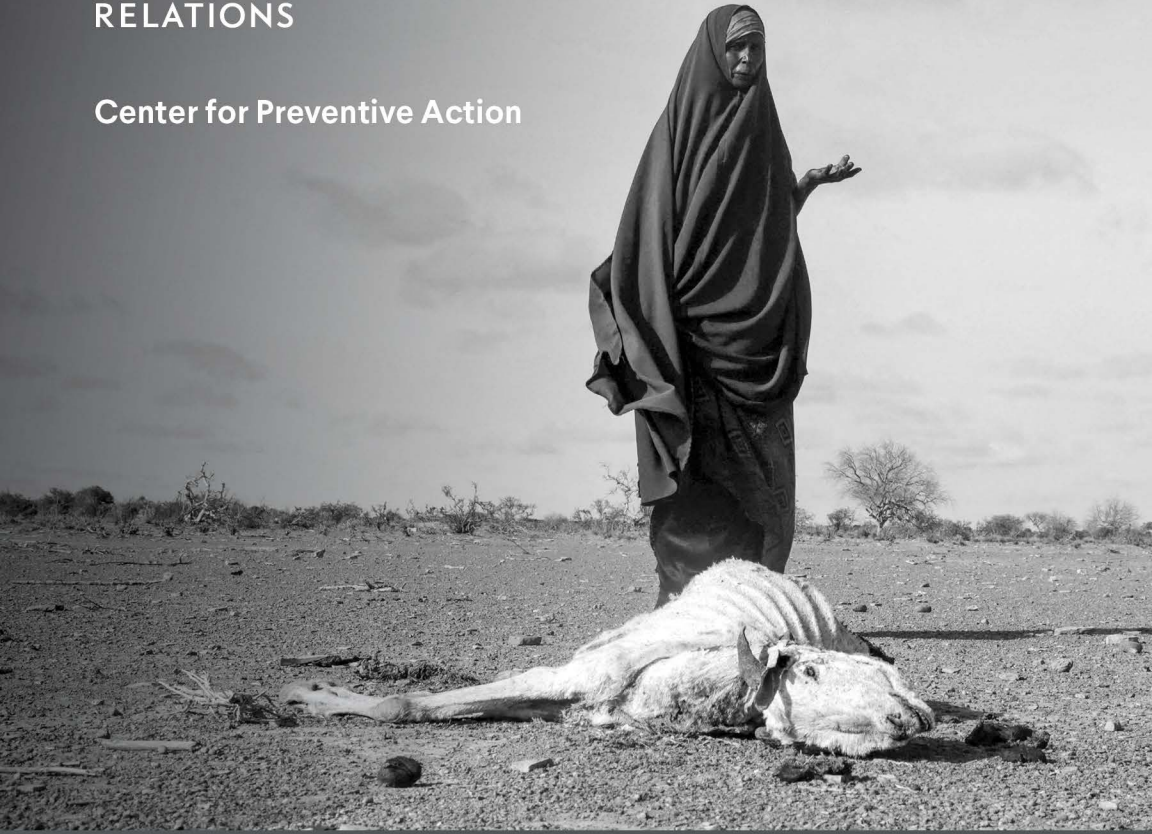


COUNCIL *on*  
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Center for Preventive Action



*Discussion Paper Series on Managing Global Disorder No. 10*  
*November 2022*

# Climate Change and Regional Instability in the Horn of Africa

Michelle D. Gavin

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# CONTENTS

- 1 Introduction
- 3 Assessing the Lay of the Land: Demographic, Economic, Political,  
and Environmental Conditions in the Horn
- 7 The Potential for Disorder
- 12 Consequences Beyond the Region
- 16 Recommendations
- 22 Conclusion
  
- 24 *Endnotes*
- 30 *Acknowledgments*
- 31 *About the Author*



# INTRODUCTION

Climate change and climate-induced migration in the Horn of Africa could seriously exacerbate security risks in the region. The sixth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reiterates the grim facts of climate change in Africa. The continent has contributed little (less than 4 percent) to total greenhouse gas emissions but has already suffered serious consequences, from biodiversity loss to reduced food production. In East Africa particularly, drought frequency has doubled.<sup>1</sup> Yet, between 2010 and 2018, most Horn countries received less than the average amount of climate adaptation funding per capita for lower-income countries, despite ranking at the top of climate vulnerability indices.<sup>2</sup> Not only is financing for adaptation measures insufficient, climate research in the region is under-resourced.<sup>3</sup>

For purposes of this discussion, the Horn of Africa region includes Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia (including the internationally unrecognized autonomous Republic of Somaliland), South Sudan, and Sudan—all of the member states of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) except for Uganda but inclusive of Eritrea, which has a complicated and somewhat ambiguous relationship with the subregional organization. This volatile and geostrategically significant region is extremely vulnerable to climate change, as it encompasses vast drylands, numerous pastoralist communities, multiple border disputes, unresolved trans-boundary water-rights issues, and porous land borders. The region also has a traumatic and politically contentious history with natural disaster, famine, and conflict, including the 1983–85 Ethiopian famine and the controversial 1992–93 humanitarian intervention in Somalia. In fact, the impetus for forming IGAD in 1986

was to address drought and desertification from a regional perspective, with peace and security issues added to the organization's mandate in 1996 due to the obvious interconnection of those issues.<sup>4</sup> The Horn's history informs and sometimes politically distorts perceptions of current climate-related threats.

