

Gulf Involvement in Africa: Motives and Implications

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The growing involvement of the Gulf states in Africa reflects their aspiration to establish new spheres of influence on the global stage while taking advantage of a window of opportunity created by the somewhat reduced American engagement on the continent. Alongside localized cooperation, the intensifying competition among Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar for influence in Africa is creating friction—notably in Sudan and the Horn of Africa—and reflects a struggle to define the contours of the emerging regional order. From the perspective of the African states, this trend is a double-edged sword: On the one hand, it offers opportunities for massive investment and modern infrastructure; on the other, it poses risks of economic dependency and external political interference that could exacerbate existing tensions or create new ones. For the Gulf states, Africa is gradually becoming a strategic arena—vital to their security, economies, and global standing—and also provides Israel with an opening for regional cooperation in confronting the challenges posed by Iran.

The increasing Gulf engagement in Africa mirrors a growing drive to seek new spheres of influence in a shifting global arena. Africa, rich in natural resources, a rapidly growing young population, and a strategic location controlling key maritime routes, has become a focal destination for the Gulf states in recent years. As traditional powers such as the United States pull back and Russia and China face economic headwinds, a window of opportunity has opened for the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. All three perceive the continent not only in terms of economic potential but also as a political and security sphere that enables them to extend their influence beyond the Middle East. This strategy rests on viewing Africa as an engine of growth: Its resources, emerging markets, and geographical location—between the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and the Atlantic Ocean—render the continent a vital arena for controlling global supply chains.

The UAE currently stands at the forefront of the Gulf's expansion in Africa. Since 2019, Emirati companies have reported deals [exceeding \\$110 billion](#) (about \$72 billion of which are in renewable energy)—the highest level of foreign investment on the continent. These investments focus on infrastructure, ports, and logistics. For example, DP World, the government-backed port giant, has invested billions in establishing free-trade zones and strategic ports, including the Berbera Port in Somaliland, where there is also an Emirati military presence. Additionally, the International Holding Company, a major Emirati conglomerate, has acquired control of copper mines in Zambia, with investments extending to Ethiopia, Egypt, and other states.

The Gulf's economic activity is closely linked to strategic and security considerations. Alongside infrastructure investments, the UAE has established military bases and a presence in key points along Africa's coasts. From the Emirati perspective, Africa serves as a theater for confronting both Iran and its proxies, as well as Islamist forces. Since the Saudi–Emirati war

against the Houthis, Abu Dhabi has invested in a military presence in the Horn of Africa and currently maintains significant footholds in Somaliland and Puntland (a federal state of Somalia that is effectively semi-independent). In addition, the UAE has become a principal backer of rebel forces in Sudan—driven by both economic motives and claims that Sudan’s government includes Islamist elements. This activity has provoked sharp criticism, including accusations against the UAE of supporting militias involved in war crimes. The crisis in Sudan even led to Sudan’s breaking its diplomatic relations with Abu Dhabi, with Sudan seeking to bring the UAE before the International Court of Justice, accusing it of aiding genocide committed by the rebels. Furthermore, the gold trade, which is estimated at about \$30 billion [annually passing through Dubai](#), has drawn allegations of blurring the line between legitimate and illicit sources. In response, the UAE has portrayed its actions as guided by humanitarian considerations and has emphasized the development of modern, transparent regulations designed to ensure [compliance with accepted international standards](#).

The waning engagement of major powers from the African continent [has contributed to strengthening Abu Dhabi’s foothold](#) there. China, which had been a dominant player in the previous decade through its Belt and Road Initiative, was forced to scale back its investments due to debt crises in African states and its own internal economic problems, although it remains a central actor in Africa. The United States, particularly during the Trump administration, cut back on aid, reduced USAID operations, and diminished its involvement in African financial institutions. In the absence of significant investments from Washington and Beijing, the UAE has succeeded in standing out as a major investor, with roughly \$97 billion in investments over the past two years—three times more than China and far exceeding that of the United States.

Alongside the UAE, Qatar operates mainly through soft diplomacy and investments in energy and infrastructure. Qatar views its ties with Africa as a source of diplomatic and economic support in the international system, aiming to expand its influence relative to its Gulf rivals, particularly the UAE. In addition to the continent’s vast economic potential, Qatar also seeks to reduce its dependency on gas revenues and to leverage its global standing through new partnerships.

