

Al-Shabaab, Houthis and Iran

By Berihu Teweldebirhan Gebresilassie
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1. Introduction

The Horn of Africa is characterized by a complex mix of local groups, regional rivals, and global powers, in particular the United States ('US'), European countries, and Iran. Since late 2024, Iranian-backed Houthi rebels and al-Shabaab have increased their co-operation in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, threatening international shipping.¹ With advanced Iranian weapons, the Houthis have attacked global shipping.² In addition to providing military aid to al-Shabaab, Iran's support for this network has intensified maritime attacks on Israel, the US and the United Kingdom ('UK'). Conflicts, violations of sovereignty, and illegal wildlife trafficking have increased in Gulf states. Geopolitical and economic interests, including control of strategic maritime routes, food security, expanding economic influence, and countering rivals, are driving Gulf involvement in the Horn of Africa.³ Economic opportunities have been created, but conflicts have intensified, raising concerns about sovereignty and the prevalence of illicit activities. Military interventions and the United Arab Emirates' ('UAE') support of separatist groups in Yemen have worsened the humanitarian crisis.⁴ Sudan's Rapid Support Forces fuel the civil war. The UAE maintains a military base in Eritrea and collaborates with Ethiopia to influence regional dynamics.⁵ Iran-backed Houthis are fighting the Yemeni government, which is supported by the Saudi-led coalition. Especially along key maritime routes, Iran supports the Houthis to challenge Western influence.⁶

¹ Tiziana Corda, "Not All Plain Sailing: The Highs and Lows of Iran's Scramble for the Horn of Africa", in Francisco José B.S. Leandro, Carlos Branco and Flavius Caba-Maria (eds.), *The Geopolitics of Iran*, Springer, Singapore, 2021, pp. 487–509.

² Raul Pedrozo, "Houthi Maritime Terrorism: Severing the Iranian Lifeline", in *International Law Studies*, 2025, vol. 106, no. 1, pp. 395–399; Sarthak Gupta, "Facilitators and Strategic Interests in Yemen's Multifaceted Proxy War", Policy Brief No. 173 (2025), Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher ('TOAEP'), Brussels, 2025, pp. 1–4 (<https://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/173-gupta/>).

³ Brendon J. Cannon and Ash Rossiter, "Patterns of External Involvement in the Modern Political History of the Horn of Africa States", in Simon Mabon and Robert Mason (eds.), *Gulf States and the Horn of Africa*, Manchester University Press, 2022, pp. 15 ff.

⁴ Jamal Humaid Ahmed Al-Zaabi, "The Role of UAE Foreign Aid to Developing Countries during Conflicting Situations from the Perspective of International Diplomacy", Doctoral Dissertation, University of Central Lancashire, 2023, pp. 64–85; Gupta, 2025, see *supra* note 2.

⁵ Dereje Melese Liyew, "The Evolving Presence of the United Arab Emirates in Ethiopia: Security Implications", in *Insight on Africa*, 2025, p. 16. See also Sarthak Gupta, "From Gold to Guns: The UAE's Sub-Imperial Footprint in the Sudan Conflict", Policy Brief Series No. 188 (2025), TOAEP, Brussels, 2025 (<http://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/188-gupta/>).

⁶ Leonardo Jacopo Maria Mazzucco, "Iran and the Houthis' Asymmetric Maritime Warfare Campaign in the Red Sea: A Study of the Sponsor-Proxy Model", in *Journal for Iranian Studies*, 2024, vol. 8, no. 20, pp. 20–25.

Iran's influence in Somalia is reportedly extended through al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda-linked group supported by the Houthis.⁷ As such, the West should improve counter-terrorism efforts and maritime surveillance to stop arms smuggling and help the Somali government fight al-Shabaab. However, misguided counter-terrorism tactics, disunity, and a lack of local understanding have largely caused Western interventions in Somalia and Yemen to fail. Conflicting priorities and overreliance on military solutions have enabled al-Shabaab and Houthi rebels to seemingly thrive.⁸ Based on convenience and Iranian support, al-Shabaab and the Houthis have formed a tactical alliance that challenges Western influence and worsens regional instability. Western peace efforts risk overlooking local dynamics, which can lead to criticism for ignoring community involvement and traditional conflict resolution methods. This policy brief on Somalia, Yemen and the Horn of Africa considers how Iran supports the Houthis and al-Shabaab alliance, and questions the effectiveness of Western strategies.