Ongoing conflicts in the region add complexity to any effort to envision future scenarios. The Horn is not just at risk for conflict and instability—conflict and instability are its current reality. In Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan, multiple ongoing conflicts involve violent clashes between military and militia forces. The region already hosts nearly 2.9 million refugees and asylum seekers and over 12 million internally displaced persons.<sup>5</sup> The Horn is currently the site of one of the world's worst food insecurity crises; in August of 2022 the number of highly food-insecure people in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia reached twenty-two million, and some already face famine conditions.<sup>6</sup> Although conflict and crisis prevention is at the heart of efforts to identify interconnected climate and migration risks, for many in the region, the present is already characterized by insecurity, and the future by uncertainty.

Demographic, economic, political, and environmental pressures all intersect in the Horn of Africa, driving popular unrest and resource competition and destabilizing migration patterns that exacerbate tensions within and between states. Regional disorder will have implications far beyond the Horn, affecting the politics, security, and relative power of external actors and constraining the prospects for effective global governance. The United States and others should act now to mitigate those risks.

# *ASSESSING THE LAY OF THE LAND*

## *Demographic, Economic, Political, and Environmental Conditions in the Horn*

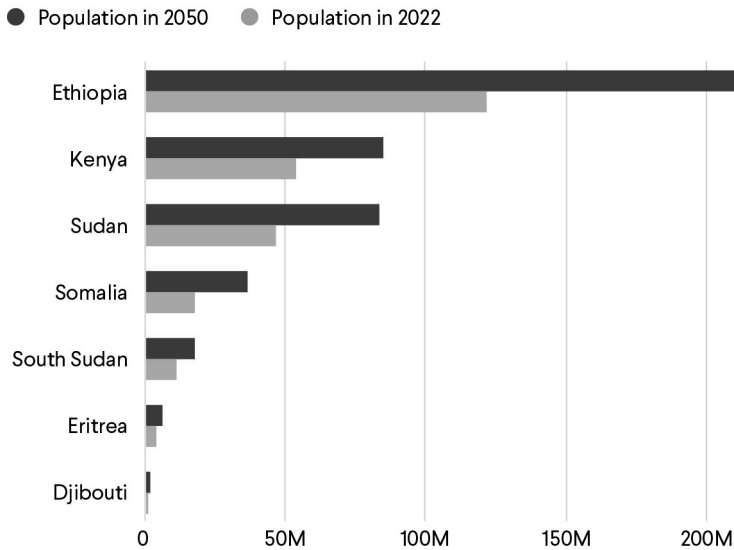
The Horn of Africa, like most of the continent, is characterized by rapidly growing and urbanizing populations (see figure 1). Many governments strain to deliver adequate social services and infrastructure to citizens, and those challenges, as well as the need to stimulate job creation, will only increase over time as these populations grow. Even without climate-induced resource scarcity, or increased competition for resources due to migration, the region's economies would be hard-pressed to grow at a pace commensurate with their populations.

### *ECONOMIC SUCCESSES AND STAGNATION*

In the last Human Development Index, four Horn countries ranked in the bottom twenty states in the world (Sudan, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Eritrea), and Somalia was not ranked at all due to insufficient data. The region's two most significant economies, those of Ethiopia and Kenya, illustrate the complexity of economic conditions in the Horn. Widely considered an economic success story through the 2000s due to years of impressive growth rates, Ethiopia made real strides in reducing poverty as an authoritarian development state, with the most recent data (from 2015) showing that just under a quarter of the population was living below the poverty line. However, growth was unequal, and poverty severity increased for the poorest rural Ethiopians even during the boom years.<sup>7</sup> After two years of costly war in Tigray and several years of drought, the World Bank expects that poverty rates have worsened, and should the country fail to stabilize, inflationary and debt burden pressures are likely to unwind some of Ethiopia's hard-won gains. In the Horn of Africa's most dynamic economy, Kenya, over 30 percent of Kenyans still live below the national poverty line, and inequality



Figure 1. HORN OF AFRICA POPULATION PROJECTIONS



Source: UN World Population Prospects 2022.

remains a difficult issue, particularly for pastoralist communities in the north where economic conditions have stagnated.<sup>8</sup>

The situation is far worse in the war-torn economies of Somalia and South Sudan. In Somalia, 70 percent of people were thought to have lived below the poverty line in 2021, with the internally displaced population of over two million experiencing some of the deepest poverty.<sup>9</sup> In South Sudan, World Bank projections suggest that 80 percent of the population could currently be living in poverty.<sup>10</sup> All of this leads to fragile food security situations in the best of times, but three years of drought for some parts of the Horn and floods in South Sudan have significantly worsened the situation.

