

The Horn's Next Wave of Geopolitical Risks and Opportunities in 2026

ABSTRACT

The 2025 geopolitical landscape in the Horn of Africa reveals escalating tensions driven by resource disputes, proxy conflicts, and maritime ambitions. Ethiopia's GERD completion and Red Sea pursuits clash with Egypt-Eritrea alliances, while Sudan's civil war fragments into resource-driven stalemates with regional spillovers. Somalia grapples with internal divisions and Al-Shabaab resurgence amid Somaliland's international gains, including Israeli recognition. Turkey's deepening Somali ties and Djibouti's balancing of superpowers underscore multipolar rivalries. Projections for 2026 anticipate contained volatility, with policy recommendations emphasizing diplomacy, internal cohesion, and equitable resource sharing to mitigate risks of broader instability.

INTRODUCTION

The Horn of Africa in 2025 stood out as a vivid illustration of global multipolarity at work, where local resource competitions, historical grievances, and strategic ambitions became deeply entangled with wider international rivalries. Covering a vast expanse bridging Africa, the Middle East, and critical maritime gateways, the region experienced a year defined by accelerated maneuvering over shared rivers, ports, and trade routes. The operational launch of a flagship hydropower project marked a major step toward energy self-reliance for upstream actors, yet it intensified anxieties over water security and downstream livelihoods, fueling diplomatic standoffs and containment efforts. Simultaneously, persistent quests for reliable maritime outlets rooted in long-standing landlocked vulnerabilities reopened debates over sovereignty, access rights, and control of chokepoints vital to global commerce.

Protracted internal conflict in parts of the region evolved into a resource-driven stalemate, with rival factions consolidating control over minerals, hydrocarbons, and port revenues. This fragmentation deepened humanitarian suffering on a massive scale, including displacement, acute food insecurity, and disease outbreaks, while creating cross-border spillovers that strained neighboring stability and refugee systems. Elsewhere, efforts to centralize authority collided with demands for regional autonomy, opening space for insurgent groups to regain ground through the exploitation of political discord and external meddling. In contrast, pockets of relative governance success highlighted divergent paths, where effective local administration attracted investment and diplomatic attention, challenging long-held norms of territorial unity.

The Red Sea and adjacent waterways emerged as the principal political setting of competition. Heightened maritime risks from distant disruptions combined with growing foreign military footprints and infrastructure deals to reshape influence maps. Middle powers expanded their roles through training partnerships, port upgrades, and economic incentives, often blending security assistance with commercial leverage. Gulf actors pursued port networks to secure supply lines, while other players sought footholds to counter perceived threats or expand monitoring over strategic straits. These overlapping interests turned peacetime investments into wartime assets, amplifying tensions without necessarily leading to open interstate war.

Throughout 2025, external involvement ranging from arms supplies and drone operations to diplomatic recognition shifts accelerated realignments, injecting unpredictability into an already volatile mix. Humanitarian crises worsened under aid blockades and funding shortfalls, revealing how suffering could paradoxically reinforce factional control by depopulating contested zones and deepening reliance on patronage. Yet amid the turbulence, signs of potential resilience surfaced: tentative mediation initiatives, cross-border economic outreach, and recognition that mutual dependencies in trade and resources might eventually compel pragmatic cooperation over escalation.

Entering 2026, the region carries forward unresolved pressures: water diplomacy remains fraught, maritime access quests continue to reorder alliances, internal political transitions risk further fragmentation, and Red Sea militarization shows no signs of abating. Climate variability, population pressures, and shifting global priorities will likely compound these dynamics. The year ahead promises cautious navigation rather than dramatic rupture—where missteps could widen proxy battles or humanitarian fallout, but shared vulnerabilities and mediation channels offer pathways toward interdependence. Ultimately, the Horn's trajectory will test whether multipolar jostling fosters destructive encirclement or, through necessity, a more balanced regional order in this pivotal crossroads of continents and oceans.

ETHIOPIA

The year 2025 marked a pivotal shift for Ethiopia, transforming key domestic initiatives into enhanced regional leverage amid a landscape of mounting external pressures. Central to this evolution was the formal inauguration of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in September, which achieved operational status and significantly amplified the nation's energy output and diplomatic posture, even as it stirred ongoing concerns among downstream states. Concurrently, Ethiopia intensified its strategic pursuit of secure maritime outlets, with a particular emphasis on Assab port as a vital Red Sea gateway. These efforts unfolded against a backdrop of escalating anxieties from adversaries like Egypt and Eritrea, who viewed such moves as threats to their own interests in controlling regional chokepoints and influence.

Ethiopia–Eritrea 2026: Proxy Fronts, Port Politics, and a Fragile Equilibrium

Ethiopia-Eritrea relations remain a high-risk factor in the Horn of Africa, marked by proxy conflicts, sensitive territorial issues, and alignments with various Ethiopian factions. These dynamics are supported by numerous intelligence assessments and diplomatic communications throughout 2025.¹ Key structural drivers include Eritrea's heightened militarization, Ethiopia's urgent need for maritime access, and lingering issues from the 1998-2000 border war. The Algiers Agreement's boundary decisions have yet to be implemented, contributing to a persistent state of tension and hostility.²

¹ African Security Analysis. "Ethiopia Sounds the Alarm: Eritrea Mobilizing for War." October 10, 2025.

² European External Action Service. "Ethiopia/Eritrea: Statement by the Spokesperson on the Anniversary of the Algiers Agreement." December 12, 2025.

In 2025, Eritrea's military support for Ethiopian nationalist movements, particularly the Amhara Fano militias,³ became central to its strategy to counter what it perceives as an encirclement by Ethiopia. Reports indicated that Eritrea has been involved in arms transfers and training for these groups via Sudan, aiming to undermine the Ethiopian federal government's authority. This pattern of supporting anti-central government factions is consistent with Eritrea's historical behavior, dating back to its alliances during the Derg era, and is now being repurposed to exploit Amhara grievances related to perceived betrayals in the 2022 Pretoria Agreement.

At the same time, relations between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) sharply deteriorated. Both sides exchanged accusations of violating the Pretoria Agreement, particularly regarding incomplete Eritrean troop withdrawals and disarmament delays. The rift is compounded by internal power struggles within the TPLF and its attempts to forge alliances with adversaries of the FDRE, particularly as broader insurgencies in Oromia and Amhara continue.

The dynamics between the TPLF and Eritrea's ruling party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (EPLF), have shifted from historical co-dependence in opposition to the Derg to more complex, opportunistic interactions. While joint military operations during the Tigray conflict from 2020 to 2022 positioned Eritrea against the TPLF, in 2025, the TPLF and Eritrea collaborated again.

Eritrea now views certain factions of the TPLF as potential proxies to destabilize Addis Ababa, leveraging their shared Marxist guerrilla roots for tactical advantages without formal alliances.⁴ Ethiopia's diplomatic communications to the UN in October underlined Eritrea's mobilization of reserves and missile tests as preparations for a broader confrontation, which may involve these proxies.

