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Bridging the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa

Strengthening Partnerships for Sustainable Development

Selected Contributions from
the WASSAP Graduate Conference

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List of Acronyms

ADFD	Abu Dhabi Fund for Development
ADNOC	Abu Dhabi National Oil Company
ADQ	Abu Dhabi Developmental Holding Company PJSC
AED	United Arab Emirates Dirham
AGII	Africa Green Industrialization Initiative
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ASAL	Arid and Semi-Arid Land
AU	African Union
CEPA	Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement
CEWARN	Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism
CISSA	Committee of Intelligence and Security Services of Africa
CMF	Combined Maritime Forces
COP28	2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference
CSP	Concentrated Solar Power
CTF	Counterterrorism Financing
DEWA	Dubai Electricity and Water Authority
DNI	Direct Normal Irradiation
EAC	East African Community
ENOC	Emirates National Oil Company
ESG	Environmental, Social, and Governance
EU	European Union
FATF	Financial Action Task Force
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FIU	Financial Intelligence Unit
G42	Group 42
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GW	Gigawatt
ICEPCVE	IGAD Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ICU	Islamic Courts Union
IEA	International Energy Agency
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMO	International Maritime Organization
INTERPOL	International Criminal Police Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISSP	IGAD Security Sector Program
JCTSS	Joint Centre for Transnational Security Studies
JGSCF	Joint IGAD-GCC Security Cooperation Framework
JSTF	Joint Security Task Force
JTIC	Joint Tech Investigations Cell
KIPPRA	Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis
KNEC	Kenya National Energy Compact
kt	Kiloton
kWh	Kilowatt-hour
LAPSSET	Lamu Port–South Sudan–Ethiopia Transport Corridor
LAS	League of Arab States
LMCP	Last Mile Connectivity Project
LTS	Long-Term Strategy
LTWP	Lake Turkana Wind Power
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MDA	Maritime Domain Awareness
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MW	Megawatt
MWp	Megawatt-peak
NDC	Nationally Determined Contributions
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OSINT	Open-Source Intelligence
P/CVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

PGEC	Pertamina Geothermal Energy Company
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
PV	Photovoltaic
RCCM	Regional Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism
RCP	Regional Consultative Process on Migration
REREC	Rural Electrification and Renewable Energy Corporation
RMSC	Red Sea Maritime Security Command
RSCT	Regional Security Complex Theory
SACCO	Savings and Credit Cooperative Organization
SASRA	SACCO Societies Regulatory Authority
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SWANA	Southwest Asia and North Africa
SWF	Sovereign Wealth Fund
TFTC	Terrorist Financing Targeting Centre
TNOC	Transnational Organized Crime
TWh	Terawatt-hour
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNTOC	United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	United States Dollar

Introduction

In late 2023, attacks on shipping in the Red Sea forced commercial vessels to abandon one of the world's busiest trade arteries, rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope and disrupting supply chains far beyond the waters where the strikes occurred. The episode was a vivid reminder that the Red Sea is not a boundary between West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, but a shared and contested space that binds the two regions together. Relations between them are now drawing renewed scholarly and political attention. Recent developments, such as next rounds of escalation involving Iran, the disruption of strategic maritime routes since 2023, and growing strains across the Gulf's political and energy landscape, have brought into sharper view how events in one region rarely remain confined to it. In particular, disruptions of maritime chokepoints such as the Bab al-Mandab undermine regional security, economic resilience, and global trade and energy supplies. Across the Horn of Africa and beyond, Gulf actors are present in ways that are at once cooperative, strategic, and contested. From diplomacy and labor mobility to investment and security, these evolving ties have become consequential for both regions and for a wider international order in flux.

Against this backdrop, this volume of publications, as part of CARPO's West Asian and Sub-Saharan African Partnerships in Flux (WASSAP) project, examines the multidimensional relations between West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. The WASSAP project explores how the political, economic, cultural, and security dimensions of this engagement unfold across patterns of cooperation and contestation, seeking to understand not only the opportunities these dynamics create but also the asymmetries, competing interests, and wider regional implications that accompany them. The present collection grows out of this agenda and its collaborative academic practice. Its immediate origin lies in the WASSAP conference held in Nairobi in April 2025, an early milestone in the growing partnership between CARPO and the University of Nairobi. Dr Oscar M. Otele, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at the University of Nairobi, and his team played a crucial role in fostering this collaboration, working closely on the joint process that shaped both the event and the development of the papers. Discussions in Nairobi ranged across security, labor mobility, diplomacy, and cross-regional cooperation, creating a productive setting for intellectual exchange. The four papers gathered here grew out of that setting and were written by students of the University of Nairobi in close engagement with the questions the conference raised.

A note on terminology is in order at the outset: This volume adopts "West Asia" as its framing, in keeping with the orientation of the project from which it emerges, while individual contributions retain "Middle East" or "SWANA". We have preserved these choices rather than imposing uniformity, since each reflects a distinct analytical and political vantage point – as does the reference to "Sub-Saharan Africa".

Across these four contributions, the volume approaches the changing relations between West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa from distinct but complementary angles, taking up themes that range from regional security and peacebuilding to labor mobility and energy cooperation. Together they do not claim to map the field in its entirety, but they capture some of its most pressing analytical and policy concerns. What gives the collection its value is that these analyses are advanced by students and early-career scholars from the University of Nairobi, whose perspectives are grounded in proximity to the contexts they examine.

The volume first turns to the institutional and policy dimensions of regional security in Barrack Ogada and George Katete's paper titled *Strengthening Regional Security in the IGAD Region: A Policy Perspective on Middle East-IGAD Collaboration*. The authors address shared security challenges – such as terrorism, human trafficking, and maritime insecurity – that are currently managed in fragmented and uneven ways. They argue for moving beyond reactive, largely bilateral responses toward institutionalized cooperation between IGAD and Middle Eastern actors, including joint task forces and harmonized mechanisms for intelligence-sharing and policy coordination. Their contribution thus places the question of how the two regions can cooperate more effectively within a concrete institutional and policy setting.

From this regional perspective, the volume then turns to a particular bilateral relationship in Philip Kaudo and Mollyne Achilla's *Labor Mobility and Economic Implications for Kenya-Saudi Arabia Relations*. Drawing on the growing bilateral labor agreements between the two countries, the paper weighs their economic significance, including employment opportunities and remittance flows, against the serious tensions that accompany them – from labor exploitation to inadequate regulatory safeguards. By anchoring broader debates in one of the most consequential migration corridors between the two regions, it makes visible the entanglement of opportunity and inequality that runs through these ties.

The volume next addresses energy relations between Kenya and the United Arab Emirates in Phelix O. Adwar and Tonny O. Ogutu's *Beyond Oil Diplomacy: Expanding Kenya-United Arab Emirates Renewable Energy Partnership*. The authors contend that fossil-fuel priorities have come to dominate the bilateral agenda and narrow the scope of engagement. They point to substantial untapped potential in renewable energy, where infrastructural deficits, financing gaps, and policy misalignments might be addressed through more diversified forms of cooperation – a constructive, forward-looking view of how interregional ties could be reshaped.

The volume closes with Nekesa Margaret Wabwile's *Rethinking Regional Security: Linking the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa for Sustainable Peacebuilding*. Bringing together many of the questions raised by the preceding contributions, Wabwile calls for a more relational and regionally led approach to security and peacebuilding across the two regions. Tracing inherited divides back to colonial spatial logics, she argues that security is best understood as something produced across linked spaces rather than within sealed-off regional categories. Her attention to shared vulnerabilities, spatial interdependence, and regional agency provides a broader conceptual lens through which to reflect on the institutional, economic, and bilateral dynamics explored in the other contributions.

By bringing these contributions into a wider conversation on relations between West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, this CARPO Report underscores the value of sustained academic collaboration across institutions and regions and adds to the growing body of research on these interregional ties. It also illustrates why institutional settings that enable dialogue, partnership, and exchange remain vital to the field's further development.

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Strengthening Regional Security in the IGAD Region: A Policy Perspective on Middle East and IGAD Collaboration

Barrack Ogada and George Katete

This policy paper examines the dynamics, challenges, and opportunities of security cooperation between the East African Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and Middle Eastern states, with a focus on counterterrorism and anti-human-trafficking initiatives. Using Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as the guiding analytical framework, the argument contends that security in the IGAD region is closely linked to developments in the Middle East because of geographical proximity, shared threats, and historical connections. The analysis shows that Middle Eastern countries – particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates – have supported security efforts in IGAD member states through military training, intelligence sharing, and funding for stabilization initiatives. However, these partnerships remain fragmented and inconsistent, often driven by individual geopolitical interests rather than a collective approach.

Ongoing threats, such as al-Shabab terrorism and human-trafficking networks, exploit porous borders, weak governance, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities across both regions. Institutional weaknesses, donor reliance, and competing national priorities within IGAD and the Middle Eastern blocs limit the effectiveness of these efforts. Nonetheless, opportunities exist to enhance cooperation through joint security agreements, formalized intelligence sharing, counter-radicalization programs, and harmonized migration policies. The paper concludes that a formalized Middle East-IGAD Security Cooperation Framework is urgently required. This should include a Joint Security Task Force, shared counterterrorism and anti-trafficking units, and mechanisms for policy coordination and cooperation. By institutionalizing cooperation, both regions can enhance crisis response, mitigate transnational threats, and foster long-term regional stability.

Keywords: IGAD–Middle East cooperation, counterterrorism, human trafficking, regional security, intelligence sharing, Regional Security Complex Theory

Introduction

Regional security cooperation has become a crucial strategy for tackling transnational threats such as terrorism, human trafficking, armed conflict, and political instability. In East Africa, the Intergovernmental Authority on

Development (IGAD) – which includes Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda – continues to face security challenges (Dersso, 2014). These challenges are closely linked to developments in the Middle East, especially within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the League of Arab States (LAS). The two regions are connected by geographical proximity, historical ties, economic interdependence, and cross-border migration, all of which shape their shared security environment.

In recent years, Middle Eastern countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar, have increased their involvement in counterterrorism, conflict mediation, and anti-human trafficking efforts (Asiri, 2024). For example, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have supported stabilization efforts in Somalia by providing funding and training to local forces. At the same time, Qatar has played a mediating role in Sudan and Somalia (Mesfin, 2016). Despite these efforts, cooperation remains informal and fragmented, often driven by differing geopolitical interests and weak institutional frameworks, as in the case of Somalia (Farah & Akinola, 2024).

The lack of a formal regional security framework further hinders coordinated responses to cross-border threats such as al-Shabab terrorism and human trafficking. Understanding the nature, effectiveness, and limitations of this cooperation is vital for creating sustainable security partnerships. Consequently, this policy paper examines the impact of IGAD–Middle East collaboration on regional stability, assesses its success in addressing common threats, and explores institutional and strategic opportunities for better coordination. The following questions guide the study:

- How does security cooperation between IGAD and Middle Eastern states affect regional stability?
- What are the main challenges preventing effective collaboration?
- What opportunities can be utilized to develop a more coordinated and sustainable security framework?

By addressing these questions, this policy paper aims to provide policymakers, regional organizations, and development partners with actionable insights to support a coherent, inclusive, and institutionalized approach to regional security governance across the Horn of Africa and the Middle East.