In societies that depend heavily on agriculture, climate change can immediately affect people's livelihoods and well-being. Except for Djibouti, where the arid climate is ill suited to farming, agriculture remains an important sector in Horn economies. In Ethiopia, agriculture—the vast majority of which is rain-fed—is responsible for 40 percent of GDP, 80 percent of exports, and roughly three-quarters of the country's labor force, rendering Ethiopia especially sensitive to changing climatic conditions.<sup>11</sup> The World Bank estimates that in South Sudan, agriculture makes up 60 percent of all employment. In

Sudan that number is 38 percent, in Eritrea 68 percent, and in Somalia 80 percent.<sup>12</sup> The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) calls agriculture in Kenya “the backbone of the economy,” accounting for one-third of GDP and employing over 40 percent of the total population and 70 percent of the rural population, though notably, tourism, another vital part of the Kenyan economy, is also vulnerable to climate change.<sup>13</sup>

## *POLITICAL STRIFE*

If the economic conditions in the Horn can be described as challenging, despite the significant gains made in Ethiopia and Kenya since 2000 and the dynamism and innovation apparent in some sectors, then the political and security challenges are equally daunting. Over the past twenty-five years, the Horn of Africa has hosted numerous conflicts, from interstate wars such as that between Ethiopia and Eritrea from 1998 to 2000, to internal conflicts such as South Sudan’s civil war from 2013 to 2020. Internationally recognized terrorist organizations have long operated and conducted attacks in Somalia and Kenya. The region is home to two UN peacekeeping operations and an African Union (AU) peacekeeping mission that has been operating for over fifteen years. Simmering tensions around rights to Nile waters have repeatedly threatened to erupt into armed conflict.

Indeed, Somalia remains one of the world’s most fragile states, in which internationally recognized government authorities control a fraction of the country’s territory, and only with the protection of an African peacekeeping force (the rest of the country is controlled by various local authorities, largely autonomous forces, or the al-Shabab terrorist organization). Eritrea is a notably repressive and highly militarized dictatorship that has generated an outsized number of asylum seekers for its relatively small population.<sup>14</sup> In Ethiopia, conflict between the federal government and regional forces in Tigray has drawn in Eritrean troops and plunged millions of people into desperate food insecurity. Meanwhile, clashes in Benishangul-Gumuz, Oromia, and other regions of Ethiopia eat away at the integrity of the state. Unresolved issues surrounding the desirability of centralized power and what a just system of land allocation and political representation entails threaten to prompt further violence. Already, the upheaval has led to a dubious distinction: over 5.1 million Ethiopians became internally displaced in 2021, more displacements than ever recorded in one country in one year.<sup>15</sup> Ethiopia is also involved in a simmering border

dispute with Sudan, where the 2021 coup d'état hijacked a delicate political transition and pitted military authorities against civilian protesters in addition to reactivating conflict dynamics in Darfur. South Sudan, whose shaky 2018 peace agreement regularly threatens to collapse, is one of the world's most prolific generators of refugees.<sup>16</sup>

## *ENVIRONMENTAL VULNERABILITY*

The region is fragile environmentally as well as politically. Although Ethiopia and Kenya have variable climates with temperate zones, both countries are predominantly classified as arid and semiarid (85 percent of the country in Kenya's case), which is also true of Sudan and Eritrea. Somalia is 80 percent arid and semiarid, making it vulnerable to drought. In 2011, an especially severe drought killed over a quarter of a million Somalis. Despite the dry climate, the country also faces the risk of catastrophic flooding due to increasingly violent cyclones along Somalia's long coastline.<sup>17</sup> It is unsurprising that the new Somali president has appointed the country's first-ever special envoy for drought and climate change to elevate these existential issues in Somalia's foreign policy. Djibouti is 90 percent desert, and rising sea levels could cause saltwater intrusion into the aquifers that are currently a lifeline for its population.<sup>18</sup> South Sudan is far less dry than the other Horn countries but still suffers from alternating periods of drought and flooding; frequent floods increase the risk of waterborne diseases.<sup>19</sup> The Horn's many coastal communities are also vulnerable to the deterioration of marine ecosystems due to years of illicit waste disposal—often by actors originating far from the region—and rising temperatures.<sup>20</sup>

# THE POTENTIAL FOR DISORDER

Overall, conditions in the Horn present a perfect storm for climate-induced disruption and conflict. In *Foreign Affairs* in 2018, Joshua Busby and Nina von Uexkull identified the twenty countries most at risk for climate-related instability and crisis. They noted that a high level of dependence on agriculture, a history of conflict, and exclusionary political institutions heightened vulnerability. Four of the twenty they named were in the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan).<sup>21</sup> The nexus between climate and conflict has long been understood in the Horn; at the subregional level, IGAD's conflict early warning and early response mechanism acknowledges the importance of flagging conditions that increase the likelihood of cross-border pastoral conflicts—the same conflicts most directly linked to drought and communities' need to find new grazing land. Climate change can, and likely will, make conflict in the region more probable, whether by prompting hunger that exacerbates popular desperation and anger at authorities or perceived enemies, triggering conflict over scarce water or grazing resources, or prompting mass migration that leads to resource competition and social dislocation.

