

REFLECTIONS ON FOREIGN POLICY AND REGIME SURVIVAL: SUDAN'S AND ERITREA'S RELATIONS WITH THE LEADING GULF STATES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ARMED CONFLICT IN YEMEN

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Abstract: The expectation and materialization of the lifting of multilateral sanctions on Iran, subsequent efforts to curb Iran, and the armed conflict in Yemen have had important implications for relations between the Arab States. However, they have also had wider repercussions, particularly in the Horn of Africa. In the context of these two international events, the growing interest of the powerful Gulf States in the Horn of Africa has contributed to the shake-up of foreign relations and political alliances in the sub-region. This article deals with Sudan's and Eritrea's foreign relations towards the leading Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. It highlights the shift from their alliance with Iran to embracing relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the leading states in the coalition intervening in the conflict in Yemen. The article shows that when faced with internal difficulties and external pressure, the Sudanese and Eritrean governments re-evaluated and shifted their foreign policy orientation significantly in an effort to ensure the continuation of obtaining material resources from the exterior that have been important for regime survival. It argues that the extent to which Sudan and Eritrea have pursued foreign policy orientation towards the leading GCC states reflects the level of domestic difficulties and external pressure faced by each state.

Keywords: Sudan; Eritrea; foreign relations; regime survival; war in Yemen

Introduction

On January 17, 2016, following the green light given by the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Iranian foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Sharif and the European Union foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, jointly announced the lifting of United Nations (UN) sanctions on Iran. To follow up, the United States (US) Secretary of State, John Kerry, made a separate statement to the same extent (Al Jazeera, 2016).

The expectation and materialization of this event had important implications for foreign relations in the Gulf region and beyond. It highlighted Saudi Arabia's fear that Iran's improved relations with the West would lead to its strengthening and undermine Saudi Arabia's role in the region. In preparation for the lifting of sanctions and expected strengthening of Iran, Saudi Arabia sought to expand its influence through consolidating old and forging new alliances in its neighborhood. Its closest partner in the region and the one that its current government has sought to emulate, is the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In particular, the crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, *de facto* ruler of Saudi Arabia, has aimed to implement similar policies as his senior, Abu Dhabi's crown prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who occupies a similar position in the UAE and appears to serve as inspiration to his younger Saudi counterpart (Stratfor, 2018).

The Shiite Houthi rebels' successes in the protracted conflict in neighboring Yemen further exacerbated the Saudi fears. The war that has raged since March 2015, featuring Saudi preoccupation about the extension of Iran's influence south of its border, followed a number of shorter conflicts between the government forces and those of the Houthi militias. It intensified after the Houthi occupied the state capital Sana'a and most of western Yemen. The alleged Houthi support by Iran contributed to the decision by a Saudi-led coalition to stage a military intervention. Reflecting on their respective domestic situations, the events in Yemen, and the UAE falling out with Djibouti shortly after, Sudan and Eritrea re-focused their respective foreign policies from close

relations with Iran to embracing the leading Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

This article discusses Sudanese and Eritrean foreign policy orientation in the context of the lifting of sanctions against Iran and the Saudi-led coalitions' intervention in the armed conflict in Yemen. In particular, it reflects on some of the commonalities and differences related to Sudan's and Eritrea's external relations with the leading Gulf States in the changing regional political landscape. Based on an analysis employing aspects of state survival and rational actor approaches, the article seeks to show how Sudanese and Eritrean governments have reacted to the current situation by focusing their foreign alliances largely to ensure the continuation of obtaining important resources from the exterior to maintain their domestic position. It argues that the extent to which each government has focused its foreign policy on seeking resources from the leading GCC states reflects the level of its domestic difficulties the intensity of external pressure in the regional political context.