The Complexities of Regional Security

This policy paper employs Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as its primary analytical framework to examine security cooperation between IGAD and the Middle Eastern countries. Developed by Buzan and

Wæver (2003), RSCT posits that most security threats are regional rather than global and that states within a geographical area are interconnected through security interdependence, in which the security conditions of neighboring states significantly influence a given country's security. According to RSCT, a regional security complex develops when the security concerns of a group of states are so intertwined that none can attain stability independently. The Horn of Africa and the Middle East form an overlapping security complex due to shared threats, including terrorism, human trafficking, and irregular migration, all of which cross borders and require joint responses (Lijnders & Robinson, 2013; Gregson, 2020; Donelli & Gonzalez-Levaggi, 2021). The theory is based on four key assumptions relevant to this study.

1. **Security interdependence**: Security threats are more influenced by regional dynamics than by global ones. Instability in Somalia, for example, has spillover effects in Kenya and Ethiopia and affects migration and security policies in Gulf states (Marsai & Szalai, 2023).
2. **Geographic proximity**: The proximity between IGAD states and the Arabian Peninsula facilitates both legitimate trade and illegal activities, including arms smuggling, terrorism, and human trafficking (Ali, 2024).
3. **Internal and external drivers**: Security is affected by domestic governance issues (e.g., weak institutions, corruption) and by external influences (e.g., Gulf military training or aid) (Askari, 2025).
4. **Role of regional powers**: States such as Kenya and Ethiopia in IGAD, and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar in the Middle East serve as key actors shaping regional security agendas and alliances (Gebru et al., 2023; Farah Hersi & Akinola, 2024).

RSCT is particularly valuable for this analysis because it shows how common threats, such as al-Shabab terrorism and trafficking networks, create mutual vulnerabilities and necessitate collective action. It also explains why Middle Eastern states have a vested interest in IGAD's stability, as regional insecurity can undermine their economic and political interests along the Red Sea corridor. However, RSCT has limitations. It tends to highlight state-centric interactions and may underestimate the importance of non-state actors, such as militant groups, trafficking syndicates, and international organizations (Wheeler & Booth, 2008). Additionally, it assumes relatively stable regional boundaries, which may not be accurate in the Horn-Gulf nexus, where maritime routes and global economic linkages obscure regional lines (Mabon & Mason, 2022). To address these gaps, RSCT should be supplemented with insights from transnational security studies and inter-regionalism theory, which acknowledge the complexity of cross-regional interactions beyond state actors. Nonetheless, RSCT offers a comprehensive framework for understanding why security cooperation between IGAD states and Middle Eastern countries is both essential and challenging, given regional interdependence yet hindered by geopolitical rivalries and institutional limitations.

Terrorism

Terrorism remains one of the most pressing and persistent security threats to both the IGAD region and the Middle East. The Center for Preventive Action (2025) observes that the al-Shabab insurgency, linked to al-Qa'ida, continues to destabilize Somalia and carry out cross-border attacks in Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia, undermining state authority and regional development. This observation is reinforced by Botha & Abdile (2014) in their study, *Radicalization and al-Shabaab Recruitment in Somalia*. The group's operations are sustained by illicit financial networks, recruitment across porous borders, and ideological influence partly derived from extremist movements (Odhiambo et al., 2025).

According to the IGAD Security Sector Program (ISSP), terrorism in the region is not limited to a single state. Rather, it exists within a regional ecosystem driven by shared vulnerabilities, including weak governance, high youth unemployment, and porous borders. In 2023, the IGAD Executive Secretary, Dr. Workneh Gebeyehu, highlighted 2023 as the critical year for the fight against terrorism in Somalia. He urged IGAD member states and the international community to scale support (Gebeyehu, 2023).

Gebeyehu further highlighted that IGAD would continue working with partners within the IGAD, the AU, the EU, and the UN framework to coordinate joint efforts towards ensuring peace, security and development. He acknowledged the support of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, particularly the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This underscores the urgent need for institutionalized cooperation between IGAD and Middle Eastern partners who face similar ideological and operational threats.

The Gulf Cooperation Council views the Horn of Africa as a vital front in the fight against terrorism. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have offered military training, intelligence sharing, and financial aid to African states (Kinkoh, 2024; Ministry of Defense Kenya, 2025). At the same time, Qatar has facilitated mediation efforts and counter-radicalization programs. For example, the Saudi-UAE Counterterrorism Initiative in Somalia, launched in 2021, aimed to dismantle al-Shabab's logistical networks and support community policing in Mogadishu and Kismayo (Arab Center, Washington DC, 2024).

Similarly, the UAE has trained Somalia's special forces and supplied equipment for border surveillance (Tactics Institute for Security and Counterterrorism, 2024), while Saudi Arabia has improved intelligence-sharing frameworks with Nairobi (Ministry of Defense Kenya, 2025). Despite these efforts, cooperation remains fractured and inconsistent, largely shaped by geopolitical rivalry among Gulf states. Turkey and Qatar, for instance, endorse alternative security arrangements in Somalia that sometimes conflict with Saudi-UAE priorities (Huliaras & Kalantzakos, 2017). This divergence has led to overlapping interventions, duplication of resources, and policy incoherence, weakening the effectiveness of regional security outcomes (Hastel & Hofmann, 2019; Morgan, 2019).

Furthermore, several Gulf-based charities and private financiers have been accused of unknowingly supporting extremist networks through unregulated donations, prompting international scrutiny (Sovereign Group, 2023; Issa, 2024; Coates Ulrichsen, 2025). While Gulf states have tightened counterterrorism financing (CTF) frameworks, including through the Terrorist Financing Targeting Centre (TFTC), implementation gaps persist, allowing extremist groups to exploit jurisdictional loopholes.

Financial Action Task Force (FATF) President Elisa de Anda Madrazo observed that continued abuse of the financial system poses a serious threat to global security and undermines international peace. She advocated the use of intelligence to build a stronger picture of threats and harness the tools available through the FATF Global Network to strengthen international cooperation and intelligence sharing (FATF, 2025).

In response, IGAD has strengthened its Regional Strategy 2021–2025, which prioritizes counterterrorism, border management, and deradicalization programs. The IGAD Center of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (ICEPCVE), based in Djibouti, promotes community-based interventions focused on youth, religious leaders, and women's groups (IGAD Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, n.d.; Intergovernmental Authority on Development [IGAD], 2021). Similarly, the GCC has expressed a commitment to deepen collaboration with IGAD member states, such as Somalia and Sudan, on security to foster regional stability (Gulf Cooperation Council, 2024).

However, these positive developments face implementation challenges. Ongoing institutional weaknesses, overreliance on donor funding, and limited interoperability among security agencies in IGAD and the GCC hinder joint operations (Khalifa, 2024; Farole, 2018). Additionally, local grievances, including political exclusion, corruption, and socioeconomic marginalization, continue to fuel radicalization. This underscores the need to combine security measures with governance and development reforms (Mwangi, 2023). To improve effectiveness, stakeholders should prioritize:

- Institutionalizing intelligence-sharing frameworks between IGAD and GCC states.
- Establishing joint counterterrorism task forces with coordinated operational doctrines.
- Investing in community-led counter-radicalization initiatives, particularly in border counties and coastal zones.
- Monitoring financial flows across both regions to disrupt extremist financing networks.

Addressing terrorism within the IGAD–Middle East security complex requires a multi-layered strategy that integrates military collaboration, financial oversight, and socioeconomic resilience, all grounded in mutual trust and shared accountability.

Human Trafficking

Human trafficking remains one of the most widespread transnational security threats linking the IGAD region and the Middle East. It flourishes amid political instability, economic hardship, and weak governance within IGAD states, as well as labor demand and regulatory gaps in Gulf countries. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023) reports a sharp increase in trafficking cases along the Eastern Route, with thousands of migrants – mainly from Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, and Sudan – being trafficked to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar for forced labor and domestic servitude. Furthermore, UNODC (2024) highlights a sharp increase of about 25% in organized crime incidents between 2020 and 2022, with human trafficking accounting for a significant share.

The Gulf states serve as both destinations and, in some cases, transit hubs for trafficked persons. Labor systems such as the Kafala (sponsorship), still widespread in several GCC states, have faced criticism for enabling forced labor, passport confiscation, and wage exploitation (Begum, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2017). Although reforms have been introduced, such as Qatar's removal of exit permits and Saudi Arabia's Labor Reform Initiative, enforcement remains inconsistent, and migrant workers from the IGAD region continue facing structural vulnerabilities (International Labour Organization, 2023).

On the IGAD side, weak border surveillance, corruption, and poverty worsen the crisis. Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan are among the central source countries, while Djibouti and Kenya serve as transit points (IOM, 2024). Traffickers exploit irregular migration channels across the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, exposing migrants to extortion, sexual abuse, and deadly sea crossings. Moreover, the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2025) reported that the number of movements tracked through Flow Monitoring along the Eastern Route increased by 13% between 2023 (395,000) and 2024 (446,194). This increase was observed despite the heightened presence of Djibouti and Yemen coast guards in the Gulf of Aden during the year, as well as military operations and forced returns from the coast of Lahj, which disrupted flows along the route.

In response, IGAD has adopted several regional instruments, notably the IGAD Regional Migration Policy Framework (2012) and the IGAD Transhumance Protocol (2021), to regulate mobility and prevent exploitation. IGAD's Regional Consultative Process on Migration (RCP) has also facilitated dialogue with her Gulf counterparts on labor migration management and anti-trafficking strategies (Intergovernmental Authority on Development, 2024). Conversely, GCC countries have increased cooperation with international organizations. For example, Qatar's Ministry of Labor, in partnership with ILO, launched the Labor Reform Program to enhance worker protections and grievance mechanisms (ILO, 2023). Similarly, the UAE has enacted Federal Decree-Law No. 9 of 2022, which expands legal coverage for domestic workers and establishes channels for reporting abuse (UAE Ministry of Human Resources, 2023). Despite these reforms, several challenges persist:

- Fragmented legal frameworks across IGAD and GCC states hinder prosecution and victim repatriation.
- Limited data sharing and weak financial intelligence enable traffickers to operate across borders.
- Socioeconomic push factors, including unemployment and conflict, continue to drive irregular migration.
- Insufficient victim protection mechanisms, particularly for women and children.

Stakeholders recognize the complexity of this challenge. The GCC emphasizes the need to harmonize labor systems with international standards and to strengthen collaborative mechanisms with African partners to address and disrupt human trafficking networks (GCC, 2024). Similarly, IOM noted that the strategy for the Middle East and Horn of Africa "provides a gender-sensitive framework for engaging with partners to facilitate mobility; promote inclusion; provide assistance and protection to people at risk or affected by crisis; mitigate drivers of, and promote durable solutions to, displacement and irregular migration." (IOM, 2021).

Moving forward, effective strategies should include:

- Joint IGAD-GCC Anti-Trafficking Task Forces for intelligence sharing and coordinated operations.
- Harmonized labor migration policies aligned with ILO Conventions 97 and 143 and the abolition of exploitative sponsorship systems.
- Cross-regional data platforms for monitoring trafficking networks and victims' cases.
- Investing in safe migration pathways and economic empowerment initiatives in source communities.
- Involvement of civil society and survivors' networks in policy development and oversight.