Projections for 2026 indicate that Eritrea is likely to maintain a measured, primarily covert posture of support for nationalist formations such as Fano, calibrated to avoid triggering an interstate invasion while influencing local dynamics through arms transfers, training, and discreet logistics in border areas. Violence is more likely to take the form of asymmetric, proxy operations, limited incursions, and hit-and-run actions into parts of Tigray and Amhara, with transit and resupply routes through Sudan, than large-scale conventional assaults on Assab, given logistical constraints and mutual war-fatigue.

Relations between the TPLF and the federal government are expected to remain tense; localized clashes could flare if federal economic measures or disarmament drives are perceived as heavy-handed, creating a risk that unrest in Tigray and Amhara could become entangled. Tactical cooperation between the TPLF and EPLF may deepen opportunistically (intelligence sharing and coordinated border actions), but enduring grievances from the recent conflict make an open, long-term alliance unlikely. Overall, the most probable scenario is contained volatility rather than full-scale war: stabilizing influences constructive African Union mediation on port access, prudent federal policies that prioritize inclusive political dialogue, and internal pressures in Eritrea favoring incremental reform could steer the region toward greater economic interdependence if miscalculations are avoided. Absent such confidence-building measures, however, unresolved proxy networks will continue to pose a persistent destabilization risk for the Horn.

³ Blackburn, Alex. "Rising Hostilities Between Ethiopia and Eritrea Threaten to Unravel Stability Across the Horn of Africa." Bloomsbury Intelligence and Security Institute, October 31, 2025.

⁴ Omer, Mohamed Kheir. "Eritrea, Ethiopia and the Missteps That Could Lead to War." New Lines Magazine, November 17, 2025.

Ethiopia–Egypt Relations: Nile Anxieties and Maritime Containment

Egypt's foreign policy in the Horn of Africa has increasingly focused on countering Ethiopia's influence while framing every regional engagement as a strategic fortification against Addis Ababa's developmental and maritime aspirations. While the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) remains the apparent core of Cairo's anxieties, recent maneuvers reveal a broader containment strategy that exploits the crowded geopolitical landscape of rival powers, including the UAE, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and now Israel. This approach challenges conventional views of Egypt as merely a water-insecure downstream state, portraying it instead as an assertive actor leveraging alliances to preserve Nile hegemony and thwart Ethiopia's quest for diversified sea access. Ethiopia, navigating these pressures with diplomatic restraint, positions itself as a proponent of equitable regional integration, but faces heightened risks from proxy escalations in 2026.

The tripartite alliance between Egypt, Eritrea, and Somalia, formalized through summits in Asmara (October 2024) and Cairo (January 2025),⁵ exemplifies this Nile-centric diplomacy. Ostensibly aimed at bolstering Somali stability and countering terrorism, the pact's joint ministerial committee has deepened military cooperation, including Egyptian arms deliveries to Somalia and coordinated stances against Ethiopia's Somaliland MoU.⁶ Cairo views the Ethiopia-Somaliland agreement, signed in January 2024 and granting Addis Ababa 50-year access to Berbera port in exchange for potential recognition, as a direct threat to its Red Sea dominance. This has prompted Egypt to align with Mogadishu to delegitimize the deal. By 2025, this has manifested in Somali threats to revoke Ethiopian troop contributions to ATMIS, straining Addis Ababa's security commitments while Egypt positions itself as Somalia's primary benefactor. In 2026, expect this alliance to evolve into joint naval patrols or intelligence-sharing initiatives, subtly containing Ethiopia without overt confrontation, though Ethiopia's pragmatic outreach to upstream Nile states could fracture Somali unity if internal divisions persist.

Egypt's discreet agreements in late 2025 to develop Eritrea's Assab port and Djibouti's Doraleh terminal⁷ mark a novel escalation, blending economic investment with military posturing. Under these pacts, signed without public fanfare, Cairo will upgrade infrastructure for refueling and resupplying its southern fleet, including destroyers and submarines, effectively establishing a semi-permanent naval presence in the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Analysts interpret this as a direct response to Ethiopia's maritime ambitions, aiming to deny Addis Ababa alternative routes by fortifying chokepoints historically used by Ethiopia before Eritrea's secession.

The Assab deal, in particular, revives colonial-era echoes, as Egypt gains leverage over a port once eyed by Ethiopia for sovereign access, potentially allowing Cairo to monitor or disrupt Ethiopian trade flow. Djibouti's participation, even though it heavily depends on fees from Ethiopia for transit, highlights Egypt's financial incentives, such as debt relief and military support, aimed at pulling allies away from Ethiopia. These moves challenge the narrative of Egypt's isolation, revealing a proactive strategy to militarize the Red Sea amid rival powers' bases.

Israel's recognition of Somaliland on December 26, 2025,⁸ injects fresh dynamics, potentially catalyzing a domino effect that pressures Ethiopia to formalize its own recognition under the MoU.

⁵ Samir, Mohamed. "Egypt, Eritrea, Somalia Leaders Hold Tripartite Summit in Asmara." *Daily News Egypt*, October 10, 2024.

⁶ "Egypt Delivers More Weapons to Somalia amid Rising Tensions with Ethiopia." *Al Jazeera*, September 23, 2024.

⁷ Hendawi, Hamza. "Egypt Increases Pressure on Ethiopia through Port Deals with Eritrea and Djibouti." *The National*, December 24, 2025.

⁸ Dahir, Abdi Latif, and Richard Pérez-Peña. "Israel Set to Recognize Somaliland as Sovereign Nation." *The New York Times*, December 26, 2025.

Although the African Union rejected this move, support from Jerusalem, motivated by a desire to counter Iranian influence in the Red Sea, could encourage other countries, including Ethiopia, to pursue similar actions in 2026. Egypt, viewing Somaliland's independence as fragmenting its Somali ally, is likely to intensify diplomatic lobbying against recognition, perhaps through UN channels or by escalating support for anti-Ethiopian proxies in Tigray and Amhara. This intersects with Nile disputes, where Cairo's 2025 demands for a binding GERD agreement, denied as threats but framed as existential, mask broader anxieties over Ethiopia's strengthened regional position. Ethiopia's completion of GERD filling in 2025, coupled with scientific rebuttals to Egyptian claims of water disruption, positions Addis Ababa favorably, but proxy manipulations could divert resources.

In 2026, Egypt's approach to the situation in Ethiopia is likely to change from previous years. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has moved from being a major source of conflict to an operational project, making Cairo focus on careful political tactics instead of direct confrontations. Although the dam is now filled and Ethiopia is generating hydropower without causing immediate harm downstream, Egypt still has serious concerns.

Building on alliances formed in 2024, especially a pact with Eritrea, Egypt will probably strengthen these partnerships to surround Ethiopia without using military force. By taking advantage of Ethiopia's internal issues, like ongoing conflicts in the Amhara and Oromia regions, Cairo can put pressure on Ethiopia's efforts to access the Red Sea. This strategy turns long-standing rivalries in the Horn of Africa into a way to contain Ethiopia, showing that disputes over resources often happen through indirect means rather than outright wars.

However, this containment approach might backfire if it ignores the need for cooperation due to climate-related challenges. Predictions indicate that population growth and unpredictable rainfall could make unilateral actions ineffective for all countries along the Nile. This challenges the idea that Egypt's aggressive stance is solely about wanting power; instead, it may also be a defensive response to its vulnerabilities.