2. Some Natural Features and Trends

In 2025, al-Shabaab launched a significant offensive against government forces in central Somalia, regaining considerable territory, in addition to the large portion of southern Somalia already controlled.⁹ It is also involved in attacks outside the country. Using guerrilla warfare and targeted killings, al-Shabaab has affected countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia.¹⁰ The Houthis in Yemen, on the other hand, have gained importance and influence by controlling strategic alliances, advanced weapons, and important territory, especially in the area of the Bab al-Mandab Strait.¹¹

The alliance between the Houthis in Yemen and al-Shabaab in Somalia is changing security in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea.¹² Both groups oppose Western influence and aim to intensify maritime threats by controlling shared maritime routes and pirate infrastructure. The Bab al-Mandab Strait and nearby coastlines allow them to conduct

⁷ Daniel Byman and Asfandiyar Mir, "Assessing al-Qaeda: A Debate", in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 2024, vol. 47, no. 12, pp. 1559–1598. For a policy brief on al-Shabaab specifically, see Orly Maya Stern, "Accountability for Al-Shabaab's Crimes in Somalia", Policy Brief Series No. 191 (2025), TOAEP, Brussels, 2025 (<http://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/191-stern/>).

⁸ Nsama Jonathan Simuziya, "Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram Beyond Face Value Political Rhetoric and Why the Governments of Somalia and Nigeria Have Failed to Tame Them", in *The World of the Orient*, 2024, no. 2, pp. 103–130.

⁹ See Stern, 2025, *supra* note 7.

¹⁰ Hillary K. Rotich, "Al-Shabaab Militia, A Threat to Security in the Horn of Africa: A Case Study of Kenya", Doctoral Dissertation, University of Nairobi, 2020, pp. 130–149.

¹¹ Andrew Maher, "Proxy Warfare in Yemen: An Enduring Strategic Challenge", in *Australian Army Journal*, 2025, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 180–204.

¹² *Ibid.*; Marek Máka, "Targeted Killing as a Tool of Counter-Terrorism: The Case of Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula", Master's Thesis, Univerzita Karlova, 2024, pp. 16–37.

covert operations and co-operate through arms transfers (including advanced drones).¹³ Weapons have also been provided to al-Shabaab via the Gulf of Aden, the Horn of Africa, and Saudi Arabia,¹⁴ turning the group into a more traditional and trans-regional threat. Instability in the region illustrates how extremist groups can unite across sectarian lines.

Geographic advantages may further enhance their operational capabilities by, for example, leveraging the rugged terrain and climatic conditions to enhance self-sufficiency and public services. Violence is usually caused by organized crime tactics and urban guerrilla warfare.¹⁵ The government is also weakened by group members hiding in natural landscapes and their use of select communication methods. Embedding in remote areas and offering services to locals undermine the government's authority because dispersed networks and low-signature communications enable the group to maintain support. All this has led to destabilization in the region and forced the US and its allies to re-evaluate their counter-terrorism strategies.

Beyond human trafficking and piracy practices, al-Shabaab exploits regional conflicts in the Horn of Africa.¹⁶ Yemen, Somalia and the Horn of Africa are increasingly complex and volatile, despite Western policies aimed at restoring stability. The ongoing civil war in Yemen and Houthi attacks on commercial shipping exacerbate economic problems.¹⁷ Conflict and climate change undermine food security further, making millions depend on humanitarian assistance.¹⁸ The situation is further destabilized by global rivalries between China, Russia and Western powers who compete for influence in Yemen and Somalia, undermining conflict resolution and fragmenting security,¹⁹ allowing al-Shabaab to increase territorial control in Somalia amid political divisions.²⁰ Without more unified international action, the region faces further instability, risking exacerbation of ongoing humanitarian catastrophes.