External Relations and State Survival in Africa

A number of prominent authors have pointed out the fragility of African states and the need for governments to look towards the exterior to obtain resources for survival (Clapham, 1996; van de Walle, 2001). In most cases, the colonial order and rapid decolonization gave birth to states which on surface resembled their Western counterparts, but many such states remained utterly weak and largely dependent on their external relations for survival. Upon independence, the already present practices of "extraversion" (Bayart, 2000) became increasingly important particularly in conditions of waning legitimacy and state decay. Maintaining power required strategies for gaining control over resources, among which using the legal recognition of the state for obtaining such resources from the exterior was important (Jackson, 1993). In these circumstances, the governing factions of the political elites sought to use the state's external relations for obtaining resources, which facilitated maintaining political power, while state institutions provided a formal façade for informal wealth generating and redistributive channels (Migdal, 1998; van de Walle, 2005).

States, largely composed of individuals and governments in power, can be considered institutional forms of rational actors. In foreign policy analysis, as applied in International Relations, considering the state as a rational actor involves assuming it as the primary unit of analysis, its relations with other states providing the context for it. In the purposes of the reflections made in this article, we approach the concept of the state through its leadership which is in charge of the executive decisions regarding foreign policy. This is particularly useful for both Sudan and Eritrea in which the respective state presidents, Omar Bashir and Isaias Afewerki, exercise wide powers, especially in foreign relations. Yet, these leaders are also intensively involved in executive decisions in domestic policy and can be considered to be heavily interested in the survival and continuation of their respective governments.

Sudan's and Eritrea's External Relations

Along with a number of other African states, Sudan and Eritrea share a common history of prioritizing foreign relations for state survival. Relations with states across the Red Sea have for a long time formed a fundamental element in the strategies of their political elites. At least from the tedious and controversial process of decolonization onwards, for instance, the contemporary Sudanese political elite has considered external relations an important way of strengthening its domestic position. Similarly, the current Eritrean political elite emerging during the liberation struggle has considered external relations as an important means to strengthen itself. Particularly from the 1970's onwards, the relations with the Gulf States have featured prominently in Sudan's foreign policy and the political elites' strategies, whereas the connections of Eritrean rebels with the Arabian Peninsula were important throughout the long liberation war.

At the end of the Cold War, Sudan stood in the midst of a protracted civil conflict while Eritrean opposition was engaged in overthrowing the Ethiopian regime in the hope of gaining independence from Ethiopia. In 1989 Sudan experienced an Islamist military coup and regime change, which had received inspiration from the conservative Gulf States. Nearly four years later Eritrean independence was finalized. These events led to fundamental transformations in regional political relations in each state, coinciding with the post-Cold War context of deepening neoliberal order which simultaneously saw a wave of democratization sweeping through

Africa (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Young, 2012). The old authoritarian regimes lost their Cold War support and the related resources and powerful Western donors and international organizations increasingly subjected leaderships in Africa to the cutting down of the public sector and conditions such as good governance. This significantly weakened a number of states in Africa and significantly contributed to the demise of some of them, such as Ethiopia and Somalia.

After the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the end of the possibility to try to use the East and the West against each other for extracting resources, and in the context of the increasing exigencies and decline of funding from the West, the survival of the African state became more dependent on its ability to extravert resources from other regionally and internationally powerful states. This became particularly important for the narrowly based regimes such as Sudan and Eritrea, which depend on the ability to successfully assert their authority and legitimacy, especially because they have both sought to survive in the conditions of relative international isolation.