Finding a true solution likely requires fair agreements that respect Ethiopia's right to develop while also protecting Egypt's water needs. As attempts at mediation through the African Union struggle, supported by analyses from Security in Context, Egypt may begin to consider realistic compromises in private talks. Recognizing that ongoing conflict could worsen the water problems Egypt wants to avoid could lead to a reluctant form of cooperation that lasts beyond 2026.

Egypt-Eritrea-Sudan SAF Interactions: Regional Alignments and Their Implications for Ethiopia in 2026

The Egypt-Eritrea-Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) nexus in 2025 represented a pragmatic alignment driven by shared concerns over Ethiopia's GERD operations and maritime pursuits, manifesting in joint statements and logistical partnerships. This collaboration focused on countering perceived Ethiopian influence without formal ideological unity, highlighting underlying tensions such as Eritrea's economic challenges and the SAF's internal divisions.

In 2025, Eritrea provided logistical support to the SAF, including border facilities for training and arms transfers that bolstered defenses in Port Sudan against RSF advances.⁹ Egypt pursued diplomatic initiatives, securing agreements to upgrade Eritrea's Assab port and Djibouti's Doraleh terminal,¹⁰ aimed at enhancing infrastructure amid Ethiopia's efforts to expand trade routes beyond Djibouti,

⁹ Abren. "Isolated Eritrea and War-Torn Eritrea: A New Alliance." October 16, 2025.

¹⁰ Addis Standard. "Egypt Has Agreed to Develop Assab and Doraleh, Considered as Pressure on Ethiopia." December 25, 2025

including outreach to Somaliland's Berbera. These deals, signed discreetly in late 2025, emphasized economic development like port expansions, though it goes beyond that; it is a strategic move to influence regional chokepoints.

Amplifying these actions, Eritrea has been extending support to Tigrayan opposition groups through training camps, mirroring historical tactics and thereby exposing vulnerabilities in northern Ethiopia. This Eritrean strategy intersects with the Sudanese Armed Forces' (SAF) unsubstantiated allegation that Ethiopia is harboring Rapid Support Forces (RSF) bases along their shared Blue Nile border. This accusation, lacking independent verification, appears designed to internationalize the Sudanese conflict and portray Ethiopia as an aggressor. Evidence suggests that both Eritrea and Sudan are orchestrating a narrative that frames the internal Sudanese strife as a regional proxy war aimed at Ethiopia's western flank. This coordinated effort seeks to draw international attention and potentially garner support by depicting the conflict as a broader regional issue rather than an internal Sudanese matter.

For 2026, trends suggest continued but restrained coordination among Egypt, Eritrea, and the SAF, potentially including joint exercises or intelligence sharing if RSF gains persist, exerting low-level proxy pressure on Ethiopia's borders rather than major incursions. Border flare-ups in areas like Tigray or Al-Fashaga could escalate amid Ethiopia's anticipated elections, possibly involving Tigrayan mobilization tied to Eritrean-backed groups and Sudanese instability.

However, logistical limits, war fatigue, Eritrea's demographic issues, and SAF divisions are likely to curb large-scale aggression. Assab enhancements may solidify as a strategic asset for Egypt, but Yemen's volatility and Red Sea militarization, potentially involving Russian-Sudanese ties, could dilute focus or create openings for Ethiopian diplomacy. The alliance's inherent weaknesses, such as Eritrea's hedging against Egyptian overreach and SAF-Cairo ideological mismatches, may invite Ethiopian exploitation via AU-led talks on port revenues or Nile issues. While generational shifts in Eritrea toward economic focus remain improbable, Ethiopia's consolidation could turn encirclement into integration opportunities, assuming no major missteps.

Policy recommendations

- Ethiopia's strategic outlook for 2026 necessitates a proactive and multifaceted foreign policy aimed at safeguarding its national interests amidst a complex web of regional rivalries and internal challenges. The core of Ethiopia's strategic dilemma lies in the intricate interplay between its aspirations for regional influence, particularly concerning maritime access and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), and the countervailing strategies employed by Egypt and Eritrea to contain its rise. This dynamic demands a recalibrated approach that balances assertive diplomacy with robust internal security measures.
- To effectively counter Egypt's containment strategy, Ethiopia must prioritize the diversification of its diplomatic alliances and leverage its economic potential to foster regional interdependence. Egypt's efforts to isolate Ethiopia through alliances with Eritrea and Somalia, coupled with its attempts to secure control over strategic ports in the Red Sea, pose a significant threat to Ethiopia's access to international trade routes. In response, Ethiopia should actively cultivate stronger relationships with Kenya, Sudan, and other regional actors who share an interest in promoting stability and economic integration. Furthermore, Ethiopia should leverage its growing economy to foster interdependence by investing in cross-border infrastructure projects and promoting trade and investment with its neighbors.
- Internal cohesion and stability are paramount for Ethiopia to effectively navigate the external challenges it faces. The risk landscape in 2026 is significantly influenced by internal political

dynamics, localized conflicts, and spillover effects from neighboring Sudan. Uneven security conditions across different regions, coupled with political recalibration between federal and regional authorities, pose considerable challenges. To address these internal vulnerabilities, Ethiopia must prioritize inclusive governance, promote economic development in marginalized regions, and strengthen its security forces to maintain law and order. By fostering a sense of national unity and addressing the root causes of internal conflict, Ethiopia can build resilience against external manipulation and internal instability.

- A robust approach to border security and counter-proxy warfare is essential for Ethiopia to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Eritrea's support for Ethiopian nationalist movements, coupled with the potential for SAF-Eritrean coordination along the Sudanese border, poses a significant threat to Ethiopia's internal security. To counter these threats, Ethiopia must establish well-defined and secured buffer zones along its borders, enhance its intelligence capabilities to track arms transfers and training activities, and launch targeted information campaigns to discredit proxy groups. Furthermore, Ethiopia should work with regional partners to address the root causes of instability in neighboring countries and prevent the spillover of conflicts into its territory.
- Ethiopia's approach to the GERD must be rooted in a commitment to regional cooperation and equitable utilization of shared water resources. While the GERD is a critical component of Ethiopia's development strategy, it has also become a source of tension with Egypt and Sudan. To address these concerns, Ethiopia should continue to engage in constructive dialogue with its neighbors, emphasizing the dam's potential benefits for regional development and promoting transparency in its operation. Furthermore, Ethiopia should explore opportunities for joint projects with Egypt and Sudan to promote regional cooperation and address shared water challenges. By demonstrating a commitment to equitable utilization of shared water resources, Ethiopia can build trust and reduce tensions with its neighbors.
- Finally, Ethiopia must adopt a pragmatic and adaptive approach to its foreign policy, recognizing that the regional landscape is constantly evolving. The rise of new actors, such as Israel, and the shifting alliances among existing players require Ethiopia to remain flexible and responsive to changing circumstances. By maintaining a clear focus on its national interests, diversifying its alliances, and promoting regional cooperation, Ethiopia can navigate the challenges of 2026 and beyond and secure its place as a leading force for stability and prosperity in the Horn of Africa.