3. Al-Shabaab and Houthis: The Connection

Colonial legacies, internal power struggles, a lack of effective governance, and radical Islamic ideology have created an environment conducive to extremist groups like the Houthis and al-Shabaab.²¹

These armed groups are forming a strategic, pragmatic alliance, as recently confirmed during the Red Sea crisis, raising security concerns, particularly for US and international stakeholders.²² The formalized partnership profits both groups, with the Houthis reportedly earning large revenues from illegal protection fees, and al-Shabaab profiting from piracy due to re-routed commercial shipping.

The Houthis enhance their military capabilities by receiving coastal intelligence from al-Shabaab. Their collaboration has led to the targeting of over 100 commercial vessels in the Red Sea.²³ Since No-

vember 2023, the Houthis have launched over 520 attacks targeting at least 176 ships, sinking two civilian vessels, securing one, and killing at least four merchant sailors.²⁴ Greek-flagged oil tanker Sounion was severely damaged by Houthi attacks in August 2024. There were casualties and environmental damage caused by the sinking of the Ruby-mar and a fatal strike on the True Confidence in March 2024. Also in March 2024, Houthi actions damaged three undersea Internet cables in the Red Sea, disrupting 25 per cent of data traffic between Asia and Europe.²⁵ Some shipping agents have started to pay the Houthis' illegal fees to allow safe passage, reportedly generating approximately USD 180 million per month.²⁶

Al-Shabaab, on the other hand, is collaborating with pirates and using ship re-routing around the Cape of Good Hope to profit. It is estimated that pirates earned USD 5 million in ransom from the hijacking of the MV Abdullah in April 2024, used to fund al-Shabaab's operations.²⁷ A Malta-flagged tanker was boarded by 'unauthorized personnel' near Eyl, Somalia, involving the firing of rocket-propelled grenades. In this case, the tanker was traveling from India to South Africa. There have been two previous boarding attempts in the region, including an armed attack on a commercial ship near Mogadishu in the first week of November 2025.²⁸ Due to the danger of the Red Sea since November 2023, shipping costs for an Asia-Europe round-trip rose by USD 1 million through the Suez Canal route and USD 1.7 million through the Cape of Good Hope route.²⁹ Over 70 per cent of Egypt's nearly USD 10 billion annual Suez Canal revenues have disappeared, resulting in significant losses.³⁰

Global trade and inflation are expected to rise, as well as trading costs and local market disruptions. Increasing shipping costs, territorial governance gaps, and coercive taxes are major issues. The Houthis and al-Shabaab allied in late 2024 and 2025, marked by military attacks, weapons sharing, and financial support.³¹ They co-operated despite divergent ideologies and achieved short-term objectives against common adversaries. As a result of this alliance, al-Shabaab could increase its piracy activities in the Red Sea, further threatening maritime security. The Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden now face renewed security threats.³²

Iran's involvement in the Horn of Africa has complicated regional dynamics, fed conflicts, and undermined stability efforts.³³ By targeting government institutions, the Houthi-Iranian nexus in Yemen has been instrumental in destabilizing East Africa.³⁴ Iran provides ad-

Review, 2024, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 294–306.

²⁴ Keith E. Holbert, "A Review of Maritime Nuclear Reactor Systems", in *Journal of Nuclear Engineering*, 2025, vol. 6, no. 1, p. 5.

²⁵ Mariia Umanets, "Geopolitical Dimensions of the Houthis' Interference with Submarine Cable Communications in the Red Sea", in *Przegląd Geopolityczny*, 2024, vol. 50, pp. 51–67.

²⁶ See Omnia Allam Mics, "The Impact of Geopolitical Events on Ship Agents: The Red Sea Crisis", FONASBA, 2024.

²⁷ "Pirates Release Bulker Abdullah in Exchange for \$5M Ransom", *The Maritime Executive*, 14 April 2024.

²⁸ "Somali pirates board first ship in 18 months", *Financial Times*, 7 November 2025.

²⁹ International Transport Forum, "The Red Sea Crisis: Impacts on Global Shipping and the Case for International Co-operation", 2024, p. 16.

³⁰ Maga Elswesly, "The Benefits and Pitfalls of Public-Private Partnerships: Case Study of the Suez Canal Container Terminal", Master's Thesis, The American University in Cairo, 2025, p. 17.