Combating human trafficking requires a multifaceted, rights-oriented approach that integrates security cooperation, labor governance, and social justice, grounded in shared accountability between the IGAD and GCC regions.

Geographical Proximity and Historical Ties

The geographical proximity and historical ties between the Horn of Africa region and the Middle East have long shaped their security interdependence. Separated only by the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, these regions have been connected through trade, migration, and religious exchange since pre-Islamic and early Islamic times (Trimingham, 2007). These connections continue to shape modern economic, political, and security dynamics. Geographically, the Red Sea corridor serves as both a bridge and a boundary, facilitating legitimate trade and cultural exchange while also enabling illicit networks engaged in arms trafficking, piracy, terrorism, and human trafficking (Farah & Akinola, 2024).

The proximity of IGAD states such as Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Sudan to Gulf nations like Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the UAE makes them particularly vulnerable to cross-border spillovers. For example, the ongoing crises in Yemen and Sudan continue to cause significant humanitarian suffering and pose serious regional security threats to both the Middle East and the IGAD region. In Yemen, the protracted conflict involving the Iran-aligned Houthis and various government and regional forces has led to state collapse, worsened food insecurity, and sustained armed fragmentation, with spillover effects evident in maritime insecurity along the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, a crucial global trade route (Susilowati et al., 2025).

In Sudan, the war between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces has devastated civilian life, displaced millions, and weakened an already fragile state at the center of the Horn of Africa (Milton et al., 2025;

Ahmed et al., 2026). These conflicts strain IGAD's regional stability by fueling refugee flows into neighboring countries, enabling the spread of arms and non-state armed groups, and undermining collective security and mediation efforts. Meanwhile, instability in both areas increases Middle Eastern insecurity by intersecting with broader geopolitical rivalries, threatening Red Sea security, and creating opportunities for transnational crime and extremist networks. These ongoing wars are thus not only national tragedies but also interconnected regional crises with wide-ranging consequences for peace, security, and governance across two strategically important regions.

Historically, religious and cultural ties have also promoted movement across the corridor. Islam's early expansion into the Horn of Africa, facilitated by Arabian traders and missionaries, established lasting networks of kinship and religious solidarity (Huliaras & Kalantzakos, 2017). These connections facilitate both legitimate diaspora links and, paradoxically, the spread of extremist ideologies and financial flows that militant groups operating in the Horn of Africa exploit. According to the United States Department of State report on Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism efforts, Saudi authorities continued to emphasize the role of religious engagement, ideological moderation, and faith-based initiatives in countering extremist narratives and preventing radicalization (United States Department of State, 2023). This corroborates the Middle East Institute's (2012) observations on Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism initiatives.

The Red Sea has also become a focal point of geopolitical rivalry. Gulf states have expanded their presence through military bases, port investments, and development aid, including the UAE's bases in Assab (Eritrea) and Berbera (Somaliland), and Saudi Arabia's economic partnerships in Sudan and Djibouti (Vertin, 2019). While these activities improve regional connectivity, they also create rivalries that hinder coordinated security efforts. The African Union Commission (2023) warns that external rivalries risk turning the Red Sea into a zone of proxy competition rather than a zone of cooperative security.

From a security governance perspective, geographical proximity necessitates joint maritime surveillance, coordinated border management, and shared early warning systems. The IGAD Coastal Security Initiative (2024), launched in partnership with the GCC, aims to establish joint naval patrols, intelligence sharing, and capacity-building programs for coastguards across Djibouti, Somalia, and Sudan. For example, to operationalize the initiative, IGAD held a high-level meeting on December 17–18, 2024, in Mombasa, Kenya, to operationalize the Regional Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (RCCM). The GCC affirmed that stability in the Horn of Africa is essential to the security of Gulf waters. The Council observed that its partnership with IGAD must evolve into a structured maritime alliance (GCC, 2024).

Additionally, historical trade and labor migration routes among Ethiopia, Sudan, and the Arabian Peninsula have shaped current migration flows. However, these same routes are exploited by traffickers, creating dual-use corridors where legitimate economic activities coexist with illicit operations. This underscores the importance of cross-regional regulation and harmonized migration policies. Geographical proximity and historical ties are both assets and liabilities. They foster deep interdependence that can be harnessed for cooperative security, yet they also enable transnational threats when governance gaps persist. Effective collaboration must therefore balance historical solidarity with modern institutional coordination, ensuring that shared geography becomes a source of collective stability rather than vulnerability.

Challenges

Although notable progress has been made in developing IGAD–Middle East security partnerships, several institutional, structural, and political obstacles continue to hinder effective collaboration. These issues can be categorized into institutional weaknesses, geopolitical rivalries, fragmented legal systems, resource limitations, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities.

Institutional Weaknesses and Capacity Gaps

Many IGAD member states face challenges stemming from fragile governance institutions, limited bureaucratic capacity, and poor coordination among national and regional agencies (Farole, 2018). For instance, border surveillance, intelligence sharing, and maritime policing remain underdeveloped due to overlapping mandates and insufficient resources. States such as Sudan and Somalia, among others, suffer from weak institutions, limited bureaucratic capacity, and a lack of political will to implement regional agreements. This is often linked to a "governance deficit" and a lack of legitimacy, with states sometimes prioritizing regime security over public service delivery. Transnational security threats (terrorism, illegal arms trade) are amplified by the porous nature of borders such as the Kenya-Somalia and Ethiopia-Somalia borders. Border surveillance and maritime policing remain underdeveloped, while intelligence sharing is hampered by historical mistrust and a lack of coordination among national agencies.

Similarly, organizations in the Middle East, such as the GCC and the League of Arab States, face challenges in achieving policy harmonization due to divergent national interests among member states. An IGAD Secretariat report (2023) notes that weak institutional linkages and fragmented operational frameworks have hindered the implementation of joint security initiatives. The African Union shares these concerns, noting that inadequate coordination among IGAD, the AU, and the GCC has led to duplicated efforts and missed opportunities for synergy (AU, 2023; Magoke & Öke, 2023; Sudan Horizon, 2024). Moreover, the 2003 GCC customs union remains only partially implemented. Disagreements over issues such as the Arab Spring and political Islam have led to cold wars within the GCC, including the so-called Gulf crisis between 2017 and 2021 and recent tensions between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The Arab League is often described as suffering from a failure of design, with limited ability to manage regional conflicts or generate effective cooperation in political and economic spheres.

Geopolitical Rivalries and Competing Interests

Security cooperation is complicated by geopolitical rivalry among Gulf states. The strategic rivalry among Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar manifests in different approaches to security engagement in the Horn of Africa. These rivalries influence partnerships with IGAD states and often lead to parallel security programs rather than coordinated frameworks. For instance, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have emphasized counterterrorism and port infrastructure investments, while Qatar and Turkey have focused on political mediation and humanitarian engagement. The result is policy fragmentation and competition for influence, which weakens collective action.

Fragmented Legal and Policy Frameworks

IGAD and GCC states operate under different legal frameworks for counterterrorism, anti-trafficking, and migration management. This inconsistency complicates joint enforcement, prosecution, and victim repatriation. For example, while IGAD has adopted the Transhumance Protocol (2021) and the Regional Migration Policy Framework, implementation remains uneven across member states. Similarly, GCC countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia have implemented labor law reforms. However, key structural barriers, such as the Kafala system, persist (Aref, 2021; Musharbash, 2025). The absence of harmonized laws and operational standards weakens accountability and allows traffickers and extremists to exploit jurisdictional gaps.

Resource and Financial Constraints

Sustained security cooperation requires substantial financial and technical resources, yet both IGAD and GCC states face budgetary pressures and donor dependence. More than 60% of IGAD’s security programming is funded by external partners, including the EU and UNDP, which limits ownership and sustainability. Even in the Gulf, despite the UAE and Saudi Arabia’s substantial resources, collective GCC funding mechanisms for cross-regional security remain underdeveloped. The GCC Secretary-General (2024) acknowledged that financial contributions to interregional programs remain uneven, limiting the scale of cooperation with African partners (Dowlah, 2024; Apostolov, 2026).

Table 1: Summary of Key Challenges

Challenge Area	Impact	Stakeholder Acknowledgement
Institutional Weaknesses	Delayed implementation; poor coordination	IGAD (2023); AU (2023)
Geopolitical Rivalries	Parallel interventions; policy incoherence	Vertin (2019); Elmi (2021)
Legal Fragmentation	Enforcement gaps; jurisdictional loopholes	UNODC (2023); IGAD (2023)
Resource Constraints	Donor dependency; limited sustainability	IGAD (2022); GCC (2024)
Socioeconomic Drivers	Persistent radicalization and migration vulnerabilities	UNDP (2022); Lind et al. (2021)

Addressing these systemic and cross-cutting challenges is essential to establishing an effective, institutionalized IGAD-GCC security partnership capable of addressing transnational threats in a sustainable and coordinated manner.

Opportunities

Despite the challenges facing IGAD–Middle East security cooperation, several strategic opportunities can be leveraged to build a more coherent, effective, and institutionalized security partnership. These opportunities include institutional reforms, technological innovation, policy harmonization, and multi-level engagement among states, regional organizations, and civil society actors.

Institutionalizing Joint Security Frameworks

One of the most promising opportunities is to formalize security cooperation through a Joint IGAD-GCC Security Cooperation Framework, which could build on and align existing instruments within both blocs. On the IGAD side, this includes the IGAD Peace and Security Strategy (2021–2025), the IGAD Strategy for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE), the Regional Migration Policy Framework, and the IGAD Transnational Organized Crime (TNOC) Strategy, all of which emphasize counterterrorism coordination, anti-trafficking efforts, and integrated border management.

On the GCC side, a complementary foundation already exists through the GCC Counterterrorism Strategy (adopted in 2002, updated in 2014), the GCC Joint Security Agreement, the GCC Anti-Money Laundering and Counter-Terrorist Financing Framework, and the GCC Unified Visa and Border Security initiatives, which are geared toward harmonizing security databases and movement controls among member states. A Joint IGAD-GCC Security Cooperation Framework could thus create mechanisms to synchronize these policies, such as joint P/CVE programs, coordinated actions against human trafficking networks, interoperable border-management systems, and regular summits or joint task forces, enabling both regions to develop a more cohesive response to shared threats across the Red Sea region.

Strengthening Intelligence Sharing and Early Warning Systems

Creating real-time intelligence-sharing mechanisms offers a critical opportunity to improve early detection of terrorist cells, trafficking routes, and maritime security threats across the Red Sea corridor. IGAD's Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN) already provides a functional platform for cross-border monitoring that could be directly linked to national intelligence agencies in the GCC, INTERPOL databases, and the Committee of Intelligence and Security Services of Africa (CISSA), an increasingly influential AU-affiliated body that facilitates continent-wide intelligence coordination.

By integrating CEWARN's field-based reporting with CISSA's continental threat analysis and the GCC's sophisticated surveillance and maritime-security capabilities, both regions could build a shared, multidimensional picture of emerging risks. Establishing joint intelligence fusion centers, for example, one in Djibouti to leverage IGAD's regional presence and another in Manama to anchor GCC participation, would promote real-time data exchange, harmonized threat assessments, and coordinated operational responses. The African Union's 2023 call for expanded cross-regional intelligence collaboration further strengthens the case for an IGAD-GCC-CISSA triangular partnership that reduces duplication, enhances situational awareness, and enables faster, more coherent action against transnational threats.