SOMALIA AND SOMALILAND

Somalia's political landscape in 2026 risks deepening fragmentation as the federal government's drive for centralization clashes with regional demands for autonomy, rooted in constitutional amendments that have intensified longstanding tensions. President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's administration advances the one-person-one-vote electoral model, building on the milestone of direct local elections in Mogadishu, which demonstrated public enthusiasm for inclusive governance despite historical reliance on clan-based systems.¹¹ This shift promises broader representation, yet it provokes resentment from federal member states, where leaders perceive it as an erosion of the balanced power-sharing that has mitigated conflicts in a society shaped by clan affiliations. The resulting discord undermines national cohesion, revealing how efforts to modernize democracy can inadvertently heighten divisions in contexts where traditional mechanisms have served as fragile stabilizers.

¹¹ Faruk, Omar. "Somalis Vote in the First One-Person, One-Vote Local Election in Decades." ABC News, December 25, 2025.

Puntland's earlier withdrawal of recognition from the federal government¹² exemplifies this rift, as it prioritizes local grievances over national unity, while Jubaland's refusal to conduct state-level elections¹³ hampers coordinated security efforts against persistent threats. Such actions leave the Somali National Army exposed, complicating the transition from the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia to the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia amid resource constraints that could weaken counterinsurgency operations. This governance impasse, exacerbated by elite rivalries and opposition challenges to electoral processes, echoes past cycles of instability, where delays have led to violence in contested areas driven by leadership disputes. As national elections approach, the contention between direct voting and the clan system underscores a timeless dilemma: reforms aimed at equity often alienate entrenched interests, perpetuating fragility unless bridged through genuine compromise.

Al-Shabaab's resurgence further exploits these fractures, recapturing key towns and operating as an alternative authority through coercive mechanisms that sustain its influence. The group's adaptability allows it to capitalize on political disunity, positioning itself as a defender against perceived central overreach and foreign meddling, thereby prolonging instability. These dynamic challenges the conventional assumption that military pressure alone can dismantle insurgencies, as underlying issues like clan exclusion and corruption provide fertile ground for militants to thrive, turning internal discord into opportunities for expansion.

Regional aspirations amplify Somalia's vulnerabilities, with Puntland's intermittent secession threats reflecting disputes over revenue and elections, even as it remains nominally federal. Jubaland's semi-autonomous focus on local security prioritizes border defense over national integration, amid accusations of aid manipulation by the center. The SSC-Khatumo administration in Las Anod demands greater self-rule while rejecting Somaliland's territorial claims,¹⁴ fueling border tensions that illustrate how clan-based quests for autonomy risk de facto balkanization. These movements highlight a profound insight: in fragmented states, the pursuit of local agency often undermines collective progress, suggesting that true stability requires reconciling self-determination with unified structures rather than allowing rivalries to erode both.

In contrast, Somaliland's trajectory in 2026 appears more resilient following its presidential elections, where Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi Irro's victory signals maturing democratic institutions.¹⁵ Israel's recognition enhances prospects for investment in agriculture and Berbera port operations, potentially integrating Somaliland into broader security frameworks like the Abraham Accords to bolster Red Sea oversight.¹⁶ Yet this external validation heightens proxy frictions with Mogadishu, particularly over contested borders with SSC-Khatumo, testing territorial integrity amid opportunistic insurgent incursions. Somaliland's effective governance challenges the dogma of inviolable unity, proving that functionality can outpace formal recognition in fostering peace, though it risks escalating regional militarization if not managed with restraint.

¹² "Somalia's Puntland Refuses to Recognize Federal Government After Disputed Elections." Reuters, March 31, 2024

¹³ "Somalia's Jubaland Withdraws from Federal System, Calls Itself Independent Government." Somali Guardian, December 8, 2025.

¹⁴ Abdulla, Ali H. "From Resistance to Recognition: The Long Struggle and Bright Future of SSC-Khaatumo." WardheerNews, April 14, 2025

¹⁵ Rukanga, Basillioh, and Ibrahim Aden. "Somaliland Opposition Leader Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi 'Irro' Wins Presidential Vote." BBC News, November 19, 2024.

¹⁶ Chibelihi, Wedaeli, Ameyu Etana, and Farah Lamane. "Somaliland: Why Has Israel Recognised the Breakaway African State as Independent?" BBC News, December 30, 2025.

As 2026 unfolds, Somalia's volatility contrasts sharply with Somaliland's relative steadiness, underscoring divergent paths in the Horn of Africa. Without consensus on electoral reforms and resource equity, Somalia faces prolonged unrest, where external interventions may inadvertently empower extremists by diverting focus from root causes. Somaliland's advancements, while promising, carry the hazards of isolation if global alignments provoke backlash. This duality exposes a core truth: imposed unity often masks dysfunction, whereas endogenous reconciliation—prioritizing clan harmony over dominance—offers the enduring route to resilience, defying notions that foreign orchestration alone can forge lasting peace.

Somalia and Somaliland: Stakes and Rivalries in the 2026 Red Sea Struggle

The deepening alliance between Turkey and Somalia in 2026 stands to reshape Ankara's presence in the Horn of Africa, transitioning from primarily humanitarian aid to a more assertive military and economic role. Grounded in the defense and economic cooperation agreement signed earlier, this partnership utilizes Camp Turksom as a key training hub for Somali forces, strengthening Mogadishu's capacity to address insurgent threats while advancing Turkish interests in regional stability.¹⁷ Maritime patrols under the agreement position Turkey to counter Ethiopia's pursuit of sea access through its memorandum of understanding with Somaliland for the Berbera port, highlighting Ankara's broader ambitions that blend assistance with strategic influence, often overlooked in portrayals of its involvement as purely altruistic. This dynamic subtly influences Red Sea security, where economic engagements mask aspirations for greater sway over essential trade pathways.

In 2026, oil exploration off the coast of Somalia is set to progress, building on earlier seismic studies conducted by the Turkish vessel Oruc Reis. These operations will start with naval protection to counter piracy. Turkish Energy Minister Alparslan Bayraktar emphasized that this is a crucial moment for drilling, as it aims to help Somalia gain energy independence and support national development projects.¹⁸ However, security issues remain. Al-Shabaab opposes these activities and has threatened to disrupt them,¹⁹ while ongoing disputes over resource distribution among different regions could increase internal conflicts. This situation highlights a significant challenge in unstable regions: when natural resources meant to promote growth are not shared fairly, they can lead to greater divisions instead of stability.

Israel's recognition of Somaliland introduces a significant shift, establishing diplomatic relations encompassing agriculture, technology, and security cooperation to oversee Houthi activities from Yemen. As the initial United Nations member to affirm Somaliland's independence, this move bolsters Israel's monitoring of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, vital for global commerce, and lends Somaliland enhanced legitimacy for attracting investments alongside its existing port developments. This development amplifies Egypt's apprehensions regarding Suez Canal integrity, linked to broader Nile disputes involving the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, extending regional rivalries southward via Egypt's participation in the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia. Such intersections reveal how water and maritime contests intertwine, defying traditional separations of these issues in strategic analyses.