³¹ Frederick Appiah Afriyie, "What Fuels Terrorism in Somalia? Perspectives from the Jihadist Group Al-Shabaab", in *Cogent Social Sciences*, 2025, vol. 11, no. 1, p. 11.

³² Burak Şakir Şeker, "Don't Forget About the Red Sea", in *Cairo Review*, 2024, vol. 51, no. 3, pp. 3–5.

³³ Yonas Adaye Adeto, "State Fragility and Conflict Nexus: Contemporary Security Issues in the Horn of Africa", in *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, 2019, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 11–36.

³⁴ Nils Olsen and Grace Jones, "The Other Side of the Strait: The Strategic Significance of the Houthi's Aggression for East Africa", in *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, 6 March 2024.

¹³ Horton, 2024, see *supra* note 12.

¹⁴ Mason and Mabon (eds.), 2022, p. 32, see *supra* note 3.

¹⁵ M. Almhqani, "Bab Al-Mandab and Its Geostrategic Value", Master's Thesis, Sultan Qaboos University, 2022, pp. 55–63.

¹⁶ Rotich, 2020, see *supra* note 10.

¹⁷ Emilio Rodriguez-Diaz, J.I. Alcaide and R. Garcia-Llave, "Challenges and Security Risks in the Red Sea: Impact of Houthi Attacks on Maritime Traffic", in *Journal of Marine Science and Engineering*, 2024, vol. 12, no. 11, p. 1900.

¹⁸ Stephen Harley, "Al-Shabaab's Exploitation of Climate Change in Somalia", in Elif Çolakoglu (ed.), *Climate Change and Terrorism*, Centre of Excellence – Defence Against Terrorism Ankara, 2025, p. 99.

¹⁹ Ashley Rhoades et al., *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in the Middle East*, RAND Corporation, 2023, p. 59.

²⁰ Daisy Muibu, "Somalia's Stalled Offensive Against Al-Shabaab: Taking Stock of Obstacles", in *CTC Sentinel*, 2024, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 18–26.

²¹ Yousef Al-Sallal, "The Houthi Rebel Movement: Analysis on the Role of War-time Social Order, Legitimacy and Greed in the Houthi Rebel Resilience in Yemen between 2017 and 2023", Master's Thesis, Utrecht University, 2024, pp. 24–35.

²² Moges Atalele Tilahun, "Red Sea Turmoil and its Repercussions on the Region Security", in *GeoJournal*, 2025, vol. 90, no. 4, p. 161.

²³ Estifanos Balew Liyew, "Geopolitics of the Red Sea: Implications of Foreign Military Bases Expansion to the Horn of Africa Security", in *African Security*

vanced weaponry and intelligence to the Houthis – who are fellow *Shī'ah* – thereby increasing regional tensions, especially with Saudi Arabia and Israel.³⁵

The US could escalate its responses if Iran leverages this partnership.³⁶ External state actors who provide these groups with financial or military support complicate peace efforts. US responses to Iranian alliances with the Houthis and al-Shabaab have included targeted strikes, increased maritime security, sanctions, and diplomatic efforts.³⁷ Ineffective multilateral deterrence, maritime attacks that impede trade, and credible proof of Iranian support for militants all trigger escalation.³⁸ However, civilians face adverse effects, regional polarization, and reciprocal strikes. Since external support increases the capacity of non-state actors, the US finds itself pursuing deterrence. Monitoring military movements and arms transfers is essential.

4. Yemen and Somalia: Western v. Iranian Involvement

Iran and Western actors use proxies and strategic approaches in the geopolitical conflicts in Somalia and Yemen. While Iran resorts to covert diplomacy and proxy networks, the US and European Union ('EU') focus on counter-terrorism, maritime security, and regional stability.³⁹ This intricate rivalry is driven by power and ideology. Yemen has been experiencing internal conflicts and political instability since 1990. With its favourable maritime location and protracted state failure, Somalia has also become a global security priority after 9/11.⁴⁰ Violent *Islāmists* and maritime threats have drawn attention to counter-terrorism partnerships. The Somali security forces were assisted, troops were deployed, and capacity was built;⁴¹ however, a single-minded focus on security can obstruct development and governance initiatives. While Somalia's stability depends on comprehensive geopolitical and counter-terrorism policies, external resources are driven by global security interests.

