAD's engagement intensified through high-level political interventions. The 43rd Extraordinary Summit on South Sudan³¹² represented a critical escalation in diplomatic efforts, resulting in the formation of a ministerial sub-committee tasked with direct engagement in Juba and the activation of investigative mechanisms such as CTSAMVM following clashes in Nasir. These developments highlighted IGAD's continued reliance on monitoring and dialogue facilitation rather than coercive enforcement. Concurrently, Sudan's full reintegration into IGAD structures provided an organizational platform for more unified mediation efforts, although the effectiveness of this approach remains contingent on the alignment of external actors and internal factions.

Institutional and integration-focused initiatives also gained momentum during this phase. The advancement of migration governance frameworks—through technical workshops in

³⁰⁷ "IGAD convenes Special Envoys on Sudan Peace Process in Addis Ababa." Fana Media Corporation S.C, March 18, 2025.

³⁰⁸ Sougal Omar. "IGAD Strengthens Coordination Among Special Envoys to Advance Sudan Peace Process." Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), March 18, 2025.

³⁰⁹ Sougal Omar. "IGAD Strengthens Coordination Among Special Envoys to Advance Sudan Peace Process." Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), March 18, 2025.

³¹⁰ "IGAD Honors Women's Leadership Across East Africa." Ethiopian News Agency, March 8, 2026.

³¹¹ H.E. Dr Workneh. "Statement by the IGAD Executive Secretary on the Security Situation in South Sudan." Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), January 28, 2026.

³¹² "Communiqué of the 43rd Extraordinary Summit of IGAD Heads of State and Government on the Situation in the Republic of South Sudan." IGAD, March 12, 2025.

Djibouti³¹³ and progress toward the ratification of the Free Movement Protocol with Uganda (including high-level meetings in Kampala on March 13)³¹⁴ reflect IGAD's ambition to deepen regional integration. These efforts align with broader continental frameworks such as the AU's Agenda 2063, but implementation gaps persist due to uneven political commitment among member states.

The mid-to-late March period reflected a consolidation phase, where IGAD focused on monitoring ongoing tensions and evaluating intervention effectiveness. Continued diplomatic friction between Somalia and Ethiopia remained a key concern³¹⁵, with IGAD emphasizing de-escalation and dialogue to prevent further regional polarization. At the same time, internal assessments of peacebuilding projects across Ethiopia, Uganda, and South Sudan indicate an increasing emphasis on accountability and impact evaluation within IGAD programming. However, warnings that South Sudan's peace agreement was "sliding back" toward instability underscored the limited durability of negotiated settlements in the absence of sustained political commitment.

In the final week of March, IGAD expanded its focus to include governance and human rights integration within its security architecture. The operationalization of the National Human Rights Institutions Network in Bishoftu³¹⁶ marked a notable step toward embedding accountability mechanisms within regional peace and security frameworks. This shift suggests an incremental move toward preventive diplomacy grounded in institutional legitimacy rather than crisis response.

Simultaneously, IGAD maintained active mediation engagement in Somalia, particularly regarding rising political tensions in South West State³¹⁷ (with a specific statement calling for dialogue issued March 29), reinforcing its role as a first responder to intra-state instability in the Horn. Ongoing commitments to Sudanese civilian dialogue and continued monitoring of the South Sudan ceasefire further illustrate IGAD's sustained involvement in the region's most protracted conflicts.

Beyond security, IGAD's parallel emphasis on resilience building remained evident throughout the month. Initiatives such as the climate-smart agriculture³¹⁸ forum and the proposed "resilience corridor" linking Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia demonstrate a recognition that environmental stress and food insecurity are central drivers of conflict in the region. By integrating climate adaptation with livelihood protection strategies, IGAD is

³¹³ "Technical Workshop on the Review and Finalization of the IGAD Regional Guidelines for the Harmonization of Migration and Displacement Data." IGAD, March 9, 2026.

³¹⁴ "IGAD and Government of the Republic of Uganda Agree on the Roadmap for the Ratification of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons in IGAD Region." IGAD, March 13, 2026.