Ethiopia's arrangement for Berbera access, without formal recognition, gains potential momentum from Israel's action, possibly encouraging Addis Ababa to explore similar paths in 2026 while balancing relations with Mogadishu. This could foster a collaborative alignment among Ethiopia, Israel, and Somaliland to broaden sea options and mitigate influences from Turkey and Egypt, testing

¹⁷ "Somali and Turkish Commanders Visit Frontline Bases Fighting Al-Shabaab." TRT Afrika, August 28, 2025.

¹⁸ "Turkey's Oruc Reis Vessel Completes First Intercontinental Mission in Somali Waters." Anadolu Agency, January, 2023

¹⁹ Jackson, Ashley. "Flailing State: The Resurgence of al-Shabaab in Somalia." War on the Rocks, June 3, 2025.

the African Union's principle of border inviolability as articulated in its condemnation of the recognition. Backed by entities like the European Union²⁰ and Nigeria, the African Union's emphasis on continental unity contrasts with Somaliland's longstanding effective administration, including stable elections and economic durability, exposing a gap where international standards favor cohesion over practical functionality, thereby sustaining instability in Somalia despite viable models elsewhere.

Responses to the recognition fragment regional alignments, with Somalia labeling it an infringement on its sovereignty and seeking urgent United Nations Security Council deliberation. Egypt and Turkey, sharing opposition, view it as undermining their stakes in Somalia through military pacts and mission deployments, potentially prompting coordinated actions to uphold Mogadishu's claims.²¹ Djibouti expresses unease over Berbera's rising prominence, diminishing its own port's role, turning to Chinese facilities for economic safeguards²², while the Arab League, alongside a broad coalition including Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Qatar, denounces the decision as contrary to international norms.²³

Al-Shabaab capitalizes on these changes through anti-Zionist messaging, depicting Israel's engagement as an external imposition and committing to resist any territorial encroachments in Somaliland.²⁴ Linking the recognition to wider militant ideologies, the group bolsters its appeal during Somalia's electoral distractions, drawing on sustained operational capabilities to position itself as a bulwark against foreign interference. Collaborations with Yemen's Houthis for arms supplies²⁵ extend threats beyond borders, demonstrating how outside involvements designed for stability can inadvertently sustain insurgencies by aggravating local resentments such as clan marginalization and governance shortcomings.

In a possible scenario for 2026, a United States likely disengagement from Somalia under shifting policy²⁶ emphases could heighten instability, diminishing counterterrorism support including aerial operations, intelligence, and specialized training. This withdrawal might create vulnerabilities, allowing Al-Shabaab to intensify assaults on key areas and expand influence through established networks, while smaller factions like ISIS-Somalia exploit openings in regions such as Puntland for disruptive incursions affecting neighboring stability. Such a pullback not only erodes immediate operational edges against militants but also amplifies their narratives of external retreat, encouraging mobilization among alienated groups and compelling partners like Turkey and Egypt to stretch resources in the resulting gaps, risking deeper proxy involvements amid the Horn's tensions.

Broader ripple effects may emerge, with Israel's initiative potentially inspiring endorsements from allies like the United Arab Emirates or a refocused United States, weaving Somaliland into frameworks like the Abraham Accords for fortified Red Sea defenses. However, this risks escalating indirect confrontations, as Turkey escalates support to Somalia and Egypt amplifies interventions, intensifying militarization in waters already unsettled by Houthi actions. The Horn's path hinges on restoring indigenous control from foreign actors, emphasizing that authentic durability stems from Somali-driven resolutions rather than external impositions. Al-Shabaab's adept use of these rifts

²⁰ Martin, Nik. "EU Backs Somalia After Israel Recognizes Somaliland." Deutsche Welle, December 28, 2025.

²¹ Greyman-Kennard, Danielle. "Egypt, Turkey Condemn Israel's Recognition of Somaliland." The Jerusalem Post, December 26, 2025.

²² "Djibouti Blasts World Bank's 'Unjust' Ports Rating, Accuses Bias." Addis Fortune, June 11, 2024.

²³ "Global Backlash Grows Over Israel's Recognition of Somaliland." Anadolu Agency, December 29, 2025.

²⁴ "Somalia's Al-Shabaab Vows to Fight Any Israeli Use of Somaliland After Recognition." The Times of Israel, December 29, 2025.

²⁵ "Al-Shabaab, Houthi Security in the Red Sea." Africa Center, May 27, 2025.

²⁶ Stares, Paul B. "Conflicts to Watch in 2026." Council on Foreign Relations, December 2025.

highlights how geopolitical maneuvers can inadvertently strengthen extremism, perpetuating cycles of disorder.

This network of partnerships and rivalries positions the Horn of Africa as a reflection of global multipolarity in 2026, where pursuits of resources, security, and ideology converge. Turkey's expanded role in Somalia, though economically advantageous, carries hazards of entanglement in enduring disputes that could erode its strategic vision, particularly against Al-Shabaab's flexibility. Israel's diplomatic outreach may cultivate a steadier Somaliland yet provoke wider frictions, questioning if such acknowledgments advance harmony or division. Egypt's responses, extending Nile contentions, expose limits in its regional leadership aspirations, while the United Arab Emirates' calculated approach signals a trend toward discerning commitments. Al-Shabaab's leveraging of discord shows insurgents prosper amid outside turmoil, sustaining instability unless Somalia's elections bridge federal gaps through inclusive reforms. Opportunities for United Nations-mediated talks prioritizing sovereignty over dominance exist, challenging the assumption that foreign orchestration yields order. The region's outlook requires homegrown strategies emphasizing fair resource management and communal harmony for enduring peace beyond immediate uncertainties.

SUDAN

As Sudan steps into 2026, the civil war that ignited in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces under General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the Rapid Support Forces led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo enters its third year, defying expectations of a quick resolution and instead embedding a protracted stalemate driven by resource rivalries and external interference. What began as power struggles in Khartoum has transformed into a fragmented contest over gold mines, oil fields, and strategic ports. This situation illustrates how, in a multipolar world, local conflicts become arenas for global proxies, challenging the notion that such wars are merely internal affairs resolvable through isolated diplomacy.

By late 2025, the RSF had solidified control in western Sudan by capturing key towns like Babanusa and the Heglig oil field,²⁷ enhancing their access to vital minerals and hydrocarbons. Meanwhile, the SAF maintained strongholds in the east, such as Port Sudan, through drone-assisted defenses, even while facing pressures in besieged areas like Kadugli and Dilling.²⁸ This territorial split reveals a deeper dynamic: leaders like Burhan and Dagalo operate not merely as combatants but as entrepreneurial warlords, leveraging national assets to sustain alliances that prolong violence. This challenges traditional views of state militaries as unified protectors of sovereignty, highlighting a new reality where fragmentation and competition drive the conflict forward.

The humanitarian toll underscores the human cost of this fragmentation, setting a grim foundation for 2026 without sudden interventions. Over 11 million people, half of whom are children, have been displaced either internally or as refugees. Additionally, 21.2 million, nearly 45 percent of the population, face acute food insecurity, with famine officially declared in parts of Darfur and Kordofan²⁹. Villages have become ghost towns due to RSF sieges and SAF airstrikes, illustrating indiscriminate tactics that devastate civilian lives. This crisis is compounded by a collapsing health system grappling with outbreaks of cholera and measles, alongside rising sexual violence in RSF-held areas.