Leveraging Technology for Transnational Threats

Technological innovation offers powerful opportunities to address rapidly evolving security challenges in the Red Sea region. New tools, such as Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT), AI-assisted surveillance, digital forensics, and blockchain-based tracking, can significantly improve efforts to identify illegal financial flows, disrupt online recruitment networks, and track trafficking routes in real time. The United Arab Emirates' AI-powered border-management system, which incorporates INTERPOL Red Notices, biometric verification, and automated risk assessment, offers a practical model that could be adapted for high-risk IGAD border points, especially along migration and smuggling routes. A coordinated Joint Tech Investigations Cell (JTIC) linking IGAD's CEWARN analytical capabilities with GCC cyber- and digital-security units would further strengthen cross-regional cooperation by enabling joint monitoring of tech-enabled extremism, coordinated dismantling of trafficking networks, and shared investigations into terrorist financing. This strategy would help both regions develop a more agile, data-driven approach to combat transnational threats that increasingly operate in digital and hybrid environments.

Harmonizing Legal and Policy Frameworks

Both regions can benefit significantly by aligning their legal and policy approaches to transnational threats with international standards, such as the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and the Palermo Protocol, particularly in mutual legal assistance, extradition, and coordinated prosecutions. Recommendations from the ILO (2023) and the UNODC (2023) underscore the need to develop bilateral and multilateral MoUs between the IGAD and GCC member states to harmonize anti-trafficking laws and standardize labor-migration governance.

Existing tools in both regions already provide a foundation: the IGAD Regional Migration Policy Framework (2012) sets norms for migrant protection, border governance, and anti-trafficking cooperation, while the GCC labor reforms (2020–2023), including contract transparency rules, wage-protection systems, and mobility reforms, signal a move toward stronger protections for migrant workers. These frameworks can be combined into a cross-regional agreement that advances both security goals and the protection of migrant workers, creating a more unified legal environment for combating trafficking networks and ensuring safe, regulated mobility across the Red Sea corridor.

Expanding Counter-Radicalization and Peacebuilding Programs

Community-led initiatives offer a sustainable approach to combating extremism. IGAD's Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (ICEPCVE) and the GCC's Religious Moderation Councils could collaborate to design faith-based counter-radicalization programs (Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs, 2022). These initiatives can engage religious leaders, youth groups, and civil society organizations to address local grievances that fuel extremism. The United Nations Development Programme (2022) emphasizes the need to combine security measures with governance reforms and economic empowerment to maintain peace (Gasper, 2022; Citaristi, 2022).

Maritime and Border Security Cooperation

Given the Red Sea's strategic importance as a global shipping route and a hotspot for piracy, smuggling, and illegal migration, joint maritime operations offer one of the most practical ways to enhance IGAD-GCC cooperation. Establishing a Red Sea Maritime Security Task Force that brings together navies and coast guards from IGAD coastal states and the GCC would enable coordinated patrols, shared radar and satellite surveillance, and rapid-response procedures for piracy, trafficking vessels, and maritime search-and-rescue missions.

This joint effort could build on existing regional initiatives, such as the Djibouti Code of Conduct, Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), and national coastal surveillance systems, to develop a unified operational picture of Red Sea security. By aligning rules of engagement, communication channels, and maritime domain awareness technologies, both regions would enhance deterrence against transnational criminal networks while protecting one of the world's most crucial maritime corridors.

Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships

Expanding cooperation to include civil society organizations, private-sector actors, diaspora networks, and international agencies can significantly strengthen the legitimacy, accountability, and social foundation of cross-regional security efforts. The IOM (2024) underscores the importance of "whole-of-society approaches" that integrate human-rights monitoring, community-based policing, and safe migration routes into security governance. In practice, this means leveraging local NGOs for early-warning insights, engaging diaspora

Table 2: Priority Areas for Action

Opportunity Area	Key Actors	Strategic Outcome
Institutional Framework	IGAD, GCC	Formalized regional security cooperation
Intelligence and Technology	CEWARN, GCC Cyber Units, Interpol	Enhanced early warning and threat detection
Legal Harmonization	Ministries of Justice, UNODC, ILO	Unified laws for prosecution and victim protection
Counter-Radicalization	ICEPCVE, Religious Councils	Reduced extremist recruitment and ideological resilience
Maritime Security	IGAD Navies, GCC Naval Forces	Secured the Red Sea corridor and trade routes
Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships	Civil Society, Private Sector	Inclusive, rights-based security responses

groups to counter harmful narratives, and collaborating with humanitarian agencies to ensure that anti-trafficking and border-security operations uphold protection principles.

Working with technology companies, financial institutions, and recruitment agencies can also improve oversight of digital platforms, labor mobility channels, and cross-border financial flows – helping prevent online exploitation, money laundering, and fraudulent recruitment. These multi-layered partnerships would not only enhance operational effectiveness but also rebuild public trust, ensuring that security cooperation between IGAD and GCC states remains people-centered and sustainable.

The convergence of shared threats, emerging technologies, and political will offers an opportunity to shift from reactive, fragmented responses to structured, integrated security cooperation. Capitalizing on these opportunities requires political commitment, institutional alignment, and ongoing investment from both IGAD and GCC member states.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that while IGAD and Middle Eastern states have made progress in security cooperation, particularly in counterterrorism and anti-human trafficking, their efforts remain fragmented, state-centric, and reactive. Using Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), the study confirms that the Horn of Africa and the Gulf region constitute an overlapping security complex marked by interconnected threats, shared vulnerabilities, and mutually strategic interests. Key findings indicate that persistent threats, such as al-Shabab terrorism, trafficking networks, and maritime insecurity, are exacerbated by institutional weaknesses, geopolitical rivalries, and inconsistent legal frameworks across both regions.

Despite substantial financial aid and bilateral programs from Gulf states, the absence of a formal multilateral framework hampers cooperation and weakens long-term effectiveness. Stakeholders from both regions acknowledge the urgency of reform. Regional security cannot be outsourced; it must be co-owned and co-managed by the regions most affected. Similarly, the Gulf's security is inseparable from the Horn's stability. These perspectives underscore a growing political consensus that transnational threats demand cross-regional solutions.

This policy paper proposes strategic opportunities for transformation, including the creation of a Joint IGAD-GCC Security Cooperation Framework, shared intelligence platforms, harmonized legal regimes, and community-led counter-radicalization programs. By leveraging emerging technologies, strengthening maritime cooperation, and adopting rights-based migration governance, both regions can transition from fragmented responses to institutionalized partnerships.

From a theoretical standpoint, RSCT effectively elucidates the regional interdependence shaping these dynamics; however, it should be complemented by transnational security and interregional governance frameworks to account for the roles of non-state actors, technology, and global institutions. Sustainable regional security in the Horn of Africa-Middle East corridor requires a transition from ad hoc bilateralism to organized multilateralism. Establishing cooperation through a legally binding framework, supported by political will, resource commitment, and mutual accountability, represents the most viable path to addressing terrorism, human trafficking, and other transnational threats while promoting peace, stability, and shared prosperity across both regions.

Recommendations

To effectively transition from fragmented security interventions to a structured and sustainable IGAD-GCC security partnership, this policy paper advocates a phased, multi-level approach centered on institutional strengthening, harmonized frameworks, and shared accountability. The recommendations are organized into short-, medium-, and long-term actions to enable systematic implementation and sustained outcomes.

Short-Term (0–2 Years): Laying the Institutional Foundation

In the short term, the priority is to establish a Joint IGAD-GCC Security Cooperation Framework (JGSCF) to serve as the foundation for formal collaboration. The framework should be based on a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by both regions, outlining clear governance structures, funding mechanisms, and thematic subcommittees focused on counterterrorism, human trafficking, and maritime security. To support this, it will be necessary to:

1 - **Establish a Joint Security Task Force (JSTF)**

Based in Djibouti, with a liaison office in Manama, the JSTF would facilitate real-time coordination, operational preparedness, and swift crisis response. The task force would comprise intelligence analysts, cybersecurity experts, and operational officers from both regions.

2 - **Establish a shared Intelligence and Data Integration Platform**

This platform should be used to improve detection and disruption of transnational threats. The platform should comply with FATF and UNODC standards and integrate data on terrorism, trafficking, and financial crimes across member states.

3 - **Introduce a Cross-Regional Counter-Radicalization Campaign**

Led by IGAD's ICEPCVE and the GCC Religious Councils, the campaign would use faith-based messaging, youth mentorship, and digital storytelling to counter extremist narratives and strengthen community resilience.

Medium-Term (2–5 Years): Implementation and Standardization

4 - **Align Legal and Policy Frameworks**

Once the institutional foundations are in place, the next phase should focus on operational harmonization. A key focus during this stage is aligning legal and policy frameworks for counterterrorism, migration, and labor relations. By conducting a legal gap analysis, regional stakeholders, particularly ministries of justice and parliaments, should ensure that national legislation aligns with international conventions, such as the UNTOC, the Palermo Protocols, and ILO Conventions 97 and 143. Harmonized legal systems would eliminate jurisdictional gaps and improve joint prosecutions.

5 - **Establish Joint Maritime Security and Anti-Trafficking Units**

Another vital intervention is to establish Joint Maritime Security and Anti-Trafficking Units operating from Djibouti, Port Sudan, and Jeddah. These units would strengthen patrols, enhance maritime domain awareness, and coordinate anti-smuggling operations within the AU Maritime Security Architecture and the IMO framework.

6 - **Integrate Financial Intelligence Units**

Integrating Financial Intelligence Units (FIUs) across IGAD and GCC member states will improve oversight of terrorist financing and money laundering, supported by blockchain-based monitoring and joint audits.

7 - **Establish a Regional Labor Migration Protection Compact**

The establishment of Regional Labor Migration Protection Compact would address the structural weaknesses that traffickers exploit. Led by the ILO and the IOM, the compact should aim to eliminate exploitative practices, such as the Kafala system, standardize labor contracts, and create grievance redress mechanisms for migrant workers.

Long-Term (5–10 Years): Institutional Maturity and Sustainability

8 - **Establish an Annual Middle East–IGAD Security Summit**

In the long term, focus should shift toward institutional consolidation and sustainability. An annual Middle East-IGAD Security Summit should be established to institutionalize political dialogue, facilitate policy evaluation, and strengthen accountability. The summit should produce an Annual State of Security Report and revise the strategic roadmap every five years.

9 - Create a Red Sea Maritime Security Command (RMSC)

The creation of a Red Sea Maritime Security Command (RMSC) would consolidate joint naval operations, enhance surveillance, and provide a unified command structure for maritime stability.

10 - Establish a Joint Centre for Transnational Security Studies (JCTSS)

To sustain knowledge generation and capacity building, both regions should jointly establish a Joint Centre for Transnational Security Studies (JCTSS) dedicated to policy research, security training, and strategic foresight. In partnership with universities and think tanks, the center would serve as a hub for innovation and policy analysis.