## POPULAR UNREST

Climate-induced scarcity, migration, or natural disaster can push already dissatisfied and frustrated populations to mass mobilizations, which could lead to, or be met with, violence. Dynamics that have little to do with climate change could set the stage, including ineffective service delivery, historical grievances, perceptions of corruption in government, or persistent insecurity—all factors present in various

degrees inside the countries of the Horn. However, climate change's consequences will put additional pressures on populations and their governments, likely beyond their capacity to cope without some degree of upheaval. The region has ample precedent for factors such as rising food prices to trigger serious unrest. It could take the form of populations demanding a change in government, just as hikes in bread prices sparked the 2018 Sudanese revolution. Rising tensions and household stresses can be channeled into anger at outgroup populations and create ethnic resentments, as is happening in Ethiopia. There, history, the heterogeneous nature of the population, and the competitive character of the ethno-federalist model all create vulnerability to this type of disorder. In Somalia, popular frustration with ineffective government has exacerbated radicalization and bolstered the fortunes of al-Shabab, the al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist organization that controls large swaths of the country. Popular discontent can topple dictators, but without effective governance, it can also empower extremists.

Likewise, prospective violent backlash from existing governments with well-established records of repression, including those in Eritrea, South Sudan, and Sudan, can turn an episode of unrest into a full-blown crisis. Because borders in the Horn are porous and many ethnic communities sprawl across national boundaries, the risk of civil conflict spreading from one state to another is significant.

## *RESOURCE COMPETITION*

The Horn of Africa is home to many pastoralist communities vulnerable to increasing competition and violence when scarcity of grazing land and water access force deviation from typical patterns of livelihood. Herder-farmer conflicts in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, and Sudan have intensified as climatic conditions grow more extreme. When elites take advantage by exacerbating those tensions for political gain, as has happened in some of Kenya's most violent and sophisticated cattle-raiding episodes, the fallout can be unpredictable, as heavily armed communities and ineffective policing shift power dynamics on the ground.

The Omo-Turkana Basin that stretches across the Ethiopia-Kenya border is the largest lake basin on the continent not governed by any cooperative water agreement and has been the site of repeated tensions as communities migrate in response to resource scarcity and government interventions.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, the Shabelle and Juba rivers that originate in Ethiopia are vital to Somalia's viability, but Ethiopian development plans could significantly affect the flow of water downstream

and collaboration on water management has been minimal.<sup>23</sup> Even where open interstate conflict seems unlikely, the prospect that states will protect their water resource interests by supporting armed proxies among neighbors is far more probable and has precedent in the region. Otherwise, the future could hold geopolitical tensions borne of suspicion about how one country's weather modification efforts could affect its neighbors. (Ethiopia is already experimenting with cloud seeding.<sup>24</sup>)

The water resource issue surrounding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, known as the GERD, is one of the largest concerns for Horn of Africa security experts. Long-standing disagreements over the allocation of Nile waters were revived in 2011, when Ethiopia began constructing the dam, a cherished national project primarily funded by the Ethiopian population itself. With just over half of Ethiopia's citizens enjoying access to electricity, the GERD, with its projected capacity of more than six thousand megawatts, is central to realizing the country's development ambitions.<sup>25</sup> When completed, it will be the largest hydroelectric project on the continent. Its popularity in an otherwise fractious domestic environment has given it great political significance, limiting Ethiopian leadership's political leeway to deviate from filling the dam during the next four to six years despite the concerns of neighboring countries.

Egypt, where the Nile is the primary source of fresh water, is already dealing with water scarcity due to population growth, climate change, and inadequate investment in water infrastructure, and sees the GERD as an existential threat to its population's security.<sup>26</sup> After decades of relying on a 1959 agreement with Sudan that allocated Nile water rights to the two countries, with no regard for Ethiopia or other riparian states, Egypt has struggled to find consensus with upstream governments to the south regarding a more equitable set of rules for managing Nile waters. Each country presents its own requirements: Egypt desires guarantees that Ethiopia would release sufficient water to meet Egyptian needs in drought years; Ethiopia wants to maintain the reliable power supplies necessary for a viable economic future; and Sudan requires predictability to manage its own water infrastructure. The Nile Basin Initiative, a ten-country intergovernmental partnership formed in 1999 to coordinate sustainable management and development of Nile waters, has not proven an effective forum for resolving the most pressing issues associated with the GERD; neither has the African Union thus far, though the UN Security Council supported continued AU mediation efforts in its first statement on the issue in September 2021.<sup>27</sup> Egypt has been unable to prevent Ethiopia from

proceeding with ongoing construction and using the GERD; the third phase of filling the dam proceeded as scheduled in August 2022.<sup>28</sup>

Egypt's concerns regarding the GERD, and the stake that many external actors have in ensuring the Egyptian state does not collapse, increase the risk of direct interstate conflict, indirect proxy attacks, or sabotage. Despite a 2015 "declaration of principles" committing all parties to peaceful resolution of disputes about the dam, both Cairo and Addis Ababa have used saber-rattling rhetoric and made intensive efforts to woo influential Sudanese actors to their respective sides. The dispute fuels external support for competing factions within Ethiopia and Sudan, contributing to the fragility of those states.<sup>29</sup>

Some analysts argue that the resolution (or lack thereof) of the GERD dispute will set a template for the region's trans-boundary water management in the decades ahead.<sup>30</sup> The issue's influence could extend well beyond the region; the reservations that India's permanent representative expressed about the UN Security Council's 2021 statement of support clearly indicate discomfort with the notion of the Security Council's involvement in trans-boundary water disputes.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, a future in which states sharing water resources undermine and destabilize each other is a profoundly unattractive proposition.