³¹⁵ Staff Reporter. "Somalia: IGAD urges 'restraint' amid SouthWest State standoff." GAROWE ONLINE, March 29, 2026..

³¹⁶ IGAD Peace and Security Division. "IGAD convenes the National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) Network." IGAD, March 26, 2026.

³¹⁷ "FSRP - Scaling Climate Smart Agriculture." Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), March 3–4, 2026.

³¹⁸ "FSRP - Scaling Climate Smart Agriculture." Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), March 3–4, 2026

attempting to operationalize a more holistic conception of security.

Overall, March 2026 highlights an IGAD that is increasingly proactive but still capacity-limited. While the organization demonstrates range, engaging in mediation, integration, human rights, and climate resilience its effectiveness continues to depend on member state cooperation and external partnerships. Nonetheless, the month reflects clear strategic positioning: IGAD is establishing itself as the central node for managing the Horn of Africa's interconnected crises, even as it grapples with the enduring challenge of translating diplomatic initiatives into sustainable political outcomes.

Global Superpowers

War in Iran and Strategic Overstretch Across Theaters

The month was dominated by the U.S.-Israeli war against Iran, but Washington's activity also spilled into Gaza diplomacy, Ukraine, Taiwan, domestic politics, and energy-market management. March opened with two early signals that Washington's foreign-policy agenda was already being stretched across theaters. On March 2, UN experts publicly condemned Trump's "Board of Peace" approach to Gaza, arguing for a rights-based reconstruction model instead, which showed that the U.S.-backed Gaza framework was already drawing international pushback.³¹⁹ Four days later, on March 4, the U.S. Senate blocked a bipartisan war-powers resolution that would have constrained Donald Trump's ability to continue military action against Iran without congressional approval,³²⁰ confirming that the administration still had enough political cover to continue the campaign. The same month, Trump's Gaza framework continued to be promoted through indirect channels, while Hamas remained resistant to disarmament as a condition for reconstruction and security arrangements.³²¹

In the first days of March, coordinated U.S. and Israeli airstrikes targeted leadership, nuclear and missile sites, air defenses, and military infrastructure across more than twenty Iranian provinces.

These actions reportedly eliminated Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and numerous senior officials while achieving substantial degradation of Iranian capabilities. Iran responded with missile and drone attacks on U.S. assets, Gulf states, and Israel, resulting in casualties and immediate disruptions to shipping in the Strait of Hormuz. Global oil prices surged sharply, prompting Trump to call on NATO and Indo-Pacific allies to contribute naval forces for securing the waterway. Most partners declined direct involvement, leading to public criticism from the administration and visible strains in transatlantic and alliance relations.

³¹⁹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. "UN Experts Condemn 'Board of Peace', Call for a Reparative, Rights-Based Approach to Reconstruction in Gaza." March 2, 2026.

³²⁰ Patricia Zengerle, "US Senate backs Trump on Iran strikes, blocks bid to limit his war powers," *Reuters*, March 4, 2026.

³²¹ Nidal Al-Mughrabi "Trump board plan would disarm Hamas in stages over 8 months, destroy Gaza's tunnels," *Reuters*, March 27, 2026.

By mid-March, Operation Epic Fury had become the month's defining security operation. The Pentagon's March 16 fact sheet said CENTCOM began the operation on February 28 and that, by that date, U.S. forces had struck more than 7,000 targets, damaged or destroyed more than 100 Iranian vessels, and flown more than 6,500 combat sorties.³²² The fact sheet also listed the main target sets as IRGC headquarters, intelligence sites, integrated air defenses, ballistic missile sites, and military infrastructure. Reports indicate that the campaign had by then expanded to more than 10,000 strikes, with U.S. officials claiming severe damage to Iran's missile, drone, and naval production capacity. At the same time, the Pentagon moved to expand munitions production and replenish stockpiles through accelerated coordination with defense contractors, reflecting the scale and intensity of sustained operations. This period also saw increased U.S. naval deployments across the Gulf and Arabian Sea, reinforcing deterrence while ensuring continuity of maritime operations.³²³