Sudan

Sudan maintained close relations with Iran from the time of the seizing of power by the Islamist government in Khartoum in 1989 until 2014. Irani support was instrumental for the Sudanese regime during the years of heavy international isolation in the mid-1990s, which featured the imposition of sanctions by the United States in 1997 and the intense external pressure until the formal end of the war in Southern Sudan in 2005. The initial events leading to Sudan's eventual shift of foreign policy orientation from the alliance with Iran towards the Gulf States took place in 2013. Alarmed by the easing of Irani sanctions, Saudi Arabia had initiated a campaign to reduce Iran's influence in its immediate neighborhood. As part of this strategy, it targeted Sudan which had maintained warm long-term relations with Iran. Aware that the Sudanese economy had suffered significantly and had failed to recover from the independence of South Sudan in 2011, Saudi Arabia applied economic pressure. It targeted the banking sector and remittances from the large Sudanese diaspora in Saudi Arabia, which are essential for financing both the Sudanese regime and economy. To counter its economic difficulties, caused in part by the loss of the majority of its oil reserves to South Sudan, Sudan tried to impose austerity measures. However, it soon abandoned the attempt due to wide protests that reminded some of the general uprising leading to the 1964 revolution that had toppled the military regime of Ibrahim Abboud.

In September 2014 Sudan finally succumbed to the Saudi pressure. It began severing ties with Iran and enhancing ties with the GCC states. Sudan closed Irani cultural centers with a pretext of curbing the extension of unwanted Shiite philosophy among the youth and expelled Irani diplomats (Abdel Aziz, 2014; Sudan Tribune [ST], 2016a). In March 2015 Sudan seized the opportunity to formally join the Saudiled military coalition (Sengupta, 2015). Subsequently, it received generous financial injections and other economic support, including a USD5 billion military aid package from Saudi Arabia (ST, 2016b), and sought to benefit further from estranging Iran and affirming its ties with the Gulf States. Since 2015 Sudan has contributed air support, logistical assistance, and ground troops for the military coalition in exchange for economic and financial support. During the January 2016 escalation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, initiated by Riyadh executing a famous opposition Shiite cleric, Sudan stood firmly with the coalition of Gulf States and was among the first to cut ties with Iran (Kerr & Aglionby, 2016).

The extent to which the Sudanese leadership depends on its Gulf allies' resources indicates the crucial importance they play in its strategic calculations. Recent criticism of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Sudan focuses on their lack of living up to their material commitments towards Sudan, which is largely seen as a significant factor deepening Khartoum's current economic difficulties. Although the Sudanese government remains highly dependent on the two allies, it has sought to diversify its external sources of resources that are important for regime survival by reaching to other partners, including Qatar, Turkey, and the European Union (EU).

Eritrea

In recent decades, Eritrean leadership has generally maintained warm relations with Iran. However, especially in the course of the 2000s, when faced with increasing international isolation, Eritrea sought vigorously external partners and its relationship with Iran grew closer. In May 2008 President Afewerki visited Iran (Allafrica, 2008), which enhanced diplomatic relations that were accompanied by economic and trade

cooperation, his subsequent public endorsement of the Iranian nuclear program (Afrol News, 2009), and stronger military relations.

However, during increasing prospects of the lifting of UN sanctions on Iran in 2014, Afewerki visited Egypt. Subsequently in April 2015, approximately month after the beginning of the Saudi-led coalition's air campaign in Yemen, he visited Saudi Arabia. Afewerki reportedly decided to support "military and security cooperation to fight terrorism and piracy in the Red Sea" and join the effort to isolate Yemen, allegedly agreeing to send in troops to join the coalition ground forces but at the same time continuing to maintain relations with Iran (Seddiq, 2015). Eritrea has since entered into the Saudi-led military alliance, allowing the UAE operate in Assab and providing logistical assistance that allows the coalition to use the port in return for financial assistance and fuel (United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea [UNMGSE], 2015, p. 3; UNMGSE, 2016, p. 4), while allegations have emerged on it having sent troops to Yemen.

At the same time, Eritrea has not manifested to have particularly bad relations with Iran and maintains good relations with Israel (Seddig, 2015). Meanwhile, the intense cooperation with the leading GCC states is likely to entail a lingering hope among the Eritrean leadership of improving relations with the US and the eventual lifting of sanctions. This is especially the case following its groundbreaking rapprochement with the new Ethiopian government in July 2018, brokered mainly by its ally the UAE, which has rapidly converted Eritrea from a pariah into a potential strategic partner for the US.

