
Middle East Institute Misreads Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in Africa

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In the September 2017 edition of its Policy Focus series, the Middle East Institute published *The Fight for Africa: The New Focus of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry*. Coauthored by Gerald Feierstein and Craig Greathead, the paper argues that the competing states Saudi Arabia and Iran are rapidly expanding their influence throughout Africa, spreading radical ideologies and, thus, creating new security threats on the continent.

The piece represents one in a series of articles since the outbreak of the Yemeni civil war in 2015, drawing attention to the perils of Gulf nations increasing diplomacy in Africa. However, this piece is somewhat unique in its focus, specifically, on the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran as they vie for influence on the continent.

Though the paper makes some points worth considering, those points are marred by numerous shortcomings, including speculation, error and illogical argumentation. Feierstein and Greathead include in one of their "Key Points" the assertion that "Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies have distanced the Horn of Africa from Iran through financial incentives." In the body of the text, they maintain that Iran once held a strong foothold in the Horn.

For instance, they argue that "Since 2015, the Iranians used access to Somalia as a principal gateway for smuggling arms and supplies to the Houthi rebels fighting against the Saudi-backed Yemeni government." This begs the question: where is the evidence that Iran had "access to Somalia"? No references are cited.

Additionally, they claim that "The use of Eritrean ports by the Iranian navy was a notable strategic asset for Iran as it offered the Islamic Republic a foothold in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, as well as a strong naval position in Saudi Arabia's backyard." Again, where is the evidence to substantiate this claim? Allegations of an Iranian military base or outpost in Assab, Eritrea are not new and have long shown to be false.

A number of Western and Israeli media outlets first made the allegation in early 2009. Eritrea has categorically and repeatedly denied the false allegations. Even with skepticism of Eritrea's official denial, one could still refute claims of an Iranian base in Assab on the basis of absurdity. On April 19, 2009, Tel Aviv-based Uzi Mahnaimi alleged in the *Sunday Times* that Eritrea bore not only an Iranian base but also a concurrent Israeli military presence: "Security sources say Israel and Iran are conducting rival intelligence operations in Eritrea, the poor African state on the Red Sea." Stratfor later repeated these allegations and in November that same year added that "According to STRATFOR sources, the traditional supply route Iran uses to arm the Houthis starts at Asab Harbor on the Eritrean coast. IRGC officers buy and transport weapons in Somalia and Eritrea, and then load them onto ships at the harbor." No conclusive satellite imagery was provided to substantiate these claims.

According to the Dubai-based English daily *Gulf News*, which became the first foreign newspaper to visit Eritrea's military camps and to investigate the claims of an Iranian presence in Eritrea, "we did not see any evidence or indication of the presence of any foreign forces...it was evident from my observation that the charges circulated by the foreign media against Eritrea were indeed baseless" ("Eritrea: In pursuit of the truth", Abdul Nabi Shaheen, *Gulf News*, April 21, 2010).

Unlike *Gulf News*, none of the sources making allegations of bases visited Eritrea or cited primary sources that visited Eritrea but rather were compiling their reports on the basis of widespread speculation following Eritrea's routine diplomatic engagement of either Iran or Israel. For example, with Israel's engagement of

Eritrea following de jure independence in 1993 and through the 2000s, many Arab newspapers speculated that Eritrea was in a strategic "Zionist" relationship with Israel. According to the Jeddah-based English daily *Arab News*, Eritrea was becoming the "most important strategic ally to the Zionist entity in every corner of the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea" ("How Israel Casts Its Dark Shadow Over Horn of Africa", Muhammed Salahuddin, *Arab News*, August 31, 2006).

Conversely, with Iran's brief boost in diplomatic engagement with Eritrea in 2008-2009, Western and Israeli papers began to speculate about anti-Israeli, pro-Houthi special military relationship with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. In 2012, the Asmara-based Eritrean Center for Strategic Studies published, in response to the crescendo of speculation, its *Eritrea: Phantom Israeli and Iranian Military Bases* report, clarifying the nature of Eritrea's relationship with Iran:

"Eritrea enjoys normative diplomatic ties with Iran. This is nothing extraordinary; neither is the relationship particularly close or special. Indeed, it is not different, by any measurable yardstick, from the warm diplomatic ties that Eritrea enjoys with all other countries in the Middle East. Eritrea has in fact resident embassies in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, the Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait while it is represented in Iran by a non-resident Ambassador. Furthermore, Iran has much deeper economic ties and resident embassies (which is not the case in Eritrea) with all other countries in the Horn of Africa; including Ethiopia, Djibouti and the Sudan. True, Eritrea had signed a loan agreement worth 25 million Euros with Iran in April 2009, during the visit of President Isaias to Tehran. But this amount is much smaller than Iranian development assistance or investments in Ethiopia or the Sudan. Furthermore, according to Eritrean Government sources, the loan, which was essentially a commercial credit to buy construction materials and other commodities from Iran, was not executed in time due to various administrative delays and was dropped altogether later."

Eritrea's unwillingness to pick sides in a major international feud has garnered much speculation as well as hostility toward Eritrea, perhaps in the hopes of those media outlets that Eritrea will decide in their favor.

In line with "damned if you, damned if you don't" thinking, the historical evidence suggests that any form of Eritrean state engagement of either Israel or Iran will, in spite of the lack of hard evidence, lead to wild speculation that Eritrea is favoring one side or the other.