The third week of March brought the first major signs of allied unease and strategic spillover. On March 18, reports indicated that European governments were pushing back against Trump's Iran policy, saying they had not been properly consulted and did not understand the scope of the U.S. objectives.³²⁴ On March 20, the United Kingdom approved U.S. use of British bases to strike Iranian missile sites targeting shipping, showing that some allies were supporting the campaign even as others resisted it.³²⁵ Also on March 20 and 21, Iran attempted long-range strikes that reached toward Diego Garcia, and that episode forced a wider discussion about the vulnerability of distant U.S. and allied bases.³²⁶ Reports indicate that this strike attempt was treated as a significant escalation because it demonstrated Iranian reach beyond the immediate Middle East battlefield. In parallel, intelligence assessments suggested heightened alert levels across NATO installations in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean regions. Trump issued deadlines for Iran to reopen the Strait of Hormuz fully, threatening strikes on energy infrastructure and raising the possibility of operations to secure Kharg Island.

March 21–22 showed that Washington was running Gaza and Ukraine diplomacy in parallel with the Iran war. On March 21, reports indicated that Trump's Board of Peace had handed Hamas a written proposal for disarmament, while the UN secretary-general said the UN was cooperating with the U.S.-backed framework for Gaza reconstruction. At the same time, reports indicate that U.S. and Ukrainian delegations had concluded two days of talks in Florida on how to end the war involving Russia and Ukraine. That parallel diplomacy mattered because it showed the White House trying to preserve momentum in Gaza and Ukraine even as the Iran conflict absorbed the bulk of its military and political attention. Concurrently, U.S. officials intensified engagement with Gulf states, particularly Saudi

³²² U.S. Department of Defense, "Operation Epic Fury - Fact Sheet - March 16, 2026," March 16, 2026.

³²³ "Thousands of US Army paratroopers arrive in Middle East as buildup intensifies," *Reuters*, March 30, 2026.

³²⁴ Andreas Rinke, Ludwig Burger and John Irish "Not our war": Europe says no to Trump," *Reuters*, March 18, 2026.

³²⁵ "UK approves US use of British bases to strike Iran missile sites targeting ships," *Reuters*, March 20, 2026.

³²⁶ "Iran fires missiles toward US-UK base in Indian ocean, Iran's Mehr says," *Reuters*, March 21, 2026.

Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to stabilize regional security coordination and manage the risks of broader escalation.

From March 23 to 27, the Iran file became a bargaining war over Hormuz, nuclear limits, and regional leverage. Reports indicate that on March 23 Trump postponed a bombing threat after signaling that indirect talks were “going well,” while Iran denied that direct negotiations were taking place.³²⁷ On March 24, reports indicate that Iran informed the UN that “non-hostile” vessels could pass through the Strait of Hormuz, which effectively turned the strait into a selective pressure tool rather than a complete blockade.³²⁸ On March 25 and 26, reports indicate that a U.S. 15-point proposal was delivered through Pakistan and that Iran viewed it;³²⁹ the same reporting said the U.S. pause on attacks against Iran’s energy infrastructure would last until April 6.³³⁰ On March 27, Marco Rubio said Washington could achieve its objectives without ground troops and expected the operation to last “weeks, not months,” which was the clearest official effort to frame the campaign as limited even while U.S. forces continued to build up.³³¹ At the same time, reports indicated that commercial shipping disruptions intensified, insurance costs surged, and several international carriers began rerouting away from Hormuz, amplifying the economic dimension of the conflict.

The Ukraine track was directly affected by the Iran campaign. On March 25, reports indicate that Volodymyr Zelenskyy said U.S. security guarantees were being tied to Ukraine giving up Donbas, while the same reporting said the next trilateral peace round had been postponed because Washington was preoccupied with Iran.³³² Also on March 25, reports indicate that Russia sought to leverage the situation by linking intelligence cooperation on Iran to U.S. intelligence support for Ukraine. On March 26, reports indicate that the Pentagon was considering diverting some Ukraine-bound air defense interceptors to the Middle East because of wartime strain on U.S. stocks.³³³ This is one of the clearest signs that the Iran war was not just another regional conflict; it was altering U.S. force allocation across Europe and the Middle East at the same time.