11 - Develop Sustainable Financing Mechanisms

Developing sustainable financing mechanisms, including a joint trust fund, member-state contributions, and public-private partnerships, will minimize donor dependence and promote ownership, with the aim of achieving 60% self-financing by the tenth year of implementation.

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Labor Mobility and Economic Implications for Kenya-Saudi Arabia Relations

Philip Kaudo and Mollyne Achilla

Discussions on labor mobility in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East continue to receive much-needed attention. On the one hand, labor mobility is viewed as an alternative to employment creation and a means of improving living standards. On the other hand, increasing prevalence of forced labor exploitation of Sub-Saharan African nationals in the Middle East challenges the effectiveness of the growing numbers of bilateral relationships between Sub-Saharan African countries and Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar.

Following the expansion of official labor agreements between Kenya and Saudi Arabia, concerns have emerged regarding the developmental impacts of Sub-Saharan African migration to the Middle East. Specifically, questions have been raised about whether labor migration has contributed to local development through remittance flows or whether it has served as a mechanism of economic exploitation. In addition, there is growing interest in understanding how labor migration flows have shaped bilateral relations between Sub-Saharan African countries and Middle Eastern states.

Given the coexistence of both cooperative and conflictual dynamics in relations between Sub-Saharan African countries and Middle Eastern states, this policy paper qualitatively examines the economic impacts of labor mobility between Kenya and Saudi Arabia, focusing on remittances. Drawing on the case of Kenyan migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, it assesses the extent to which labor migration contributes to local development and shapes bilateral relations between the two countries.

While cognizant of public views and tensions over claims of labor exploitation of Kenyan laborers in Saudi Arabia, this paper also examines how migration flows influence Kenya-Saudi Arabia relations. We find that the economic implications of Kenya-Saudi Arabia relations in terms of labor mobility are mixed, presenting both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, labor mobility opens employment opportunities for Kenyan citizens. On the other hand, given the weak labor regulations, the relations between Kenya and Saudi Arabia have also been characterized by labor exploitation, which threatens to undermine mutual labor relations.

Keywords: Labor mobility, labor regulations, social remittances, labor migration

Introduction

International labor migration continues to rise. In 2013, there were 232 million international migrants compared with 304 million immigrants reported in 2024, representing more than 3% of the global population (United Nations, 2024). The nexus between unemployment and labor migration is exemplified in the research findings by the International Labor Office (2014), which reiterated that regions with weaker social protection policies and poor economic conditions tend to record higher incidences of emigration compared with stable economies. Similarly, conflict-prone regions also experience higher emigration as forced refugees look for peaceful areas of settlement, after which they opt to enter the labor market. Therefore, labor migration is viewed as a vehicle for responding to global unemployment.

One of the most important consequences of international migration is the flow of remittances. Due to globalization and technological advancements, migratory remittances have evolved significantly. The World Bank (2020) indicated that global migrant remittances reached $508 billion in 2019, hence serving as an important source of external financing for most developing countries' economies. As a result, the increase in global remittances continues to coincide with the increase in international migration.

The Middle East is one of the most attractive markets for international labor among developing countries. Migrant workers constitute up to 70% of the total population and 90% of the total workforce in some member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), such as Qatar. The region relies on skilled and unskilled migrant workers in construction, manufacturing and domestic labor (Roper & Barria, 2014). It has a higher demand for labor due to the oil boom and also offers better economic incentives compared to other world regions. Other contributing factors to labor migration include natural disasters and extreme weather events as well as wars and conflicts in countries of origin and the search for better education opportunities offered by wealthier countries – particularly in the Gulf region.

Against this backdrop, Saudi Arabia has emerged as one of the most significant destination countries for migrants, mainly from other Arab countries, Asia, and Africa. The kingdom offers lucrative employment prospects as a result of labor shortages driven by the oil boom starting in the 1970s (Malit Jr. & Al-Youha, 2016). Between 2010 and 2024, the population of Saudi Arabia rose from around 23.9 million to 35.3 million. Statistically, as of 2022, 42% of the Saudi population were foreign nationals, who constitute 76% of the employed population (De Bel-Air, 2018).

Kenya is one of the countries that exports its labor to the Middle East, particularly to Saudi Arabia. Economic instability in Kenya has fueled labor migration to Saudi Arabia as Kenyans escape limited opportunities and financial uncertainties. According to a report by the Kenyan Prime Cabinet Secretary and Cabinet Secretary, 416,548 Kenyans are working in the Gulf. This number is projected to be even higher given poor documentation and high migration rates. For Saudi Arabia alone, the Cabinet Secretary acknowledged that Saudi Arabia accounts for the largest number of Kenyan workers in 2024, estimated at 310,266, against 80,000 Kenyan workers reported back in 2021 (The Star, 2024). This demonstrates a significant increase in the number of Kenyan workers between 2021 and 2024. Bilateral labor arrangements between Saudi Arabia and Kenya have further contributed immensely to the rise of labor migration. These arrangements, signed on May 25, 2017, have shaped legal pathways for workers to access Saudi Arabia easily.

A Driver for Growth: Migrant Remittances from Saudi Arabia to Kenya

Malit Jr. & Al-Youha (2016) argue that Kenya's rising unemployment rates, economic instabilities, the economic growth of Gulf countries, geographic proximity to Gulf countries, and difficulty in gaining access into Western countries have contributed to the increase in Kenya's migrant population in the Gulf, especially in Saudi Arabia. The rise in Kenyan migrant workers has also led to a general increase in migrant remittances back to Kenya. In 2015, for instance, the Central Bank of Kenya (2015) acknowledged that diaspora remittances to Kenya amounted to $1.55 billion, representing 3% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). As of June 2025, Kenya's President William Samoei Ruto disclosed that Kenya's global remittances reached a record high of $4.95 billion, up from $4.4 billion in 2022 (Republic of Kenya, 2025). In recent years, Saudi Arabia has emerged as the third-largest source of remittances. In March 2021, the United States was the largest source of foreign remittances in Kenya, accounting for 55.9% of total remittances, followed by the UK (11.2%), Saudi Arabia (4%), Canada and Australia (2.9%). The same year, remittances from Saudi Arabia accounted for $19.2 million compared to $7.1 million from Qatar and $4.6 million from the UAE (Commission for Administrative Justice, 2023). According to Kenya's Remittances Survey Report (2023), commissioned by the Central Bank of Kenya, financial inflows from Saudi Arabia grew by 30%, from $188.8 million to $246 million between January and August 2023. Comparatively, Kenyans in Saudi Arabia wired back home $292.7 million in 2022 compared to only $179.18 million in 2021.

Therefore, Kenya's ability to export labor to Saudi Arabia is not only an alternative to its unemployment problem estimated at 5.5% (World Bank, 2026) but also serves as a source of remittances to the Kenyan economy and consolidates the two countries' diplomatic relations, which is key to economic development. Saudi Arabia also benefits from Kenyan labor migration, as it helps address the growing labor shortages faced by the domestic labor market. Notably, Kenyan migrant workers in Saudi Arabia are employed in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy. In the formal sector, skilled laborers are employed in the construction industry, the service sector, and Information and Communications Technology (ICT), among other areas, while a significant population of Kenyan low-skilled laborers serves as domestic laborers.

While considering remittances as the key link between human mobility and development, Zerihun (2020) argues that a positive correlation exists between migrant remittances and the economic growth of migrants' countries of origin. Remittances not only contribute to the development of migrants' home countries' financial resilience but are also sources of foreign currency and other capital flows. In the Kenyan case, migrants' remittances to Kenya are mostly used for local investments such as housing construction and the establishment of businesses. Lubambu (2014) also argues that remittances are a significant source of household income and an anti-poverty force in most developing countries. In fact, in Kenya, recipient households of migrants' remittances invest remittances in income-generating activities and meeting households' needs, hence cushioning them from economic vulnerabilities such as poverty. Therefore, remittances increase the availability of local capital, which can be reinvested in businesses and other productive activities. In the case of Kenya, remittances from migrant workers in Saudi Arabia thus make a significant contribution to the national economy and GDP. They serve as an important source of foreign exchange and financing, while also functioning as a poverty-reduction mechanism through employment creation, income generation, and household support.

Social Remittances: Know-How Transfer as a Contribution to Human Development

Social remittances play another important role in the development of Kenya. Such remittances include skills, cultural practices, ideas, knowledge, and social capital transferred by migrants. The migrants, especially those in ICT, services, and construction industries, acquire professional and technical skills they invest back at home. For instance, exposure to advanced technologies and workplace practices in Saudi Arabia equips returning migrants with valuable skills, knowledge, and experience that can be applied upon their return to Kenya. This often enables returnees to establish businesses and contribute significantly to local industries, thereby fostering entrepreneurship and promoting economic development (Zerihun, 2020). Additionally, domestic workers who form a major part of the Kenyan migrants, develop interpersonal and organizational skills that influence community initiatives and household dynamics. Women are mostly employed as domestic workers, such as housemaids. Social remittances promote female empowerment by ensuring that women achieve monetary independence, which equips them with decision-making power within their households (Lubambu, 2014). Finally, transfers of expertise, such as in the ICT sector, provide capacities for the communities to undertake development initiatives, such as building schools. Social capital through various migrant networks further motivates community-driven projects such as the Savings and Credit Cooperative Organization (SACCO) which helps in addressing local concerns such as poverty (SACCO Societies Regulatory Authority [SASRA], 2025).

Migrant Remittances and Labor Concerns: A Double-edged Sword

As outlined above, Saudi Arabia has emerged the third largest source of Kenya's foreign remittances globally and the largest recipient of Kenyan migrant laborers in the Gulf countries. While this relationship offers better opportunities for employment, investments, migrant remittances, and contributions to Kenya's GDP, it has also been characterized by exploitation and other forms of labor discrimination, which violate international labor norms. As such, migration should be considered a double-edged sword.

As a political consequence, reports of labor violations have previously culminated in a tense relationship between the Governments of Kenya and Saudi Arabia. A 2021 report by the Kenyan Senate Committee on Labor and Social Welfare, entitled "Report on Labor Migration, Senate Study Visit to the Middle East and Policy Implications" (Senate of Kenya, 2021), emphasized that while labor migration to the Middle East (including Saudi Arabia) is viewed positively due to its contribution to Kenya's economic development and its support to local families, its downside remains a policy issue. The report emphasized that in Saudi Arabia, immigrant workers remain vulnerable to structural violence, abusive conditions, and discrimination and receive inadequate wages despite working for longer hours. The findings of this report are corroborated by the findings of the Commission on Administrative Justice (2023), which identified physical abuse, sexual abuse, sleep deprivation, food deprivation, labor exploitation, imprisonment before deportation, passport confiscation, religious intolerance and psychological abuse as further major human rights concerns for Kenyan laborers in Saudi Arabia. For instance, the report indicated that in some cases, workers are only allowed less than two hours of sleep per day. Labor exploitation thus remains the main form of violation. Most workers reported that despite signing agreements for a monthly salary totaling $700, they were paid only $180. The report by the Commission on Administrative Justice also stated that travel documents, and even mobile phones of immigrants, are confiscated by the immigrants' employers, hence not only disconnecting them from the outside world, but also exploiting and controlling them.