Aid blockades exacerbate these issues, potentially increasing displacement figures by millions more. However, this crisis reveals a counterintuitive truth: rather than weakening the belligerents,

²⁷ Ali, Faisal. "South Sudan Army to Secure Critical Heglig Oilfield in Sudan War Spillover." *Al Jazeera*, December, 2025.

²⁸ Tounsel, Christopher. "Sudan's Civil War: A Visual Guide to the Brutal Conflict." *The Conversation*, December 18, 2025

²⁹ World Food Programme. "Famine in Sudan." n.d. <https://www.wfp.org/emergencies/sudan>.

humanitarian suffering inadvertently strengthens their control by depopulating contested areas and forcing reliance on factional patronage networks. This inverts the common assumption that crises compel peace, suggesting that the ongoing suffering may instead entrench the current power dynamics and prolong the conflict.

Regionally, Sudan's turmoil spills outward, straining neighbors and risking broader instability in the Horn of Africa. Refugee flows into Chad overburden already fragile systems,³⁰ while the temporary halt in South Sudan's oil exports through Heglig pipelines, vital for over 90 percent of Juba's revenue,³¹ fuels economic distress there, including unpaid salaries and inflation that could incite mercenary recruitment or internal unrest. Ethiopia contends with border frictions tied to Nile water disputes, where Sudan's chaos amplifies tensions over resource sharing, demonstrating how one nation's implosion can cascade into transnational threats.

Libya's volatility adds another layer, facilitating mercenary influxes that prolong Sudan's fight, while Iranian drone supplies to the SAF³² introduce Middle Eastern rivalries, echoing patterns in Gaza and Yemen without direct entanglement. This interconnectedness challenges the prevailing optimism that modern conflicts can be quarantined, revealing instead a web where economic interdependencies and proxy interests amplify rather than contain spillover.

Economically, 2026 looms with persistent high inflation and bifurcated systems that widen disparities, fueling further mobilization. Sudan's inflation averaged around 87 percent in 2025, and although it is projected to ease to about 55 percent in 2026,³³ this still borders on hyperinflationary thresholds, eroding livelihoods amid divided control. The RSF dominates western minerals and hydrocarbons, achieving 70 tons of gold production in 2025 despite ongoing hostilities,³⁴ while the SAF relies on eastern port revenues.

Such asymmetries ignite inequalities, empowering ethnic militias like the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North in Kordofan to ally with the RSF against SAF positions. Agricultural ruin from floods intensifies famine risks for 19 to 21 million people, with humanitarian funding meeting only about 25 to 35 percent of needs.³⁵ This underscore how warring economies favor arms over humanitarian aid, a pattern in African conflicts that paradoxically sustains violence by prioritizing short-term military gains over long-term stability.

Central to these strains is the Heglig oil field in South Kordofan, a border-straddling asset whose RSF seizure in early December 2025 disrupted production and transit, slashing output to around 20,000 barrels per day from a pre-war level of 64,000 under the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company consortium.³⁶ This interruption halted South Sudan's pipeline flows, triggering revenue crises in both nations—Sudan lost transit fees amid devastation, while South Sudan faced service collapses that threatened renewed civil strife. Yet, by late December, a cooperative pact allowed for the resumption of operations, with South Sudanese troops securing the site, highlighting an overlooked interdependence: adversaries bound by shared economic vulnerabilities, where unilateral control invites mutual downfall, as seen in the 2012 border clashes.

³⁰ World Food Programme. "WFP Chad External Situation Report #25, December 2025." ReliefWeb. December 29, 2025.

³¹ Marks, Simon, and Salma El Wardany. "South Sudan Oil Exports at Risk." *Rigzone*, December 10, 2025.

³² Badi, Emadeddin. "Collateral Circuits: The Impact of the Sudan's War on Arms Markets and Mercenary Networks in Chad and Libya." *Global Initiative*, December 1, 2025.

³³ International Monetary Fund. "Data Mapper." n.d.

³⁴ Sudan Tribune. "Sudan produces 70 tons of gold in 2025." December 28, 2025.

³⁵ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. "IPC Country Analysis: Sudan." N.d.

³⁶ Sudan Tribune. "RSF seizes strategic Heglig oilfield, local administration deploys protection force." December 8, 2025.

Without sustained agreements, however, Heglig's fragility portends dire outcomes for 2026. Revenue shortfalls could erode SAF cohesion, strain RSF operations, and further destabilize South Sudan. Historical parallels suggest tripartite neutralization or revenue sharing, mediated by the African Union or IGAD, as pathways forward. Persistent clashes might deepen poverty, but recent resumptions indicate that battlefield impasses or international leverage could foster hybrid security models, defying predictions of inevitable collapse by exposing pragmatic incentives buried in chaos.

Looking ahead, Kordofan's volatility anchors the 2026 outlook, where RSF-SPLM-N coalitions challenge SAF lines, fostering a grueling attrition with shifting fronts and casualties potentially reaching 4000 to 5000,³⁷ positioning Sudan among global hotspots. This deadlock tilts toward de facto partition, with RSF western domains earning informal legitimacy through resource patronage, while SAF eastern enclaves retain diplomatic recognition but compromise authority through militia dependencies. This scenario appears more likely than total failure due to mutual exhaustion. Such division, often lamented as disintegration, might ironically lead to localized governance and reduced nationwide violence, challenging the notion that centralized states alone can foster peace in Africa's diverse landscapes.

Burhan's escalating tactics, especially diplomatically, may shift toward Turkey and Egypt-led efforts, perceived as allies untainted by RSF sympathies and countering UAE influence, as evidenced by recent Egypt-Turkey alignments against Emirati actions in El Fasher. However, his November 2025 dismissal of the Quad proposal, comprising the US, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and others, as the "worst document ever" due to perceived bias toward the RSF and UAE signals resistance to neutral frameworks, insisting on RSF disbandment.³⁸ This strategy, while astute in exploiting partisan mediators, risks prolonging the war, as RSF rejections of perceived imbalances could lead to only fleeting ceasefires amid ongoing sieges rather than a resolution.

If RSF gains persist, Burhan might deepen ties with Turkey and Russia, inviting sanctions and Western isolation, potentially fortifying the SAF but obstructing negotiations through rigid demands. Civilian voices from the 2019 revolution offer faint optimism, yet their marginalization by militarists perpetuates cycles of spurned agreements that lead to new ones. Absent Sudanese-driven demilitarization and inclusion, 2026 threatens to solidify divisions, entrench foreign influence, and worsen aid shortages, urging global actors to prevent a regional contagion that amplifies local suffering.