Fighting terrorism and preserving regional stability seem to be the main motivations for Western engagement in Somalia and Yemen. Unlike Yemen, Somalia has focused on reducing the power of extremist organizations like al-Shabaab and state-building.⁴² While the West has militarily supported the African Union Mission to Somalia ('AMISOM'), a multinational peacekeeping force, and the federal government, Somalia's institutions also require funding and support from foreign actors, chiefly the US, the EU and the United Nations ('UN'), to develop institutional capacity, improve infrastructure, and foster economic development.⁴³ Somalia faces heightened security challenges due to clan conflicts and a weak central government. In response, the

African Union and UN are investing in state-building alongside efforts to combat al-Shabaab.

Yemen's proximity to key maritime routes makes it a security focal point.⁴⁴ The Bab al-Mandab Strait and related maritime routes are vital to international trade and energy supplies. Yemen's ongoing civil war, which began in 2014, has exacerbated security concerns by producing refugee crises and breeding extremism. Saudi Arabia and Iran's involvement in the Yemen conflict has regrettably escalated these tensions.⁴⁵

Western actions towards Iran are motivated by concerns over nuclear proliferation and Iran's malevolent influence in the Middle East. Iran supports the Houthis to challenge Saudi dominance in Yemen, while Western nations aim to restore the Yemeni government and protect maritime trade routes.⁴⁶ Iran collaborates with al-Shabaab to enhance its influence in key regions impacting Western anti-terrorism efforts, exerting control over important waterways, and supporting various proxy groups. Iran's assistance to the Houthis challenges Saudi influence in Yemen, while its strategic location by the Strait of Hormuz enables it to affect global oil trade. Peace talks and humanitarian efforts exist amidst the crisis, but persistent political complexities, funding disagreements, and human rights violations hinder the pursuit of a lasting resolution. The US has largely supported Saudi-led military operations against the Houthis, which intensified the Yemeni conflict.⁴⁷ It would appear that external military interventions have contributed to humanitarian suffering and undermined peace efforts.

5. Miscalculations and Inaccurate Assumptions

As we have seen, there is a complex proxy struggle between Iran and Western nations in Yemen and the Horn of Africa, with the Iranian-aligned Houthis at the centre of events.⁴⁸ Geostrategic factors, notably Iran's ambitions and Western counter-terrorism policies, have shaped the conflict, with Iran boosting Houthi military capabilities. This has resulted in attacks on shipping and subsequent military responses from the US and UK. The partnership between the Houthis and al-Shabaab raises additional concerns for regional stability and maritime security, involving the transfer of advanced weapons like drones and missiles, alongside financial and military support from Iran. The impact this has on the global economy is profound – potentially disrupting USD 1 trillion in global trade.⁴⁹

Western peace and reconciliation efforts in the Horn of Africa often overlook local legitimacy and bypass key influencers, leading to criticism. The unexpected alliance between al-Shabaab and the Houthis raises security concerns and highlights the need for Western actors to better align their strategies with local realities.⁵⁰ Using their reputations for neutrality and humanitarian commitment (a valuable capital built up over many decades of credible and prudent efforts), Switzerland and Norway have significantly influenced peace and rec-

³⁵ Adiba Tahir Gill, Umme Ummara and Ali Abbas Hashmi, "Great Power Rivalry and Regional Escalation: The Russia-US Proxy Conflict and its Impact on the Iran-Israel War", in *Policy Journal of Social Science Review*, 2025, vol. 3, no. 9, pp. 224–235.

³⁶ Sara Bazoobandi, "Iran's Strategies in Response to Changes in US-China Relations", in *Middle East Policy*, 2024, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 120–132.

³⁷ Robert Mason and Simon Mabon, "Pushing the Envelope of National Security and State Influence at the Margins: Saudi and Iranian Competition in the Horn of Africa", in Mason and Mabon (eds.), 2022, pp. 36 ff., see *supra* note 3.

³⁸ Branislav Milosavljević and Veljko Blagojević, "The Concept of Deterrence in Current Relations in the Middle East", in *The Review of International Affairs*, 2024, vol. 75, no. 1192, pp. 383–403.