Feierstein and Greathead's latest publication appears no different. Unfortunately, it repeats the yet-to-be-proven allegations of an Iranian presence and claims that Saudi Arabia and its allies have now replaced Iran.

They assert—as fact and without questioning—that there exists a Saudi-Emirati "jointly operated military base in Assab, Eritrea." However, Eritrea's Foreign Minister Osman Saleh Mohammed told Reuters in 2016 that the United Arab Emirates uses Eritrean "logistical facilities" rather than a military base per se ("Foreign help building Eritrea bases violates embargo: U.N. experts," Michelle Nichols, *Reuters*, November 4, 2016).

In May this year, Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki clarified his country's position on military bases:

"Discourse about 'a military base here or there' is a throwback to old times; it represents an outdated philosophy. We have no desire or appetite to entertain and resurrect concepts of military and security alliances [and] blocs in the Horn of Africa that existed not only in the past 25 years but also before and that did not contribute to regional and international peace. To create and pledge allegiance to this or that bloc is redundant philosophy and politics at this time. What is discussed now is outside this old framework. It is not about establishing military blocs. Obviously, fostering military and security cooperation is not a taboo. We all have our respective capabilities in this regard. The central issue is how we pool and leverage our respective resources. Essentially, these revolve around the exchange of information, identification of common threats and consultation on

joint tactics. This is not in fact a matter of choice but normative relations between all countries. Therefore, the cooperation between Eritrea and Egypt or Eritrea and other countries in the region, which aims at promoting stability, should not be surprising at all" ("We must further strengthen the multi-dimensional cooperation between Eritrea and Egypt,' President Isaias," Ministry of Information, Asmara, Eritrea, May 27, 2017.).

Asmara has indicated that the Eritrean state does not subscribe to polarized blocs and permanent military bases on the basis of a major power or ally requesting Eritrean facilities but, if there is a framework of strategic alliance and there are exigencies of national alliances, the state will not rule out those options.

Additionally, Feierstein and Greathead write, "Although Somalia has remained neutral in the Saudi-Emirati-Egyptian dispute with Qatar (and is therefore at risk of losing an \$80 million donation from the Saudis), Sudan, Eritrea, and Djibouti have all sided with Saudi Arabia and downgraded their relations with Qatar." This claim is not entirely true or, at the minimum, is speculative. There are no overt indications of a downgraded Eritrea-Qatar relationship as both countries have maintained unchanged diplomatic presences in Doha and Asmara.

Although Feierstein and Greathead are certainly correct to make the point that Iran and Saudi Arabia are increasingly vying for influence in Africa (as most states are), many of their claims regarding the specific means by which both are exerting their influence, particularly in the Horn of Africa, are unsubstantiated or false. The authors provide endnotes yet those endnotes are not cited within the body of the text, making it impossible to investigate the veracity of each claim. In spite of the lack of proper citation, many of the claims can be shown to be false under the eye of scrutiny. This is clearly demonstrated with the assertions made about Eritrea and Somalia.

By the end of the paper, one is led to believe that Iran and Saudi Arabia are simply buying allegiance in Africa and that, worse yet, their allegiance is of a social, ideological and religious nature rather than a geopolitical one primarily based on realpolitik and self-interest. In their analysis, it appears that African states cannot be disinterested actors in terms of ideology, which will ultimately lead to dangerous sectarianism:

"As Saudi Arabia and Iran continue to fund and construct mosques and centers for Islamic learning, the consequent spread of fundamentalist Shiite Islam and Wahhabism, coupled with weak state institutions, is radicalizing populations. Somalia serves as a prime example of the dangers of exporting conservative forms of Islam to weak or fledgling states in the African continent. As such, as Saudi Arabia and Iran expand their ideological battle, this rising sectarianism will lead to increasing security threats for several states throughout Africa."

Contrary to Feierstein and Greathead's views that Iranian and Saudi diplomatic competition is a negative for Africa it should instead be seen as a boon for the continent. Choosing to engage is ultimately up to each individual African state and decisions need not be made in ways that compromise those states' sovereignties.

If there is indeed any concern about the rise of sectarianism, perhaps given the history of Saudi Arabia or Iran in their respective spheres of influence, those concerns can be best addressed by pushing other state and non-state actors to diplomatically engage Africa with better incentives than those provided by the Iranians and Saudis.

It is an assumption by Feierstein and Greathead that African nations are incapable of engaging in diplomacy with Middle Eastern powers without succumbing to their influence or mortgaging national policy in exchange for financial assistance. To Feierstein and Greathead, it seems that even nations with a reputation for being "fiercely independent," as is clearly the case with Eritrea, are but geopolitical pawns and

pushovers. Though this may be the case with some particular African nation, it cannot be a sweeping assumption affixed to all African nations en masse.

Individual African nations have their own idiosyncratic policy presumptions, calculi and means of leverage. Despite the obvious power asymmetries between some African states and some more powerful Middle Eastern states, a number of African states can—and do—leverage their location, resources and other national advantages to advance their interests. These realities are not considered by Feierstein and Greathead's report and, thus, require more nuanced analysis of Saudi, Gulf and Iranian influence in Africa.

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Please direct all correspondence to the New Africa Institute at newafricainstitute@gmail.com.