## *DESTABILIZING MIGRATIONS*

Migration can be a sensible adaptation to climate change. However, sudden, massive migrations can also be profoundly difficult for transit and recipient communities to absorb. The Horn of Africa currently hosts over 2.9 million refugees. If Uganda, which hosts many persons from Horn countries, is included, the number of refugees approaches 4.5 million. An additional twelve million people are displaced, largely in Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan.<sup>32</sup> Those large movements of people will likely continue in the decades ahead; populations will be even larger, climatic conditions more challenging, and resource competition fiercer. Although many countries in the region have responded commendably to those populations in need, the tensions they have produced to date are instructive. For example, some in the Kenyan security services view the large Somali refugee community in Kenya as a source of instability and potential infiltration by terrorist operatives, a sensitive issue given Kenya's painful experiences with terrorism. That framing has also led to standoffs with other states over international norms governing refugees, and even expeditionary military strategies supporting the creation of a semiautonomous buffer region in Somalia

known as Jubaland, further drawing Kenya into Somali political and security dynamics. Recipient states' tendency to conflate large movements of migrants with the security threats emanating from their countries of origin can exacerbate rather than calm conflicts.

Finally, these types of destabilizing trends reinforce each other. Cycles of multiple displacements deplete household resources and resilience; once people are living on the margins with no savings or ability to absorb shocks, disruptions they could otherwise manage become grave emergencies. Population movements increase the risk of heightened competition for resources in host communities. In a vicious cycle, the environment is further degraded by conflict and upheaval. That is why building systems of resilience and adaptation will only get more difficult should the region tip further toward disorder. Not only does climate change serve as a threat multiplier to conflict, but conflict can also interfere with efforts to cope with climate change. Policymakers will have to grapple with the difficulty of building lasting capacity in an extremely volatile region. Politics and conflict do not stop while the world organizes itself to contend with higher temperatures, rising sea levels, and more frequent and intense natural disasters.

Nevertheless, working to build climate resilience amid instability is far easier said than done, and many adaptation efforts in the region have been derailed or even destroyed by the current turmoil. The charcoal trade in Somalia has, in the past, both contributed to environmental degradation and profited al-Shabab. Efforts to ban the trade met with limited enthusiasm when changes in conditions on the ground meant its profits began to benefit factions aligned against the terrorist group.<sup>33</sup> In Sudan, the UN Environment Program's efforts to bolster national capacity to address climate-related security risks have been repeatedly disrupted, first by the 2019 revolution that prompted turnover in the officials that had been trained, and then by the 2021 coup that again halted activity.<sup>34</sup> In Ethiopia's Tigray region, hard-won gains in landscape restoration and reforestation were rolled back by the conflict that broke out in November 2020, as the Ethiopian government's strategy of siege in Tigray deprived the population of alternative fuel sources to wood, prompting new deforestation.<sup>35</sup> When conflict is unleashed, efforts to address the climate crisis too often move backward, creating a dismal cycle.



# CONSEQUENCES BEYOND THE REGION

In addition to the moral disaster of millions of civilians plunged into circumstances of violent conflict and life-threatening deprivation, disorder in the Horn of Africa creates real risks for contagion and security consequences far beyond the region.

**Bolstering ethno-nationalism.** Today, the Horn's substantial migration flows occur largely within individual states or within the region. However, state collapse in countries the size of Ethiopia or Sudan is bound to trigger sizeable refugee flows that will extend beyond East Africa—much as the Syrian refugee crisis, which implicated a far smaller population, was not contained within the Middle East. Resulting pressures on Europe could breathe new wind into the sails of ethno-nationalists and set back efforts to combat democratic decline.

**Providing opportunities for malign actors.** The strategic significance of the region also makes it ripe for opportunistic actors to take advantage of instability. Violent extremist organizations, most notably al-Shabab, already operate across boundaries in the region and have formalized links to global terrorist organizations. The many drawbacks of previous attempts to address those threats in places with weak or absent governance do not change the fact that these forces threaten U.S. interests and those of many other states, to the point of motivating U.S. military forces to reenter Somalia in 2022.<sup>36</sup> Particularly given the importance of freedom of navigation in the Red Sea, through which some 10 percent of the world's commerce passes, attacks that compromise maritime security in the region would have global implications, including for U.S. ability to project power in the Indian Ocean.<sup>37</sup>

An increasingly ungoverned Horn also provides lucrative opportunities for illicit trafficking in arms, narcotics, and people.