Alliance politics also became more difficult by the fourth week. On March 26, NATO said defense spending in Europe and Canada had risen sharply,³³⁴ but that report also underlined the pressure on allies to keep up spending momentum at a time of wider security stress. On

³²⁷ Humeyra Pamuk and Susan Heavey “Trump says there are ‘major points of agreement’ in talks with Iran,” *Reuters*, March 23, 2026.

³²⁸ “Iran tells UN: ‘non-hostile’ ships can transit Strait of Hormuz,” *Reuters*, March 24, 2026.

³²⁹ Parisa Hafezi and Alexander Cornwell “Iran says it is reviewing US proposal to end war,” *Reuters*, March 25, 2026.

³³⁰ [Bhargav Acharya](#) and Kanishka Singh “Trump says he will pause attacks on Iran’s energy plants,” *Reuters*, March 26, 2026.

³³¹ Parisa Hafezi, Humeyra Pamuk and Steve Holland “Rubio says Iran war could end in ‘matter of weeks, not months,’ no US ground troops ...,” *Reuters*, March 27, 2026.

³³² Luke Harding, “Ukraine war briefing: Zelenskyy says US has linked security guarantees to ceding of Donbas,” *The Guardian*, March 26, 2026.

³³³ Darren Lyn, “Pentagon Considering Diverting Military Aid from Ukraine to Middle East: Report,” Anadolu Agency, March 27, 2026.

³³⁴ “NATO Reports 20% Increase in Europe, Canada Defence Spending,” *France 24*, March 26, 2026.

March 27, Trump said the U.S. did not “have to be there for NATO,” which sharpened European concerns about American reliability.³³⁵ On March 30, reports indicate that Spain had closed its airspace to U.S. military planes involved in the Iran war,³³⁶ while reports indicate that U.S. lawmakers in Taipei were pressing Taiwan to pass a stalled \$40 billion defense budget.³³⁷ The same day, the top U.S. diplomat in Taiwan reiterated strong U.S. support for Taiwan’s defense and energy security,³³⁸ showing that Washington was still active in the Indo-Pacific even as the Middle East dominated its attention.

Domestic pressure rose as the war’s costs became visible to the American public. On March 24, reports indicate that polling found Trump’s approval had fallen to 36 percent, the lowest since he returned to office, with disapproval concentrated around inflation, fuel prices, and the Iran war.³³⁹ By March 28, reports indicate nationwide “No Kings” protests that explicitly folded anti-war sentiment into a broader political backlash.³⁴⁰ At the same time, Trump and the White House began signaling that Arab states might help pay for the war,³⁴¹ which showed how quickly the campaign had become a fiscal and political problem as well as a military one.

By the final days of March, the conflict had widened into a regional security system with global economic consequences. On March 30, reports indicate that thousands of U.S. paratroopers had arrived in the Middle East, while Trump again warned Iran to reopen Hormuz or face attacks on oil facilities, power plants, and desalination plants.³⁴² The month therefore ended not with resolution, but with a wider security architecture, a deeper energy shock, and more active spillover into Europe, the Red Sea, Gaza, Lebanon, and the Gulf.

Reports indicate that the U.S.-Israel conflict in Iran provided Russia with a substantial strategic and economic windfall. Elevated global oil prices, driven by disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz, boosted Russian revenues.

Reportedly, Russia offered limited backstage support to Iran, including intelligence sharing, satellite imagery, and possible technical assistance on drones and electronic warfare,³⁴³ but avoided direct military involvement or open confrontation with the United States and Israel.

³³⁵ “Trump Casts Doubt on Willingness to Defend NATO Allies ‘If They Don’t Pay,’” *The Guardian*, March 6, 2025.