The challenging working environment in Saudi Arabia is exemplified not only by the increasing distress calls and complaints of exploitation but also by a recent statement by Kenya's Cabinet Secretary for Foreign and Diaspora Affairs while responding to questions in the Senate plenary. He noted that since 2002, more than 316 Kenyans have died in Gulf countries, with the majority of deaths reported in Saudi Arabia (166), followed by Qatar (58), UAE (51), Iraq (25), Bahrain (10) and Kuwait (6). The Cabinet Secretary further noted that the reported deaths have been under unclear circumstances (The Star, 2024).

Migrant workers thus continue to face numerous challenges, including deficits in decent work, inadequate protection of migrant workers' rights, and weak labor governance mechanisms. Kenyan migrants in Saudi Arabia are required to possess an **iqama** (residency permit), which serves as official authorization to access both government and private services. The migrant workers are also vulnerable to exploitation due to the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, which has largely contributed to discrimination and worsening labor standards. The *kafala* system undermines the autonomy of migrant workers by making their legal status and employment dependent on their sponsors, thereby limiting their independence and freedom of movement. [1]

To strengthen labor relations and reduce structural violence against migrants, several labor reforms have been introduced in Saudi Arabia, including a ban on passport confiscation. Furthermore, workers are allowed to transfer sponsorship without the consent of the employer (*kafil*) before their contract

1 The *kafala* (sponsorship) system regulates the relationship between local sponsors and migrant workers and remains a dominant labor governance mechanism in several destination countries, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Jordan. Under this system, citizens and companies are granted the authority to recruit and employ foreign workers. Sponsors are typically responsible for facilitating migrants' entry into the host country by covering or arranging travel, accommodation, and other related expenses, as well as negotiating employment contracts and remuneration packages on their behalf. However, the system has been widely criticized for undermining the autonomy of migrant workers. Because workers' visas, residency permits, and employment status are tied to their sponsors, they often face significant restrictions on their freedom to change jobs or negotiate better employment conditions. As a result, migrant workers may be unable to seek alternative employment opportunities, join labor unions, or effectively access dispute-resolution mechanisms without the consent of their sponsors. This dependency can increase their vulnerability to exploitation and limit their ability to exercise their labor rights.

expires. An extended minimum wage regulation for domestic workers has also been introduced as a non-discriminatory minimum wage system. Finally, the objection certificate for job changes was removed. However, despite such legal reforms, the implementation of these reforms has faced several challenges for Kenyan workers in Saudi Arabia (Amnesty International, 2025). In this regard, the prevalence of unregulated recruitment agencies also facilitates labor concerns. More than 1,000 recruitment agencies exist in Kenya while others operate from the Middle East, exporting Kenyan laborers to Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia. Given the limited regulations by both governments, the recruitment agencies perpetuate labor exploitation through different ways, including charging excess visa processing and agency fees, confiscating the workers' passports, and providing immigrants with fake work engagement promises.

A US Department of State (2020) report found that through illegal recruitment agencies, Kenyans are lured into forced manual labor in Gulf countries. Due to several reasons, the activities of these recruitment agencies have remained prevalent. Odhiambo (2021) confirmed that several gaps exist in the management of migrant laborers in Saudi Arabia. For instance, while the Labor Relations Act of Kenya tasks the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection with the principal responsibility of oversighting private recruitment agencies at both the county and national levels, and the Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs with the oversight of overseas branches of Kenyan linked recruitment agencies, the act fails to specify what concrete measures of oversight and necessary compliance interventions or mechanisms should be put in place. Unethical labor practices thus also remain prevalent due to inconsistent implementation of laws and regulations guiding both national and foreign labor. In this respect, the study findings by Odhiambo (2021) also revealed that no monitoring and evaluation system of the operation of the recruitment agencies exists. Furthermore, standard employment agreements in the recruitment process for migrant workers are lacking. Additionally, both governments have also been less forceful in enforcing the minimum wage requirements, especially for foreign workers. These structural and enforcement gaps continue to perpetuate the endurance of migrant exploitation in Saudi Arabia.

A Way Forward?
Existing Labor Policies and Associated Reforms

To eradicate unethical labor practices between Kenya and Saudi Arabia, several international and national interventions have been put in place – with mixed outcomes. For instance, already in 1990, the International Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and Members of their Families was adopted.

Articles 10 and 11 of the Convention prohibit any form of cruelty and inhumane treatment or slavery and servitude of migrant workers. In this context, the African Union also ratified the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Article 15 of the Charter stipulates that every individual is entitled to the right to work in a safer and equitable society, where employees are guaranteed equal pay.

At the national level, the Government of Kenya, through the 2010 Constitution, guarantees freedom from torture and any form of cruelty to any citizen of Kenya, both locally and internationally. To address this challenge, the government is mandated to regulate the operations of recruitment agencies through a licensing framework administered by the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection. Licensing is granted upon submission of incorporation documents to the Registrar of Societies and payment of the prescribed fees. In addition, the Labor Institutions Act No. 12 of 2007 stipulates that renewal of licenses is conditional upon agencies demonstrating compliance with regulatory requirements. Specifically, they must provide proof of payments to the Registrar of Societies, apply formally for renewal, and submit audited financial statements. Subsequently, the Labor Institution Act No.12 of 2007 also guarantees that all migrant workers should be provided with comprehensive insurance before they depart from Kenya. In this regard, the Government of Kenya has also authorized several institutions, such as the National Employment Authority and the National Employment Agency, to regulate the behavior of private recruitment agencies. In 2015, the government also launched the Kenya Diaspora Policy, which called for the overall protection of migrant workers by recommending the need to introduce minimum wage standards in trade agreements. The policy also called for the effective protection of Kenyans abroad through the signing of bilateral agreements and negotiations (Kinuthia et al., 2017). In 2024, the Government of Kenya suspended the licenses of over 900 recruitment agencies to curb the proliferation of labor concerns in Gulf countries.

Despite the existence of these regulatory frameworks and actions against recruitment agencies, existing gaps and shortcomings in the implementation of immigration policies and empowerment of existing institutions, both locally and in Saudi Arabia, continue to exacerbate concerns over Kenya's migration flows to Saudi Arabia. Despite some actions, both the governments of Saudi Arabia and Kenya have failed to abolish the unregulated or unregistered recruitment agencies that put local Kenyans into very unfavorable working conditions. Similarly, both governments have struggled to streamline financial flows between the two countries. The Senate report acknowledges the complexity of establishing accurate remittance systems in Kenya, noting that the majority of transfers are conducted through informal channels. This reliance on unregulated platforms not only undermines transparency but also presents potential risks for money laundering. The lack of accurate data on persons in the diaspora also raises fundamental gaps in Kenya's immigration and emigration policies.

Towards a New Partnership Model? Implications of Labor Mobility on Kenya-Saudi Arabia Relations

Labor mobility plays a critical role in shaping the relationship between Kenya and Saudi Arabia. On the one hand, it strengthens bilateral ties by generating economic benefits, including employment opportunities, financial remittances, and social transfers. Moreover, labor relations can create multiplier effects, such as diversifying trade and expanding investment opportunities between the two countries. However, on the other hand, unethical labor practices, manifested in the form of labor exploitation, confiscation of travel documents, irregular arrests, exclusion from legal protection, and detention of Kenyan workers abroad, among others, undermine the relations between the two countries. Reported cases of deportation and mistreatment of Kenyan migrant workers have repeatedly triggered diplomatic frictions between Kenya and Saudi Arabia. Notably, in 2014, the Government of Kenya imposed a ban on recruitment agencies, a move that significantly strained bilateral relations. Stalled labor negotiations resulted in a reduction in Kenya's economic remittances from Saudi Arabia (Okara & Obiero, 2018).

Similarly, allegations of money laundering and illicit financial transactions further undermine trust and complicate efforts to sustain stable and cooperative engagement between the two countries. It is also important to note that the increasingly contentious repatriation of foreign workers highlights the fluid and often fragile nature of bilateral relations between Kenya and Saudi Arabia. The case of Stephen Munyakho, a Kenyan national employed in Saudi Arabia, drew considerable diplomatic attention from both Saudi Arabia and the Government of Kenya. He was facing the death sentence following a workplace altercation in April 2011 that resulted in the death of a Yemeni colleague. Munyakho was charged with murder, with the possibility of execution under Saudi law. The case was ultimately resolved through a monetary settlement negotiated between the two governments, underscoring both the tensions and the capacity for pragmatic accommodation within their diplomatic engagement. He was released back to Kenya in 2025 after being in prison for 11 years in Saudi Arabia (Rukanga, 2025).

Conclusion

The impact of labor migration on Kenya–Saudi Arabia relations is multifaceted and produces both positive and negative outcomes. On the one hand, the partnership provides significant economic opportunities, particularly through employment creation, migrant remittances, and investment flows. Remittances from Saudi Arabia contribute to Kenya's GDP, serve as a source of savings and investment capital, and function as an important tool in the fight against poverty. On the other hand, the relationship is increasingly challenged by labor rights-related concerns, including the repatriation of Kenyan workers under contentious circumstances. Weak regulatory frameworks and limited enforcement mechanisms expose Kenyan migrant workers to unfavorable working conditions that contravene both national labor laws and international labor standards. Overall, while labor migration has contributed to Kenya's economic development, persistent challenges, particularly labor exploitation, continue to constrain the full realization of benefits in trade, employment creation, and investment. Moving forward, the sustainability of Kenya-Saudi Arabia relations will depend on the ability of both governments to effectively address migrant labor rights concerns and embed stronger protections within their bilateral framework.

Recommendations

To establish a mutually beneficial relationship and enhance migrant remittances, Kenya and Saudi Arabia must address current challenges through coordinated bilateral regulatory frameworks that safeguard the rights and interests of workers.

1 - Standardize Employment Agreements

The respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs in both countries should jointly develop a standardized employment contract for migrant workers. Such an agreement must explicitly define minimum wage thresholds, expected working conditions, and safeguards against exploitation.

2 - Streamline Financial Flows

Through collaboration between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Finance, and Domestic Affairs, the Kenyan and Saudi governments should strengthen mechanisms for monitoring financial flows. This includes eliminating unregulated recruitment agencies that facilitate informal transfers and implementing systems to detect and prevent money laundering or illicit transactions.

3 - Regulate Recruitment Agencies

The Kenyan Government must ensure that all recruitment agencies are duly registered, tax-compliant, and aligned with national and international labor standards. To reinforce accountability, the government should conduct bi-annual audits of recruitment agencies and submit compliance reports to the Ministry of Interior and National Coordination, as well as other relevant oversight bodies. Recruitment agencies should be further licensed by the National Police Service in close coordination with the Foreign Affairs ministries of Kenya and Saudi Arabia. Licenses must be renewed annually to ensure compliance, and non-compliant agencies should be deregistered. Both governments should establish joint labor committees to harmonize labor interests and maintain a joint website where labor-related concerns can be reported transparently.

4 - Reform Labor Governance in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia should adopt international labor frameworks protecting migrant workers, including the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families.

5 - Enhance Awareness and Sensitization

The Ministries of Labor in both countries should enhance regular sensitization and awareness campaigns for migrant workers, informing them of their rights, privileges, and available support systems. Awareness programs should also highlight the consequences of violating international labor frameworks and guidance on maximizing economic and social benefits while abroad.