Ultimately, Sudan's path suggests entrenched schism, with the SAF-RSF impasse evolving into resource balkanization and proxy entanglements. Forecasts indicate that Kordofan attrition could yield thousands of deaths, inflation will hover at 55 percent, and famine could grip 20 million people amid climatic challenges and funding shortfalls. While Burhan's diplomatic shifts may lead to the formation of a Turkey-Egypt bloc, RSF defiance and rivalries, particularly with the UAE, are likely to favor intermittent truces over enduring accords, risking spillover into the Sahel and Red Sea. This trajectory redefines African statehood, embedding instability as a persistent feature in resource-rich nations, where fragmentation, far from being an anomaly, becomes a resilient adaptation to global disorder.

SOUTH SUDAN

The political landscape leading up to South Sudan's elections in December 2026 is marked by uncertainty due to ongoing struggles in implementing the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Key tasks, such as merging armed forces and drafting a permanent constitution, remain incomplete, heightening the risk of the transitional government's

³⁷ Security Council Report. "Sudan: Briefing." December 22, 2025.

³⁸ Al Jazeera. "Sudan Army Chief Rejects the Quad's Truce Proposal, Citing UAE Role." November 24, 2025.

collapse. Public sentiment is shifting, with growing disillusionment toward the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) as citizens prioritize security and economic stability over party loyalty. This dissatisfaction could lead to voter apathy or protests if election results are perceived as unfair or if further delays occur amid ongoing purges and trials. While there is progress toward inclusivity, including a goal for 35% representation for women,³⁹ it risks being merely symbolic without strong enforcement.

Additionally, the success of these elections is complicated by regional dynamics, particularly the ongoing civil war in Sudan, which may provide justifications for further postponements and utilize the situation of opposition leader Riek Machar as a bargaining chip in negotiations. The relationship among Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N), and South Sudan is developing into a complex network of opportunistic alliances⁴⁰ that could reshape regional borders and power dynamics. The RSF, led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), has gained control over western Sudan, effectively establishing a parallel government in areas like Darfur and Kordofan, which border South Sudan. This situation creates challenges for the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), commanded by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, pushing both sides to seek outside backing. The SPLM-N, a rebel group historically linked to South Sudan's ruling SPLM, has managed its position by maintaining bases along the border and occasionally partnering with the RSF against the SAF.

For South Sudan, this evolving relationship signals potential increases in cross-border activities as economic interests, particularly oil pipelines that run through Sudan, merge with ethnic connections. For example, Nuer communities along the border may find common ground with SPLM-N factions, possibly drawing South Sudanese forces into proxy conflicts. This shift challenges the perception of South Sudan as merely a victim of Sudan's instability; instead, it positions Juba as an active participant where President Kiir's government might exploit ties with the RSF to gain leverage against domestic challenges. At the same time, it faces accusations of supporting the paramilitary group while using the regional chaos as an excuse to extend the transitional period beyond 2026.⁴¹

Building on these regional entanglements, the question of support from the SAF for Riek Machar looms large, potentially escalating South Sudan's ethnic conflicts. However, his house arrest since March 2025 and ongoing trial complicate direct involvement.⁴² Historical precedents are evident: during the civil war from 2013 to 2018, Sudan backed Machar's SPLM-In Opposition (SPLM-IO) to counter President Kiir, who aligned with Uganda.⁴³ Recent tensions, including clashes in Upper Nile State, suggest a revival of this dynamic, albeit indirectly through proxies. With the SAF facing advances from the RSF, they may consider supporting Machar, a Nuer leader with cross-border connections, as a strategic way to destabilize Kiir, who has become closer to the RSF due to shared economic interests.

However, any overt support would likely depend on Machar's release, which seems unlikely unless there is a collapse of Kiir's regime or external intervention. Such support could come in forms of arms supplies or sanctuary for SPLM-IO fighters, potentially igniting ethnic clashes between Dinka-dominated government forces and Nuer militias like the White Army. This escalation would not just replicate past conflicts but exacerbate them, especially given the influx of modern weaponry from

³⁹ International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN). "When Women Lead, Peace Follows: The Transformative Power of Supporting Women's Political Participation in South Sudan." August 14, 2025.

⁴⁰ Security Council Report. "Sudan: Briefing." December 22, 2025

⁴¹ The East African. "South Sudan's Kiir Proposes Elections First, Political Reforms Later." December 30, 2025.

⁴² Crisis Group. "Trial of South Sudan's Frail Peace." Last modified December 12, 2025.

⁴³ Radio Tamazuj. "Opinion: South Sudan on the Brink of Renewed Civil War." Last modified December 21, 2025.

Sudan's ongoing conflict. This scenario challenges the oversimplified ethnic binary often portrayed in the media, revealing how external actors exploit internal divisions, transforming local grievances into regional proxy conflicts that undermine national cohesion and justify delaying elections in the name of security.

Amid these political maneuvers, the refugee crisis intensifies vulnerabilities, with projections indicating a significant influx into Ethiopia's Gambella region in 2026.⁴⁴ Already, over 50,000 South Sudanese fled to Gambella in 2025⁴⁵ due to renewed violence and economic collapse, straining resources and heightening tensions with host communities. Gambella, home to both Anuak and Nuer ethnic groups, has absorbed waves of refugees since 2013, but the presence of armed groups complicates humanitarian efforts. The White Army, a Nuer militia considered a terrorist group by some South Sudanese authorities for its role in ethnic violence, has infiltrated refugee camps, using them for recruitment and cross-border operations.

This militarization undermines refugee protections under international law, as camps become flashpoints for clashes with local Anuak populations who accuse refugees of land grabs and attacks. As South Sudan's ethnic conflicts intensify before elections or amid delays, an expected additional thousands of arrivals in Gambella will further overwhelm aid systems already at breaking point and risk broader communal strife, particularly as Nuer displacements may be driven by wider political grievances. This influx, far from being a passive humanitarian issue, intertwines with political strategies, wherein displaced populations become pawns in larger power games, complicating the feasibility of holding timely elections.

The potential for the SAF to exploit the refugee situation in an attack on Ethiopia adds a layer of geopolitical intrigue, particularly amid false allegations that Ethiopia hosts RSF training camps in Benishangul.⁴⁶ By leveraging the Nuer refugee population, many loyal to Machar, the SAF could orchestrate hybrid operations, arming proxies within the camps to target Ethiopian interests or disrupt RSF supply lines, even as limited coordination amplifies grievances among supporters. Such actions would challenge the notion of refugees as neutral victims, revealing how states weaponize displacement to pursue strategic objectives, potentially drawing in regional powers like Egypt or Eritrea, and providing another reason for South Sudan to delay its electoral process.

These interconnected threads, including elections on the brink of further delay, deepened ethnic rifts from unresolved leadership detentions, regional alliances, oil disruptions, and dynamics with refugees, paint a picture of South Sudan in 2026 as a tinderbox where short-term political survival overshadows long-term stability. The SAF's potential backing of opposition figures could push internal conflicts toward full-scale war, while RSF-SPLM-N ties might alter influence maps along the border. Meanwhile, the surge of refugees in Gambella, intertwined with White Army militancy, risks spilling into Ethiopian territory, inviting SAF retaliation amid the allegation.