**Influencing major power rivalry.** If the era commencing with Russia's invasion of Ukraine is to be characterized by intensified geostrategic competition and increasingly audacious disregard for international norms and laws in pursuit of influence and advantage, an up-for-grabs Horn of Africa promises to attract multiple suitors. As the U.S. Africa Command's deputy commander said, "We clearly know that environmental change is a driver of instability, and we recognize that other entities—whether we call them competitors or adversaries—are going to take advantage of that."<sup>38</sup> The region is already the site of intense geopolitical competition, hosting China's only permanent expeditionary military presence in Djibouti, as well as U.S., French, Italian, Turkish, and even Japanese forces. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates play an active, sometimes competitive role in the region's political, economic, and security arrangements. Russia is supporting factions of Sudan's security establishment to gain a foothold in the region, including a naval base at Port Sudan. In 2020, the U.S. Institute of Peace's Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena found that "the Horn of Africa is now an integral part of and in fact the link among the security systems of the Middle East, the Indo Pacific, and the Mediterranean by virtue of the strategic importance of and competition for influence over the Red Sea and the states that border and depend upon it for trade and transit."<sup>39</sup> Disorder in the Horn promises to accelerate that jockeying for influence, raising the risk of proxy conflict and potentially benefiting actors such as Russia who

have historically accessed resources and projected power for cheap by co-opting fragile regimes to expand their presence globally.

**Increasing resentment toward historic emitters.** The United States, China, and Europe should prepare for the politics of grievance and resentment regarding historic carbon emissions to gain new currency in the Horn. The reality of the historical record is hard to ignore; the world's largest economies bear outsized responsibility for total carbon emissions and experience fewer of their consequences. A politically astute leader could deploy those facts in a bid to rally people around a common enemy, deflect blame for scarcity and suffering, demand compensation, and dismiss other policy priorities and concerns articulated by those wealthy external powers. Likewise, in a region as geopolitically competitive as the Horn, external powers themselves could find it useful to reinforce convenient messages about who is to blame for climate-induced hardships and who is responsible for addressing their consequences.

Other external powers are also at risk. Numerous states, including India, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, have leased over nine hundred thousand hectares (roughly 2.2 million acres) of fertile land in Ethiopia, both to cultivate biofuels for a green economy and hedge food security threats in their own societies.<sup>40</sup> Many of those same actors have pursued similar investment strategies in Sudan and South Sudan. Land tenure can be a politically explosive issue in the region; many of the country's current communal conflicts are linked to disputes over access to land. In periods of scarcity, the notion of reserving fertile land for foreign interests is bound to sow resentment and reinforce the notion that the international system values African lives less than the prosperity of wealthier regions.<sup>41</sup> As food security issues rise on the global agenda in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the temptation for rich countries to hedge against future scarcity by acquiring fertile African land grows stronger, and the importance of state transparency and institutional arrangements governing land tenure in the interest of citizens grows ever more important.

**Undermining global governance norms.** Disorder and deprivation in the Horn of Africa will also set back efforts to update international institutions and global governance to reflect African priorities. As African populations grow, accounting for one-quarter of the world's people by 2050, and the anachronisms that give Africa relatively little

influence in the international system grow increasingly glaring and unsustainable, it would be tragic if African states lacked the leadership to assert the region's equities on the global stage. However, leaders of states consumed with civil conflict and humanitarian crisis are unlikely to be effective global champions.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The road ahead in the Horn of Africa will undoubtedly be rocky, but the United States can take steps to decrease the likelihood of worst-case scenarios, strengthen regional capacity to adapt to climate change and capitalize on green-economy opportunities, and maintain the possibility of beneficial, collaborative relationships in the Horn. The recommendations below have implications beyond the Horn region, because addressing the nexus of climate and conflict requires new thinking about both foreign policy priorities and implementation mechanisms.

**Elevate conflict resolution and peace-building.** Climate change does not just increase the likelihood of conflict; conflict makes building more resilient societies difficult and can create a downward spiral. Perhaps the single most important intervention that external powers can make in the Horn to lessen the likelihood of climate and migration-induced disorder is to redouble diplomatic peace-building efforts at the interstate and intrastate levels and sustain them over time. Much of the violence and instability gripping the region now is not a temporary phenomenon but rather springs from unresolved questions around governance, from how to manage heterogeneous societies to how to mitigate center-periphery tensions. Sustainably addressing those tensions requires supporting African peacemakers and civil society and bolstering diplomatic capacity, including mediation-support capacity, in the region and ensuring it has active support at the highest levels in Washington. External actors interested in stability in the Horn should also focus on improving policing, which could be as important as, if not more important than, strengthening military forces in the region.