³⁹ Saadia Gouasmia and Elaggoune Abdelhak, "Understanding the Middle East's Centrality in US Foreign Policy", in *Dirasat Human & Social Sciences*, 2025, vol. 52, no. 3, p. 1–14.

⁴⁰ Mohamed Shueib Musse, "Counter-Terrorism Measures and National Security in Mogadishu, Somalia", Doctoral Dissertation, Kampala International University, 2023, p. 76.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Aishatu Bature and Hussein Abubakar Assidiq, "Terrorism: The Activities of Al-Shabbab and State Failure in Somalia: 2015–2020", in *International Journal of Law, Politics & Humanities Research*, 2023, vol. 27, no. 6, pp. 169–192.

⁴² Mohamed A. Abshir, "Role of Organizations in Promoting Peace and Stability in Somalia: A Study of the United Nations and African Union", Doctoral Dissertation, University of Nairobi, 2024, pp. 123–135.

⁴³ *Ibid.* (AUSSOM's mission is to stabilize the country and conduct security operations).

⁴⁴ Waqas Abdullah, Muhammad Ahmad and Ghilman Fatima Awan, "The Shifting Dynamics of Maritime Security in the Red Sea: Strategic Interests of Gulf States and External Powers", in *Journal of Media Horizons*, 2025, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 205–214.

⁴⁵ Hemn Shawkat Ali, "Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement and its Implications for the Security and Stability of the Middle East: A Case Study of Yemen and Syria", in *Jurnal Tapis: Teropong Aspirasi Politik Islam*, 2023, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 26–54.

⁴⁶ Muhammad Ahmad and Haleema Ali Khawaja, "US Role in Yemen Conflict: Implications for Regional Stability and Global Leadership", in *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 2025, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 389–401.

⁴⁷ Grzegorz Gil, "The Yemen Security Complex in the Middle East: Continuity and Change since 2004", in *Stosunki Międzynarodowe-International Relations*, 2025, vol. 5, p. 31.

⁴⁸ Katherine Zimmerman, "Yemen's Houthis and the Expansion of Iran's Axis of Resistance", American Enterprise Institute, 2022, pp. 13–18.

⁴⁹ Muhammad Waseem, "The Yemen Houthi-Saudi Conflict: Iran's Strategic Influence and the Impact of Disruptive Technologies", in *Social Science Review Archives*, 2025, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 2049–2061.

⁵⁰ Christian Ilcus, "The Red Sea: A Region in The Making – Is Your Wife a Hat MBS?", in *Journal of Economic Development & Global Markets*, 2025, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 13–24.

conciliation diplomacy in Somalia.⁵¹ But with deep internal clan tensions, al-Shabaab has emerged as an effective quasi-state actor. Doubts remain as to how well the recent Norwegian peace and reconciliation diplomacy has been informed by tribal and religious-ideological realities in Somalia, despite the large Somali diaspora in Norway.

Military aid has not eliminated al-Shabaab or the Houthis (far from it), and fragmented donor strategies cause further inefficiencies.⁵² Interventions often face resistance due to perceived external control. It may well be that some Westerners overrate military solutions and underestimate regional dynamics. This can alienate local actors and strengthen the insurgency. Al-Shabaab has not been eradicated by the militarized ‘War on Terror’ approach, and Somali federal government officials are often corrupt and clan-captured.⁵³ Trust, hybrid governance, and community ownership are essential for lasting peacebuilding in the region. It appears then that the Houthis and al-Shabaab have been empowered also through Western miscalculations in Somalia and Yemen.

6. Reconciliation, Peace and the Future

The overall picture is bleak. Political instability, ongoing conflicts, and humanitarian crises plague Somalia, with al-Shabaab insurgents posing persistent threats.⁵⁴ In Yemen, there is a prolonged civil war between the Houthis and the internationally-recognized government, resulting in widespread famine and disease. External influences have, to a certain extent, complicated peace and stability efforts in both countries. Iran has supported proxy groups to expand its influence. Its support for the Houthis in Yemen keeps the protracted civil war going. In Somalia, Iran pursues a broader strategy to gain a foothold in the Horn of Africa and counter Western interests.⁵⁵ Iran’s involvement in local conflicts feeds the flames of instability with the fuel of its so-called strategic efforts. In these troubled areas, this dynamic has further complicated international efforts to address humanitarian crises and achieve sustainable peace.