This scenario contradicts optimistic views of post-conflict recovery, highlighting how elite agreements perpetuate cycles of violence. For lasting progress, it is essential to recognize that true peace requires not just elections but also accountability: dismantling patronage networks, integrating armed groups, and prioritizing citizen welfare over proxy conflicts. Without these changes, 2026 may not show a democratic breakthrough but rather another chapter in ongoing strife, where borders blur,

⁴⁴ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). "South Sudan (RRP) | Global Humanitarian Overview 2025." December 4, 2024.

⁴⁵ United Nations, CERF. "Allocation Summary | CERF: Ethiopia, Refugees, 04 Jul 2025." n.d.

⁴⁶ Sudan Tribune. "Sudan army prepares for RSF attack from Ethiopia on Blue Nile towns." December 27, 2025.

and human costs mount unchecked, with repeated extensions of the transitional period ensuring a state of uncertainty.

DJIBOUTI

Djibouti is in a key position amid global rivalries and regional dependencies. Although small, it plays a significant role in the security dynamics of the Horn of Africa. Its control over the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which is crucial for global trade, has led to foreign military bases setting up there, creating a mix of international interests. However, recent developments indicate possible changes. Djibouti's ability to manage these pressures may be tested by internal challenges and increasing competition from other powers, raising concerns about its stability as a host for superpowers.

The growing rivalry between the U.S. and China in Djibouti illustrates how global power struggles could change the region's future. The U.S. operates Camp Lemonnier as its main base for counterterrorism in Africa, while China has maintained its first overseas military facility there since 2017. This situation has turned Djibouti into a key area for strategic competition. Concerns in Washington about China's influence, particularly due to Djibouti's significant debt to Chinese lenders, have led to proposals for alternative strategies, such as recognizing Somaliland to gain access to the Berbera port.⁴⁷ This could help reduce dependence on Djibouti.

Djibouti's governing strategy has been pragmatic neutrality: the state treats relationships as instruments to shore up ports, logistics, and energy capacity while keeping its diplomatic options open. That posture has paid off in steady revenue from base leases and in infrastructure deals that underwrite growth, but it rests on a fragile balance. The Red Sea's security environment, most notably a wave of Houthi attacks that have threatened commercial transit since late 2023, has turned what was once a manageable security equation into an arena where peacetime port investment and wartime risk now collide.⁴⁸ At the same time, Djibouti's exposure to external lenders and shocks leaves it sensitive to creditor politics and to the political costs of appearing to favour one patron over another.

That vulnerability helps explain the sudden deepening of ties between Djibouti and Egypt in late 2025. The two governments signed a package of agreements covering a multipurpose container terminal, logistics-hub land leases, and a green-port initiative that includes a 100-megawatt solar project for the Doraleh container terminal.⁴⁹ While these projects are presented as economic and environmental cooperation, they also expand Cairo's commercial foothold on the Red Sea littoral and create a new vector of influence in the Horn, a dynamic that must be read alongside upstream Nile politics and Egypt's broader strategic calculations in the region.

Looking ahead to 2026, Djibouti is likely to remain a deliberate and consequential actor rather than a passive stage for competing powers. The United States and China will probably persist in overlapping, and sometimes competing, security and commercial initiatives. Washington's exploration of alternatives in the Horn reflects both tactical hedging and a longer-term search for resilience in supply-route access. These external dynamics will significantly shape Djibouti's strategic calculations and foreign policy decisions.

Those external realignments intersect with Djibouti's central bilateral relationship with Ethiopia, which depends on Djibouti's ports and transport corridor. That vulnerability helps explain the deepening ties between Djibouti and Egypt. The agreements signed in late 2025, covering a

⁴⁷ Christou, William. "Israel Becomes First Country to Recognize Somaliland as Sovereign State." *The Guardian*, December 26, 2025

⁴⁸ "Too Many Houthi Attacks on Merchant Ships in Red Sea." *Reuters*, January 16, 2025.

⁴⁹ Ahram Online. "Egypt Signs Three Agreements with Djibouti on Ports, Logistics, and Green Energy." December 30, 2025.

multipurpose container terminal, logistics-hub land leases, and a green-port initiative, expand Cairo's commercial foothold on the Red Sea and create a new vector of influence in the Horn, a dynamic that must be read alongside upstream Nile politics and Egypt's broader strategic calculations in the region.

In 2026, these external realignments will likely intensify pressure on Djibouti's core bilateral relationship with Ethiopia. While Ethiopia relies on Djibouti's ports, the potential for the US to recognize Somaliland and establish a presence in Berbera introduces a new dynamic. Djibouti has already condemned any recognition of Somaliland, viewing it as a violation of Somalia's sovereignty. Djibouti's growing ties with Egypt could be seen as further complicating Ethiopia's access to diversified sea routes.

Despite the "exemplary" relationship, Djibouti's rejection of Ethiopia's naval base proposal and Egypt's increasing influence in Djibouti's port infrastructure may create friction, requiring careful diplomatic navigation. The Egypt agreements will strengthen Djibouti's options and revenue base but will also force a careful diplomatic calibration with Ethiopia, which treats access to seaports as a core national interest. Domestically, recent constitutional changes and the upcoming April 2026 election create an interval of political uncertainty that could impact Djibouti's room for maneuver, depending on how internal dynamics play out.

CONCLUSION

Looking ahead to 2026, the Horn of Africa is poised for a landscape of managed volatility rather than outright collapse, shaped by interlocking crises that demand adaptive resilience. Resource disputes, particularly over shared waters, ports, and strategic trade corridors, will likely remain central flashpoints, yet deepening mutual dependencies in commerce, energy transit, and regional stability may gradually temper escalations and encourage pragmatic, back-channel diplomacy over open confrontation.

Proxy networks and external interventions from middle and great powers are expected to evolve rather than disappear, injecting layers of unpredictability while simultaneously creating incentives for selective de-escalation through mediation platforms and shared economic interests. Humanitarian pressures, including large-scale displacement, acute food insecurity, disease outbreaks, and funding shortfalls, will continue to test the region's capacity, potentially forcing belligerents toward intermittent truces to secure aid access and stabilize patronage systems, though such arrangements risk entrenching fragmented control rather than resolving underlying tensions.

Geopolitically, the multipolar environment will keep testing regional unity, with Red Sea militarization, climate variability, and population-driven resource stress accelerating realignments. More optimistic trajectories foresee incremental progress: negotiated frameworks for equitable resource utilization, electoral and governance reforms that bridge internal divides, and diversified investment flows that reduce single-point dependencies. Pessimistic paths, however, warn of persistent low-level proxy friction, insurgent resurgence in governance gaps, and humanitarian deterioration that could spill across borders if confidence-building measures falter.

Ultimately, 2026 will likely redefine the Horn not as a perpetual zone of chaos but as a proving ground for adaptive multipolarity in Africa. Shared vulnerabilities, economic interdependence, maritime chokepoints, climatic uncertainty, may compel cooperation where ideology and history have long divided. The region's trajectory will hinge on whether external jostling fuels destructive encirclement or, through necessity and exhaustion, fosters a more balanced order in this vital crossroads linking continents, oceans, and global trade routes. Enduring stability will depend less on imposed solutions and more on endogenous reconciliation that prioritizes communal harmony, fair resource management, and inclusive political processes over dominance and exclusion.