**Update foreign assistance approaches.** USAID's capacity to respond nimbly and innovatively to potential crises in the Horn is severely constrained because of the programmatic directives associated with most of its budget. The United States risks bankrolling public health and humanitarian relief initiatives at the expense of the preventative work in natural resource management, community-level conflict resolution, resilient agriculture, and disaster preparedness that could help prevent worst-case scenarios from becoming real crises. USAID has real depth on those issues, as evidenced by the Horn of Africa Resilience Network it established over a decade ago to strengthen regional cooperation and outcomes around resilience, but budget and manpower allocations do not reflect the urgency of that work.<sup>42</sup> Across the board, donors are aware that prevention is essential and are trying to shift their approach to drought and famine in the region from one of crisis response to a sustainable development-focused strategy to build resilience.<sup>43</sup> Numerous and largely effective early-warning systems exist, but local and international capacity to respond effectively to the signals those systems send is lagging.<sup>44</sup> Making this shift successful requires flexibility in how resources are used, and that, in turn, requires intensive congressional involvement and greater trust between executive-branch agencies implementing foreign assistance programs and the legislators charged with funding them.

**Mainstream and integrate climate sensitivity.** Given the far-reaching consequences of climate change, the United States and other external actors should continue supporting efforts to mainstream climate sensitivity in bilateral and multilateral programs and interventions on the

continent. The Horn is in the vanguard in this area: in 2020, the UN Security Council called for climate considerations and risk management strategies to be integrated into all UN activities in Somalia, and Christophe Hodder was appointed as the UN climate security and environmental advisor to Somalia, a first-of-its-kind position.<sup>45</sup> Ensuring that peace-building and development strategies are climate sensitive also requires building new skills and sharing knowledge among foreign policy professionals, and incentivizing that workforce to develop this expertise.

**Democratize climate awareness and prioritize gender inclusion.** The United States should support local efforts to raise awareness among the diverse populations of the Horn about the global climate crisis and the local action to address it. A recent analysis of conventional and social media revealed that African societies, including those in the Horn, are deeply concerned about climate issues and inclined to support policies that address and prevent the worst consequences of climate change.<sup>46</sup> This is a strong basis from which to build an agenda with broad support. The stronger and more widespread the baseline of shared facts and understandings about climate-related issues, the greater the likelihood of popular support for mitigation and adaptation interventions. Particularly in societies such as Ethiopia, where identity is closely linked to land, climate change-related policies can be exquisitely politically sensitive, requiring significant consultation and consensus.

Including women and girls' perspectives and contributions in conversations about climate and adaptation strategies is especially important. As the African Union noted in March 2022 when member states adopted a common position regarding gender inclusion's importance in climate action, women's livelihoods in the region tend to be especially climate sensitive, and women often face barriers to accessing land and credit, making them particularly vulnerable in situations where climatic conditions change household circumstances.<sup>47</sup> Effective community-level climate policy options will invariably require the insight and buy-in of women, who play a substantial role in the agricultural sector.

A widely shared understanding of the challenge could also lessen the efficacy of efforts to scapegoat specific populations in situations of resource scarcity. However, external powers eager for influence in the region, including the United States and China, should also prepare for popular anger regarding their carbon emissions and as-yet-insufficient support for African states suffering the consequences of climate change.

**Be responsible climate actors.** To mitigate risks, powers such as the United States should work assiduously to reduce their carbon emissions and to fulfill their adaptation and resilience financing pledges. The Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 makes important headway toward the former goal, but much work remains to mobilize resources and honor international commitments. Developed economies have failed to meet the target of mobilizing \$100 billion a year starting in 2020 and failed to devote a sufficient portion of the resources they did commit to adaptation efforts in the most vulnerable countries.<sup>48</sup> The United States has stood out as particularly laggardly, and although the Joe Biden administration has made new pledges to increase U.S. financing of adaptation to \$3 billion a year by 2024, that is still an insufficient commitment from an economy as sizeable as that of the United States to meet global targets.<sup>49</sup> The politics of mobilizing more significant support for adaptation and resilience efforts abroad are unquestionably difficult, and helping lawmakers understand the link between traditional security threats and climate-induced disorder will be an important piece of the puzzle. When it becomes clear to leaders that loss and damage in the Horn and elsewhere will have costly consequences for the United States, it will be easier to reckon with African efforts to institutionalize financing to cope with the climate disasters that are, at this point, unavoidable. The best antidote to resentment of the West is a serious effort to lead a meaningful international response with resources and action, not just rhetoric.

**Acknowledge African energy needs.** Climate sensitivity cannot mean insisting that an aversion to carbon emissions tightly constrain the goal of increasing access to power in the region, which is essential to the job creation and economic growth required to accommodate growing populations. The hypocrisy of continuing to develop fossil fuel projects domestically while refusing to finance them abroad in places such as the Horn, where access to power is scarce, is not lost on policymakers or citizens in the region. Although the clean-energy potential of the Horn (and its proven performance in states such as Kenya, where already 90 percent of electricity in use comes from green sources) is exciting and deserving of attention and support, with geothermal, solar, hydropower, and wind prospects of significance, the overall energy mix will have to include some fossil fuel projects.<sup>50</sup> Major global powers should shoulder the burden required to bring down total emissions even while acknowledging that Africa's share, for the foreseeable future, will increase.