³³⁶ Suman Naishadham, “Spain Closes Off Its Airspace to U.S. Planes Involved in the Iran War,” *Washington Post*, March 30, 2026.

³³⁷ “US lawmakers urge Taiwan to pass stalled \$40 billion defence budget,” *Reuters*, March 30, 2026

³³⁸ “US supports Taiwan on defence, energy, senior diplomat says,” *Reuters*, March 26, 2026.

³³⁹ Jason Lange, “Exclusive: Trump’s Approval Hits New 36% Low as Fuel Prices Surge amid Iran War,” *Al-Monitor*, March 24, 2026.

³⁴⁰ “Iran warns against ground attack, ‘No Kings’ protests and robot umpires,” *Reuters*, March 29, 2026.

³⁴¹ “Trump Interested in Calling on Arab States to Help Pay for Iran War, White House Says,” *Straits Times*, March 31, 2026.

³⁴² David E. Sanger and Neil MacFarquhar, “Iran War Updates: Trump and Global Oil Markets, March 30, 2026,” *New York Times*, March 30, 2026

³⁴³ Thomas Grove, Milàn Czerny, and Benoit Faucon, “Russia Is Sharing Satellite Imagery and Drone Technology With Iran,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 2026.

The month of March was dominated by China's cautious and carefully calibrated response to the U.S.-Israel war against Iran that began on February 28. Beijing maintained a consistent public position of neutrality while repeatedly urging all parties to exercise restraint, return to dialogue, and avoid actions that could lead to a wider regional or global conflict.³⁴⁴ Chinese officials, including Foreign Ministry spokespersons and senior diplomats, described the conflict as a dangerous escalation that threatened international energy security, global economic stability, and freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. China called for an immediate ceasefire, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and a political solution through multilateral channels.

On the diplomatic front, China positioned itself as a responsible stakeholder and potential mediator. It supported calls for de-escalation through UN channels and maintained close contact with both Gulf states and Iran.³⁴⁵ The postponement of the planned Trump-Xi summit due to the Iran crisis was viewed in Beijing as an opportunity to observe U.S. commitments elsewhere before engaging at the highest level. By late March, the summit was rescheduled for May 14–15 in Beijing, which Chinese diplomats saw as a chance to stabilize bilateral relations and address broader strategic competition on more favorable terms.³⁴⁶

European Countries

Defensive Engagement and Strategic Restraint

The month of March was dominated by the United Kingdom's cautious and limited response to the U.S.-Israel war against Iran that began on February 28. Prime Minister Keir Starmer consistently maintained that the conflict was “not our war” and that Britain would not be drawn into offensive operations or regime-change efforts.³⁴⁷ The UK's involvement remained strictly defensive, focused on protecting British interests, overseas bases, and regional allies while avoiding direct combat against Iranian forces.

Early in the month, the UK faced immediate pressure when Iran launched drone and missile attacks on the British sovereign base at Akrotiri in Cyprus.³⁴⁸ This marked the first direct attack on British territory since 1986. The UK responded by reinforcing air defenses around the base and coordinating with France, Greece, and other European partners to protect Cypriot and EU territory. Starmer authorized limited defensive use of British bases, including Akrotiri and Diego Garcia, for intercepting threats to regional allies and shipping, but he repeatedly rejected American requests for offensive operations from UK soil.

³⁴⁴ “Beijing's Balancing Act Amidst War in the Middle East,” *IntelBrief, The Soufan Center*, March 3, 2026.

³⁴⁵ Yuan Zhang, “Understanding China's Stance on the Iran-Israel/U.S. Conflict,” *Gulf Research Center Commentary & Analysis*, March 6, 2026.

³⁴⁶ Nitya Chakraborty, “Trump-Xi Summit Rescheduled on May 14–15 in Beijing Worries Japan and Taiwan,” *Arabian Post (Medium)*, March 2026.

³⁴⁷ YouGov, “What Do the Public Say About Keir Starmer's Handling of Britain's Response to the US-Iran Conflict,” *YouGov (United Kingdom)*, March 30, 2026.