Qatar’s position has strengthened in Sudan, Mozambique, and Tanzania, and it has played a mediating role in conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (where it closely cooperated with the Trump administration), as well as in South Sudan and Chad. In doing so, Qatar presents itself as an alternative to Abu Dhabi, using its status as a generally accepted mediator and seeking to overcome the isolation it experienced between 2017 and 2021. Al Jazeera, Qatar’s global media arm, has invested heavily in covering African issues, highlighting Qatar’s role in the region, and shaping narratives favorable to the country.

Doha recently announced an unprecedented investment plan of \$103 billion across six African countries. It includes the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which is to receive roughly \$21 billion mainly for mining, energy, and agriculture; Mozambique, about \$20 billion aimed at agriculture and energy development; Zambia and Zimbabwe, each to receive around \$19 billion focused on diverse sectors including oil and gas; and Botswana and Burundi, each slated for roughly \$12 billion. Botswana emphasizes infrastructure, diamond processing, tourism, cybersecurity, and security, while Burundi prioritizes energy, agriculture, and infrastructure.

The scale of these planned investments reflects Qatar’s ambition to secure access to critical resources and emerging markets. However, the implementation of these projects depends heavily on political stability, governance capacity, and the ability to manage large-scale projects in countries often burdened by weak institutions and limited infrastructure. Thus, these declarations represent only a first stage, and the real challenge lies in translating them into tangible results on the ground.

Saudi Arabia, for its part, has adopted a broader but more gradual approach. Riyadh is investing in agriculture, renewable energy, mining, and infrastructure—[primarily in East Africa and the Sahel Belt](#)—as part of its effort to ensure food security and expand its regional influence. For example, Saudi Arabia has planned to significantly expand its investment in the strategic port of Assab in Eritrea and announced its intention to increase overall investments on the continent to about \$25 billion in the coming years. Some of these projects are carried out in cooperation with international financial institutions and are aligned with Saudi Vision 2030, reflecting the kingdom’s ambition to secure food supplies, reduce dependence on oil, and leverage the strategic importance of the Red Sea. In addition, Saudi Arabia operates religious and humanitarian aid organizations, including the King Salman Center, which strengthen its cultural and religious presence. In doing so, it seeks to reinforce its position as a leading Muslim power with vast economic capabilities and a growing global profile.

At the same time, inadequate attention to local needs has led to protests against many projects and, in some cases, to their collapse, thereby damaging Saudi Arabia’s image. To achieve sustainable results, Riyadh will need to adjust its approach—to employ and train local workers, involve communities in decision-making processes, and channel part of the profits toward meeting essential needs such as water and electricity. This approach could help create a more balanced partnership that aligns Saudi Arabia’s strategic aspirations with the development goals of the Horn of Africa states, transforming its image from that of a suspicious external actor into a desirable partner.

The expanding engagement of the Gulf states in Africa has not been without tensions among them. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are reluctant to see Islamist influence on the continent, particularly that associated with Qatar and Turkey. Conversely, both Saudi Arabia and Qatar view the policies of the UAE as confrontational and rule-breaking, especially in the Somali and Sudanese arenas, where Abu Dhabi supports separatist elements contrary to the mainstream Arab stance. The Gulf competition for influence in Africa is expressed as a kind of investment race between the Gulf states, which in turn increases the value and leverage of African countries. Thus, the Gulf struggle over Africa unfolds on multiple fronts—economic and security-related, but also ideological and political.

The UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia each emphasize different priorities, but all recognize the continent as a strategic arena that can strengthen their global standing. For the African states themselves, this trend is ambiguous: On the one hand, it brings vital capital and investment, while on the other, it carries the risk of dependency, external political and security influence, and heightened tensions. Looking ahead, Gulf involvement in Africa is likely to deepen, driven by the Gulf states’ ongoing pursuit of global legitimacy, new sources of growth, and their desire to shape Africa into a strategic “backyard” essential to their long-term security.

From an Israeli perspective, since Israel and several Gulf states share overlapping interests in Africa—particularly in countering Iran’s influence and radical Islam—Israel can find opportunities for security and economic cooperation with them, especially in East Africa near the Red Sea and the Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen. However, Israel must act cautiously, as some Gulf states involved in Africa have faced failures or criticism, and any partnership with them could expose Israel to similar scrutiny.

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