When it comes to the GERD, that means balancing long-standing U.S. commitments to Egyptian stability with acceptance of Ethiopia's genuine energy needs, and recognition that African states cannot be expected to subordinate their interests today to anachronistic, colonial-era regimes that simply ignored their equities. After the Donald Trump administration's ill-fated intervention in GERD diplomacy, the United States lacks the credibility to lead the charge for a negotiated agreement.<sup>51</sup> It can, however, continue to encourage mediation and support the African Union's capacity to be effective, as well as address other external powers' concerns about the relative costs and benefits of international involvement in this issue and discourage interventions that promote forum shopping and diffuse diplomatic energy.

**Ensure adequate support for Somaliland.** Somaliland is suffering from the consequences of climate change and increased drought frequency, which are driving up rural-to-urban migration and putting additional pressures on the state.<sup>52</sup> Somaliland's ambiguous legal status should not act as a barrier to accessing appropriate international support, including from the Green Climate Fund, and participating in global forums for sharing best practices and adaptation agenda-setting. As the most stable part of Somalia and a potential developing democracy, Somaliland's continued success is an important element of any lasting strategy to build accountable, stable political systems in the most volatile part of the Horn.

**Support subregional and African institutions and civil society.** When it comes to stabilizing the political environment in the Horn, the influence of external actors pales in comparison to local leadership and the potential of regional commitment to manage trans-boundary tensions. IGAD, for all its flaws, inefficiencies, and evasions, is the only game in town at the subregional level; various proposed alternatives that include Gulf actors around a Red Sea arena would introduce a degree of economic inequality unlikely to serve the interests of African stability and prosperity. Stabilization will take time and political will among member states to make IGAD a more effective forum for addressing the many peace and security issues bedeviling the region. More immediately, however, IGAD is also an essential mechanism for managing the complex trans-boundary issues raised by climate change and climate-induced migration. The IGAD Protocol on the free movement of people and transhumance can be an important building block for constructing rule-based guardrails to manage the inevitable

migratory flows of the future.<sup>53</sup> The Kampala Ministerial Declaration on Migration, Environment and Climate Change, signed by IGAD and East African Community members in July 2022, establishes important priorities and commitments that should inform the support that partners provide.<sup>54</sup>

The African Union acknowledges the risks posed by climate change in its peace and security architecture, but its ten-year Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan expressly frames climate resilience as “a central aspect of achieving sustainable development,” illustrating how climate discourse is sometimes stovepiped into either security or development channels, and proactive approaches are sometimes divorced from peacemaking agendas.<sup>55</sup> The African Union’s mediation efforts need ongoing support to manage flashpoints in the region. In addition, the AU’s African Risk Capacity (ARC) Group is doing important work to develop evidence-based recommendations and policy playbooks for AU member states to cope with the consequences of climate change, ensuring technical capacity is a shared resource. That too merits support.

In addition, numerous African scientists, activists, and community leaders are working on research, policy proposals, and citizen-led initiatives to address the climate crisis affecting livelihoods and stability in their communities. Regional organizations such as the Pastoral and Environmental Network in the Horn of Africa, and broader groups like the Pan-African Climate Justice Alliance, are both closer to the problem and more sensitive to the constraints governing local and national policies. Support for those African voices is one of the most important investments external actors can make to identify viable paths to sustainable peace in the region.

# CONCLUSION

The contentious issues currently driving conflict in the Horn of Africa are unlikely to be resolved quickly, and increasing pressures—including climate pressures—will ensure that new challenges continue to emerge when states and communities eventually resolve current conflicts. Ultimately, African leadership will be the most consequential factor in determining whether the future of the Horn is one of disorder or cooperative adaptation and innovation in a new green economy. When former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon asserted that climate change was partly responsible for the horrifying violence that erupted in Darfur in 2003, activists feared he let Sudanese leaders off the hook, painting a picture of natural disaster rather than state-sponsored genocide.<sup>56</sup> His point was not to obscure decision-makers' responsibility, however, but to illuminate how environmental stressors contribute to conflict, and, critically, how those factors have to be considered in a politically negotiated peace. Leaders can either prioritize resilience, conflict prevention, and conflict resolution or they can use resource competition or in-group–out-group dynamics to stoke tension and distract citizens from other issues, including from government failures. Politics matter, and in no scenario are they put on hold while climate resilience strategies take root.

For external actors with real stakes in the Horn's stability, encouraging the politics of peace, and the regional mechanisms that support conflict prevention and resolution, should be a top priority, along with offering practical assistance to increase resilience over time. Deft diplomacy and a greater appreciation for the interests of actors on the ground can also help avert unnecessary conflict. For the United States, playing an effective supporting role will require significant domestic

effort to better organize U.S. foreign policy tools, prioritize resources, and strategize on longer time horizons to avoid being too late to make a difference. Ultimately, real climate leadership will also require ambitious new foreign policy thinking that centers global regeneration as a top-tier priority.

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*Cover photo: Internally displaced Somali woman Habiba Bile stands near the carcass of her dead goat on May 26, 2022, following severe droughts near Dolow in Somalia's Gedo region. (Feisal Omar/Reuters)*

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