Western nations should counter Iranian influence in Somalia and Yemen by addressing security threats while promoting governance and economic development. A comprehensive strategy may include diplomacy, international peacebuilding support, humanitarian aid, intelligence-driven operations, maritime security coalitions, sanctions against arms transfers, and local governance reconciliation to combat al-Shabaab and the Houthis.⁵⁶ As part of this strategy, several pillars are emphasized: destroying cross-border networks, protecting civilians,

safeguarding shipping routes with maritime security, targeting revenue and smuggling sources financially, fostering community-led governance initiatives, enhancing societal resilience to climate impacts, and promoting multilateral diplomacy.⁵⁷ While addressing geopolitical risks, the focus must be on ensuring immediate humanitarian access, medium-term governance improvements, and long-term institutional stability. Trends indicate a shift toward more complex transnational conflicts, requiring adaptive approaches to address evolving threats.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

In Somalia and Yemen, Western stakeholders often rely heavily on military solutions and underestimate Iran’s influence tactics. Iran uses political, economic and cultural ties to gain support and destabilize opponents. By strategically using proxies and soft power, Iran maintains plausible deniability while exerting significant influence in conflict zones without direct military action. The alliance between the Houthis and al-Shabaab highlights Iran-backed transnational militancy, threatening maritime security and regional stability. Meanwhile, Western responses often fail to address local needs and the root socio-economic and political issues that help sustain such alliances, sometimes magnifying local grievances.

Military strategies and diplomatic efforts should go hand-in-hand to resolve these conflicts comprehensively. Failing to address local concerns and root issues may allow continuing cycles of instability and growing Iranian influence. Poverty, political exclusion and resource shortages must be recognized. To counter Iran’s influence and achieve lasting peace in the region, a thorough approach that focuses on the region’s needs is required. Somalia and Yemen should rebuild their local governance. It is also advisable to counter Iran’s support for the armed groups through sanctions and efforts to disrupt smuggling. Additionally, regional security co-operation can be strengthened, community resilience and development can be promoted, and strategic communication can be used to discredit extremist narratives. Mediating conflicts and tackling their root causes requires as much effort as military actions. Tensions related to the environment and climate must be taken into account. International co-operation and dialogue can help resolve underlying issues, but long-term stability depends on strengthening local governance and ensuring inclusive participation in decision-making.

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⁵¹ Magdalena Ratajczak and Natalia Broś, “Humanitarian Diplomacy: The Case of Switzerland and Sweden”, in *Politeja*, 2023, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 143–163.

⁵² Daisy Muibu and Yayedior Mbengue, “Somalia at a Crossroads: Resurgent Insurgents, Fragmented Politics, and the Uncertain Future of AUSSOM”, in *CTC Sentinel*, 2025, vol. 18, no. 5, pp. 2–6.

⁵³ Massimiliano Dosmo, “The Role of Insurgencies in Conditioning the State-Building Process of a Country: A Comparative Case Study between Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al-Shabaab in Somalia”, Master’s Thesis, Univerzita Karlova, 2024, pp. 57–71.

⁵⁴ Heather R. Cotter, “Three Decades of Conflict and Multiple, Concurrent Crises: Past, Present, and Future Challenges Impacting Somalia’s Stability”, 2022, p. 7.

⁵⁵ Viktor Marsai and Erzsébet N. Rózsa, “The Late-Comer Friend: Iranian Interests on the Horn of Africa”, in *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 2023, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 356–370.

⁵⁶ Thean Potgieter, “Maritime Counterterrorism in Africa: The Need for Proper Governance”, in János Besenyő, Moses B. Khanyile and David Vogel (eds.), *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in Modern Sub-Saharan Africa*, Springer Nature, Cham, 2024, pp. 127–168.

⁵⁷ Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly, “Cross-Border Cooperation: A Global Overview”, in *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 2022, vol. 47, no. 1, p. 4.



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