6 - Digitalize Recruitment and Monitoring Systems

Both governments should fully digitalize the recruitment process for domestic workers. A centralized digital platform should publish a list of accredited recruitment agencies and legitimate employment opportunities, thereby minimizing fraudulent practices. Digital systems should also allow authorities to track permits and monitor worker activities more effectively.

7 - Establish a robust complaint and welfare mechanism

The Ministries of Labor, in collaboration with the National Employment Authority and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, should develop an effective complaint management system to address migrant worker grievances and emergency situations. In addition, both governments should consider establishing a welfare association for Kenyan domestic migrant workers in Saudi Arabia to support the coordination and representation of their interests.

8 - Enforce labor agreements

The Ministries of Labor in both Kenya and Saudi Arabia must prioritize the enforcement of existing bilateral and international labor agreements, particularly those related to minimum wage standards, non-discrimination, and the prohibition of all forms of exploitation.

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Beyond Oil Diplomacy: Expanding the Kenya-United Arab Emirates Renewable Energy Partnership

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Despite progress, over 80% of Kenyans still rely on polluting fuels for cooking, while less than 20% of total final energy consumption, including transport and cooking fuels, comes from renewable energy. As Kenya aims to transition towards a non-carbon economy by 2030, its energy cooperation with the United Arabs Emirates has been dominated by fossil fuels, with oil diplomacy overshadowing renewable energy initiatives. This has been a key barrier to the renewable energy transition. The shift to renewable energy has also been hampered by infrastructural deficits, technological gaps, and policy misalignments. Further, fiscal barriers, disparities within society, and a lack of political commitment from both countries have worsened the situation. This has also been aggravated by both domestic and global regime changes with different energy priorities. This policy paper, through document analysis, examines the potential of the Kenya-UAE renewable energy partnership and offers action-oriented policy recommendations for diversified energy cooperation. The paper stresses the need for expanded bilateral direct renewable energy agreements, the adoption of innovative renewable energy financing, the establishment of renewable energy public-private partnerships, and the encouragement of technology transfer and capacity building.

Keywords: Renewable energy transition, Kenya-UAE partnership, energy cooperation, sustainable energy, technology transfer, renewable energy financing

Introduction

For a long time, oil diplomacy has dominated the Middle East's engagement with the global community, given the region's central role as a major supplier of the world's energy resources (Hayati et al., 2023). However, the traditional energy-based alliance between the Middle East and Africa has been undergoing significant transformation due to changing dynamics in international energy markets, the diversification of energy sources, and growing global concerns about climate change (Griffiths, 2017). This has prompted Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, to leverage their potential in sustainable energy. The UAE, for example, has invested in the Barakah Nuclear Power Plant, the 5,000 MW Mohamed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park, established by the Dubai Electricity and Water

Authority, and the Noor Abu Dhabi Solar Power Plant (Jamaledini & Bayat, 2024). Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has invested in the Tabarjal Solar Plant and the Yanbu Wind Farm (Ubaid & Gulrez, 2025). The kingdom has also established both national and regional renewable energy policies, including a 2050 net-zero emissions target and the Middle East Green Initiative (Bousrih & Elhaj, 2025). However, GCC countries have struggled to translate this renewable energy potential into partnerships with African countries, such as Kenya, which face major renewable energy access deficits (Otieno et al., 2024).

Oil diplomacy often overshadows the global renewable energy initiatives and engagements of GCC countries (Alshehhi et al., 2024). This problem has been exacerbated by infrastructural and technological gaps, policy misalignments, fiscal barriers, disparities within society, and domestic and global political leadership characterized by differing energy governance priorities. Moreover, non-carbon energy cooperation between the Middle East and Africa receives limited political prioritization in parts of the Middle East, constraining efforts to expand broader energy partnerships in the renewable energy sector. Historically, actors in the Middle East have perceived limited urgency to integrate oil and renewable energy within a unified global energy strategy. In the UAE, the transition toward sustainable renewable energy has been shaped, and at times constrained, by public perception, technological innovations, socio-economic factors, environmental concerns, and sustainability considerations (Alshehhi et al., 2024).

Additionally, most African countries possess significant renewable-energy potential, including solar irradiance levels[1] ranging between 3 and 7 kWh/m^2/day (Agoundedemba et al., 2023), yet many have not created a conducive environment for institutionalizing renewable-energy cooperation and development. This persists even though these countries are disproportionately affected by the negative consequences of polluting fuels and face challenges similar to those observed in parts of the Middle East's clean-energy transition, such as leadership gaps, policy misalignment, infrastructure deficits, and fiscal constraints (Anku, 2025).

Notably, due to financing constraints, dependence on imported technologies and equipment, policy inconsistencies, and infrastructure deficits, the costs of investing in and deploying renewable energy technologies in Africa remain higher than in countries such as India and China. These challenges hinder the expansion of renewable energy partnerships and investment flows between Africa and external partners, including the Middle East (Agoundedemba et al., 2023). Yet, over 600 million Africans, including Kenyans, lack reliable access

1 Solar irradiance (kWh/m^2/day) measures the average amount of solar energy available per square meter each day. Values above 3 kWh/m^2/day are generally considered suitable for economically viable solar power generation.

to electricity (World Bank Group, 2024), and modern energy sources are only adequately accessed by about 20% of the African population (Mugisha et al., 2021), underscoring the need for energy diversification through energy engagements. Therefore, even though the level of renewable energy cooperation between African countries and the Middle East is still low, this can be changed through stronger regional cooperation and country-to-country commitments. The UAE, for example, announced an investment commitment of almost $72 billion between 2019 and 2023 (Kolek, 2025; Savage, 2024) to advance renewable energy in the African region, amidst the earlier-mentioned barriers.

Motivated by the question of how and why these two regions can integrate renewable energy into their cooperation, this policy paper employs document-based analysis and a pragmatic approach to propose diversification strategies to enhance energy security and sustainability within the Kenya–UAE energy relationship, aligning with the global green economy agenda. Like many African countries, access to sustainable energy in Kenya is still low. Despite progress, over 80% of Kenyans still rely on polluting fuels for cooking, while less than 20% of total final energy consumption, including transport and cooking fuels, comes from renewable energy (Rotich et al., 2024), even as Kenya seeks to align with the Paris Agreement through Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) (Dal Maso et al., 2020). Specifically, over 12 million Kenyans have no access to electricity (Christley et al., 2021).

In the wind sector, installed capacity represents only about 13.4% of the country's estimated 4,600 MW wind potential (Fields et al., 2023). Similarly, despite substantial solar potential – estimated at 23,046 TWh per year in theoretical technical potential (annual energy yield under ideal conditions), with average solar irradiance of 4–6 kWh/m^2/day (Anku, 2025) – only around 170 MWp (peak power output)[2] of solar PV capacity had been installed by 2022 (Coffey, 2023). To address these gaps, Kenya needs to deepen its existing renewable-energy cooperation with the UAE by creating a more enabling environment for Emirati companies and other private investors.

The UAE's renewable energy expertise and oil-funded capital can bolster Kenya's 2030 low-carbon transition goals through enhanced cooperation. At the same time, such engagement offers the UAE access to a growing renewable-energy market, including opportunities to export technology and technical expertise. Moreover, both countries share a strong interest in renewable energy, demonstrated at COP28 and the African Climate Summit in Nairobi, as well as similar experiences with fossil fuel dependence and comparable

2 Terawatt-hour (TWh) represents a quantity of energy, while Megawatt-peak (MWp) describes the maximum power output of a system under ideal conditions.

advantages in solar and wind resources. Both are vulnerable to climate change and have expressed commitment to the global green economy agenda. These factors create a strong foundation for effective renewable energy diplomacy between Kenya and the UAE.

Kenya's Renewable Energy Potential and Steps Toward Sustainability

Kenya is a frontrunner in renewable energy adoption across Sub-Saharan Africa, where over 600 million people lack reliable electricity access (World Bank Group, 2024). The Last Mile Connectivity Project (LMCP) has helped cut the number of people without access to electricity nearly in half, from 20 million in 2015 to around 11 million in 2025 (IEA, 2025).

Statistically, with the assistance of renewable energy, Kenya has been able to increase its energy generation, leading to an increased electricity access from 37% in 2013 to 79% in 2023 (IEA, 2025). Although Kenya is already tapping into renewables for energy generation, their utilization remains relatively low. Statistics from the Ministry of Energy show that Kenya has an installed capacity of 3,299.8 MW, comprising 29% geothermal, 30% hydro, 13.4% wind, 6.5% solar, and 18.7% thermal (State Department for Energy, 2025). However, this capacity only utilizes less than 10% of its estimated technical renewable energy potential, underscoring opportunities for accelerated diversification through partnerships like those with the UAE.

This section focuses on the specific renewable energy areas that Kenya has and should invest in, highlighting the potential collaboration areas with the UAE, inspiring South-South collaborations. The section first examines Kenya's solar energy resources and developments.

Kenya's abundant solar renewable energy resources position it as a potential leader in sustainable energy within Africa. With vast solar radiation averaging 4–6 kWh/m^2/day (Dal Maso et al., 2020), particularly in northern and western regions such as the arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs), Kenya boasts an estimated solar photovoltaic (PV) potential of 23,046 TWh/year, enough to power the continent multiple times over (Mutuku and Mbatia, 2020).

Despite this huge capacity, installed solar capacity connected to the national grid stood at 212.6 MW as of 2024, contributing about 7.4% to electricity generation (Kimutai et al., 2024). This, measured against its potential, shows that Kenya is still far from realizing its solar potential. However, it increased its installed capacity by 20% to around 340 MW in 2024 (Koons, 2025). Kenya's key projects in the solar energy sector include the 55 MW Garissa Solar Plant, the largest grid-connected solar power plant in East and Central Africa. Others include the 52 MW Malindi solar plant in the coastal part of Kenya and the Kesses 1 (55 MW), Cedate (40 MW), and Selenkei (40MW) solar generation. To meet rising demand among populations beyond the national grid, the Garissa Solar Plant is expanding through private investments and off-grid mini-grids that extend its reach to rural communities (State Department for Energy, 2025).

Additionally, the M-Kopa pay-as-you-go solar program has significantly expanded off-grid access across Kenya. So far, M-Kopa had deployed more than 3 million solar home systems by 2025, electrifying millions in off-grid areas (Mbayo and Rajula, 2025). These investments show that Kenya is trying to harness the Global Horizontal Irradiance that reaches up to 2,300 kWh/m^2 annually in ASALs. Despite these efforts, the scaling of solar energy remains constrained by high upfront investment costs and challenges associated with grid integration. As a result, only 212.6 MW of solar capacity has been installed, despite an estimated potential of approximately 15,000 MW (KIPPRA, 2022; Kimutai et al., 2024). This underutilization highlights a significant policy gap: although the decentralized nature of solar energy has the potential to challenge centralized fossil fuel-based energy systems and expand access to electricity, its widespread adoption requires targeted financing mechanisms and supportive policy interventions. Such measures are necessary to overcome affordability barriers and encourage greater uptake, particularly among the approximately 11 million Kenyans who still lack access to electricity.