³⁴⁸ “British Military Base in Cyprus Targeted in Suspected Drone Attack,” *Al Jazeera*, March 2, 2026.

The most significant incident occurred on March 20 when Iran attempted a long-range ballistic missile strike on the joint U.S.-UK base at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean.³⁴⁹ One missile failed in flight and the other was successfully intercepted by U.S. forces, with no damage or casualties on the base. Starmer described the attempt as “reckless” and stated there was no current assessment that mainland Britain was under direct threat. However, the incident raised serious concerns within the government about the vulnerability of distant British bases and the expanding range of Iranian missiles.

Throughout the month, Starmer faced domestic criticism for initially restricting and later granting limited access to British bases for U.S. defensive operations.³⁵⁰ He defended these decisions as necessary for collective self-defense and the protection of British nationals and interests in the Gulf region. The government also focused on mitigating the economic impact of the conflict, particularly rising fuel prices caused by disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz. Starmer warned Parliament that the war could last longer than expected and that the UK must prepare for prolonged instability.

On the diplomatic front, the UK joined European partners in issuing joint statements condemning Iranian attacks on shipping and calling for the restoration of freedom of navigation.³⁵¹ Britain supported calls for de-escalation and a negotiated solution but avoided joining any proposed Hormuz naval coalition during active hostilities. Starmer emphasized the need for any future escort mission to be multilateral, viable, and strictly defensive.

France consistently maintained a delicate balance: condemning the initial U.S. and Israeli strikes as actions conducted outside the framework of international law, while holding Iran primarily responsible for the escalation through its missile and drone attacks on regional countries and its destabilizing regional behavior.³⁵²

In the early weeks of the conflict, France deployed significant naval assets, including the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle and supporting warships, to the eastern Mediterranean.³⁵³ These forces were positioned to protect French interests, safeguard shipping lanes, and support defensive operations around Cyprus following Iranian drone strikes on the British base at Akrotiri. Macron emphasized that France’s military posture remained strictly defensive and would not extend to offensive operations against Iran.

Chancellor Friedrich Merz adopted a pragmatic position that expressed understanding for the

³⁴⁹ Jessie Yeung and Issy Ronald, “Live Updates: Iran Fires Ballistic Missiles at US-UK Military Base in Indian Ocean,” *CNN*, March 21, 2026.

³⁵⁰ Mehmet Solmaz, “UK Faces Backlash, Division over US Use of Bases in Iran Conflict,” *Anadolu Ajansı*, March 5, 2026.

³⁵¹ George Allison, “Britain Signal Readiness to Help Secure Hormuz Shipping,” *UK Defence Journal*, March 19, 2026.

³⁵² İlayda Cakirtekin, “French President Says U.S.–Israel Attacks on Iran ‘Outside the Framework of International Law,’” *Anadolu Ajansı*, March 3, 2026.

³⁵³ Sylvie Corbet, “Why France Is Bolstering Military Presence in the Middle East, as Macron Prepares for Postwar Talks,” *AP News*, March 2, 2026.

goal of neutralizing Iran’s nuclear and missile threats³⁵⁴ while firmly rejecting any direct German military involvement in offensive operations.

In the early weeks of the conflict, Germany focused on defensive solidarity with its European partners. Following Iranian drone strikes on the British base at Akrotiri in Cyprus, Germany contributed air-defense systems and naval assets to a multinational effort to protect EU territory and shipping in the eastern Mediterranean.³⁵⁵ Merz emphasized that these deployments were strictly defensive and aimed at safeguarding European interests rather than supporting broader offensive campaigns.

³⁵⁴ “Germany’s Merz Shares US Aim to End Iran’s ‘Dangerous’ Nuclear Armament,” *The Times of Israel*, March 1, 2026.

³⁵⁵ Mehmet Kemal Firik, “UK, EU Member States Start New Military Deployments to Eastern Med Area Around Cyprus,” *Anadolu Ajansı*, March 25, 2026



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REVIEW

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