Since the July peace agreement, which was formalized in Jeddah in September, Eritrea's position in regional politics has changed radically. It is now able to cash in on its strategic location at the Red Sea coast which is not only useful for military operations in Yemen, but also for controlling the shipping lanes passing through Bab el Mandeb straight. Eritrea has since reactivated its relations with another strategic partner, Russia, while seeking to improve ties with internationally powerful actors, such as the EU and Japan, and nearby states such as Somalia (Solomon, 2018). Eritrea's new opportunities to further diversify foreign relations are largely a result of its rapprochement with Ethiopia. The new partnerships, and reviving old alliances, are likely to mark the end of international isolation of Asmara and result in new resources from the exterior which will strengthen the government. At the moment, Eritrea's situation, therefore, appears brighter than that of Sudan which remains more limited in terms of external partnerships and with a heavy reliance on a few key alliances.

Conclusion

Today, survival continues to be a central concern for narrowly based leaderships in a number of African states in which at least partly authoritarian political culture remains. As several authors have pointed out, external relations, backed by the state's legal status as a recognized member of the international community, continue to play an important role in the strategies for obtaining resources from the exterior. In conditions of political and economic strain, external relations may become essential for drawing resources for maintaining the governing elite faction in power. As this brief article has sought to demonstrate, strategies of survival continue to dictate the external relations of at least some governments that remain under considerable distress. Both Sudan and Eritrea have faced long periods of international isolation and economic difficulties. While Sudan suffered greatly from South Sudan's independence and continues to face US sanctions, Eritrea has been dealing with UN sanctions regime since 2009.

In the context of the lifting of UN sanctions on Iran and the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in the war in Yemen both re-evaluated their foreign policy orientation. They improved relations with the GCC countries in order to gain further resources for regime survival. While Sudan was hard pressed by Saudi Arabia to sever its ties with Iran and to a large extent gave in to Saudi pressure, Eritrea appears to have made a less constrained choice to approach Saudi Arabia and the UAE for gaining diplomatic and economic support. Whereas Khartoum's move should be seen in the context of its economic dependence on the Gulf States, Asmara arguably faced somewhat less such pressure to sever its ties with Iran. Instead, the Eritrean government has sought to pursue wide-ranging external relations which have gained new impetus from the recent reconciliation with Ethiopia.

Yet, although both Sudan and Eritrea currently appear to consider their Iran relations less beneficial than their ties with Saudi Arabia and UAE, this condition is not constant. Their interests continue to be subject to the latter demonstrating a sustained economic commitment that surpasses any benefits Iran and its perceived allies might offer. At the same time, however, the foreign relations position of the two governments has some

differences. While Sudan appears to depend heavily on relations with its Gulf allies and is largely subject to their political and economic power, Eritrea, benefiting from the recent peace agreement with Ethiopia, appears to have been more successful in pursuing wider-ranging foreign relations to maximize benefits from relations with states beyond distinct alliances and orientations. This may partly explain the difference in the public admission regarding involvement in the war in Yemen and affect the coalition leaders' apparently different treatment of the two states.

Finally, in a recent development, the GCC partners' isolation of Qatar has also received distinct responses from Sudan and Eritrea. Sudan has sought a reconciliatory approach and salvaged its relationship with Qatar and in extension Turkey. But this has potentially undermined its relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE and may partly explain the lack of material support to Khartoum from these states. In contrast, Asmara has cut ties with Doha despite Qatar's previously vital role in financing the Eritrean government, providing other economic support, and mediating and peacekeeping in its border dispute with Djibouti. In its effort to pursue wide-ranging foreign relations, Asmara is likely to have deemed more beneficial to clearly disassociate itself from Qatar, which has enabled it to focus more on its alliances with the UAE and Saudi Arabia and improve relations with other powerful states.

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