Further to its solar energy potential, Kenya's wind energy potential of 4,600 MW is viable in the northeast, central, and coastal regions, where wind speeds reach up to 10 m/s in areas like Marsabit and Turkana (Rotich et al., 2024). Despite this huge potential, the current installed capacity is around 435.5 MW, which is only 13.3% of the total installed capacity (Kimutai et al., 2024). Approximately 71% of this installed wind energy (435.5 MW) is generated primarily from Lake Turkana Wind Power (LTWP). The LTWP project is Africa's largest wind farm, which provides 310 MW of low-cost electrical power to the national grid (Simberg-Koulumies, 2024; Ramirez et al., 2025). It has also been able to provide affordable, reliable, and clean energy to Kenya, significantly reducing greenhouse gas emissions and the reliance on costly fuel oil plants.

Recent 2025 developments furthermore include new onshore farms in coastal zones aiming to generate an additional 500 MW by 2027, supported by the National Energy Compact (State Department for Energy, 2025; Dal Maso et al., 2020). These developments are likely to enhance Kenya's ability to harness its considerable renewable energy potential. However, significant challenges remain, particularly the lack of adequate advanced energy storage technologies, which are essential for managing the intermittency of renewable energy sources. In addition, challenges facing the wind energy sector, including underutilization of installed capacity and delays in transmission infrastructure development, underscore the need for substantial infrastructure upgrades. Addressing these constraints will be critical to unlocking the full potential of Kenya's renewable energy sector and ensuring a more reliable and sustainable energy supply.

Next to solar and wind energy, Kenya also possesses hydropower capacity. Lake Victoria, Rift Valley, Athi/Sabaki River, Tana River, and Ewaso Ng'iro North River basins are the major hydropower areas. Together, they have an estimated hydropower potential of 6,000 MW (Kiprono and Kiplagat, 2024). The Tana River Basin holds the highest potential for producing more hydropower and, so far, Kenya has a total installed hydropower capacity of 838.5 MW. Hydropower projects within the Tana basin and other regions have, overall, contributed approximately 30% of total electricity capacity with an average annual contribution of 27.5% over the last 5 years (State Department for Energy, 2025).

This shows that more electricity can be generated from hydropower in these regions if its capacity is well utilized. The Sondu Miriu (60 MW) and the Seven Forks cascade are examples of hydropower projects that were installed with the bigger aim of harnessing more power. However, the project has continued to face challenges, such as droughts. For instance, droughts reduced the project's output by up to 20% in 2024–2025. To address this, Kenya aims to plant 15 billion trees by 2032 to enhance watershed protection and mitigate environmental risks (Kelvin, 2024). The drought vulnerability shows that hydropower's reliability is threatened by water scarcity exacerbated by climate change. This necessitates the need for diversification and integration with the UAE's desalination technologies to support more resilient systems.

Lastly, geothermal power accounts for the largest share of Kenya's renewable energy investments. Geothermal energy, with 7–10 GW potential in the Rift Valley, is underexploited since only about 10% of the maximum estimated potential is exploited countrywide (Richter, 2025). Nonetheless, the current installed capacity of 988 MW (29%), generating 39.8–47% of electricity (State Department for Energy, 2025), is the highest share among renewables in Kenya and the 6th geothermal producer globally (International Trade Administration, 2022). This geothermal power sector investment is led by the Olkaria complex, which produces over 800 MW and is rated Africa's largest geothermal site (Omenda et al., 2025). Plans are underway to add an additional 500 MW to make the project more viable and serve more people with renewable energy. The Government of Kenya has explored a public-private partnership to harness the potential of the Olkaria complex, since the planned expansions are costly. Despite this, financial challenges are involved because of the high exploration costs ($5–10 million per well) and environmental concerns such as land subsidence (IEA, 2024). This notwithstanding, the Olkaria complex project shows the huge potential as a global exporter because although it is already underutilized, it is still rated the largest geothermal site in Africa.

Generally, Kenya has made strides toward sustainability through robust policy frameworks, including the 2023–2050 roadmap for hydrogen power generation. The country has invested in various renewable energy policy frameworks, such as the National Energy Policy 2025–2034, which puts more emphasis on the diversification of energy sources. This has consequently improved renewable energy affordability. Additionally, Kenya has invested in various renewable energy projects, such as the Last Mile Connectivity Program (phases I–IV) and M-Kopa's pay-as-you-go solar systems (IEA, 2024).

These projects have helped boost electricity access from 56% in 2019 to 79% in 2023 (Stedile and Gordon, 2025). Despite these milestones, the country still has policy gaps, including uncoordinated regulatory agencies (e.g., overlaps between Kenya Power Company and Rural Electrification and Renewable Energy Corporation (REREC)) and limited fiscal incentives, thus hindering progress.

Moreover, Kenya's renewable energy sector faces persistent obstacles that hinder sustainability. Financially, the country's projects are affected by capital costs, estimated at nearly twice the global average, while heavy debt servicing further limits expansion (Stedile and Gordon, 2025). Technologically, systemic inefficiencies, such as grid losses of around 20% and technical skills gaps, slow progress in scaling renewable solutions. Socially, affordability remains uneven, with many unelectrified households still unable to bear the costs of connection or alternative systems despite subsidies and pay-as-you-go models. Environmentally, deforestation and prolonged droughts undermine the stability of hydro and geothermal sources. Statistically, geothermal sources are the backbone of Kenya's renewable energy mix, at approximately 45% (Rotich et al., 2024). Thus, any decline in geothermal productivity has the potential to undermine broader national investments in renewable energy and impede the achievement of sustainability goals. These challenges are comparable to some of those encountered by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) during the development of the Masdar project. However, the UAE successfully addressed many of these obstacles through sustained investment, technological innovation, and supportive policy frameworks. Consequently, Kenya can draw valuable lessons from the UAE's experience through bilateral learning, knowledge exchange, and innovation partnerships as it continues to expand and strengthen its renewable energy sector.

Why the UAE?

The United Arab Emirates occupies a unique position at the crossroads of global energy policy, balancing its legacy as a hydrocarbon hub with rising ambitions in climate action. Since the launch of Masdar in 2006, the UAE has emerged as a laboratory for renewable innovation, achieving a 7% renewable energy share by 2023 and committing to net-zero emissions by 2050 through its Long-Term Strategy (LTS) submitted to the UNFCCC in 2024 (UNFCCC, 2024). Specifically, the UAE's Energy Strategy 2050 aims to increase renewable energy capacity, with projections suggesting it could reach 14 GW by 2030 (UAE, 2024). This initiative involves investments in clean energy and a focus on decarbonization across various sectors, as supported by new climate legislation and ongoing clean energy project financing.

The UAE was the first country in the Middle East to commit to achieving net-zero emissions by 2050 in a plan that involves an investment of AED 600 billion (over $163 billion) in clean energy (GE, 2021). As part of the strategy, the UAE aims to mobilize AED 150–200 billion ($41–54 billion) by 2030 to triple renewable capacity, expand onshore and offshore wind projects, and grow the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park to 5 GW by 2030 (UAE, 2025).

When considered alongside Kenya's rapid electrification gains – which increased electricity access from 37% in 2013 to 56% in 2019 and further to 79% in 2023 through initiatives such as the Last Mile Connectivity Program (IEA, 2025b) – the United Arab Emirates (UAE) presents a contrasting yet complementary model of energy transition. While the UAE is shifting from a fossil fuel-dependent economy toward a more diversified and sustainable energy mix, Kenya is expanding electricity access while positioning renewable energy at the center of its long-term development strategy. The UAE's transition toward renewable energy, although more advanced, shares structural similarities with Kenya's energy transformation efforts. As such, it offers valuable opportunities for bilateral learning and cooperation in areas such as renewable energy deployment, innovative financing mechanisms, technological development, and policy design. Through enhanced collaboration, Kenya can draw on the UAE's experience in managing the complexities of energy transition while accelerating its own renewable energy and sustainability objectives. The UAE's renewable energy landscape reflects conditions highly comparable to Kenya's arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs), offering a strong basis for technology transfer. With solar irradiation averaging 6 kWh/m^2/day across nearly 350 sunny days annually and wind speeds reaching up to 7.5 m/s, the UAE has developed expertise in technologies that align well with Kenya's resource profile (Salim and Alsyouf, 2020). Photovoltaic systems, concentrated solar power (CSP), and fuel cells – core elements of the UAE's renewable energy mix – are particularly relevant to Kenya's renewable energy ambitions. These technologies could be applied in Kenya.

For instance, Masdar's PV experience from the 2 GW Noor Abu Dhabi plant (Kashef, 2025) can be directly applied to Kenya's high direct normal irradiation (DNI) zones, like Northern Kenya, while advances in fuel cells provide viable solutions for off-grid electrification (Saha, 2025). Similarly, lessons from the UAE's 2025 Wind Program, which generated 117 MW of domestic capacity (Ashraf and Sagheer, 2025), can inform Kenya's exploitation of its estimated 4,600 MW wind potential, notably in sites such as Turkana and Ngong, through hybrid solar-wind models that mitigate intermittency challenges.

Financially, the UAE's hydrocarbon revenues provide a platform for renewable innovation and outward investment. Sovereign wealth funds (SWFs), such as ADQ and Mubadala, have become important in this transition. This is because the UAE collectively channeled $800 billion into energy investments between 2020 and 2023, including $72 billion into African renewables between 2019 and 2023 (Capapé Aguilar and Johnson, 2024; Savage, 2024). In 2024 alone, $55 billion in deals targeted green hydrogen and solar deployment (UNFCCC, 2024), positioning the UAE not only as a technological partner but also as a financier for countries, like Kenya, struggling with high capital costs and limited fiscal space. Notably, 90% of Middle East SWFs now explicitly reference sustainability or ESG criteria in their investment strategies, underscoring the structural shift in investment patterns (Depolla, 2025).

The UAE's energy transition challenges the conventional narrative of oil dependence. Despite hydrocarbons still contributing about 70% of GDP, policy updates in 2025 confirm that renewable energy now accounts for 15% of installed capacity, with targets of 50% by 2030, backed by $163 billion in planned investments (UAE, 2024). This pivot is not only domestic but also outward facing, as seen in large-scale hydrogen projects. The UAE, for example, has declared a goal of capturing 25% of the global low-carbon hydrogen market by 2030 (Ibrahim et al., 2022). Annually, Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) already produces over 300 kilotons (kt) of hydrogen with an advanced annual production target of 500 kt.

Hydrogen production has also been increased with the creation of the Abu Dhabi Hydrogen Alliance, which advocates for a conducive environment for its production and exportation. This has led to mega hydrogen projects such as Masdar and ENGIE's Green Hydrogen Project and Dubai Green Hydrogen Project (Sriram and Mense, 2024). For Kenya, such mega-projects showcase the potential of technology transfer and surplus production models, offering pathways to address technical gaps while advancing toward energy independence – albeit at smaller, context-appropriate scales.

This partnership creates opportunities that extend beyond energy generation. For the UAE, Kenya offers market access within one of Africa's fastest-growing renewable energy markets, while for Kenya, the benefits include enhanced energy security, lower fiscal dependence on Western donors, and job creation through technology-intensive sectors such as solar assembly, grid expansion, and green hydrogen pilot plants. Joint ventures could also attract foreign direct investment (FDI) and accelerate local skills transfer, narrowing Kenya's technological gaps. Together, the collaboration embodies South-South cooperation, providing a counterweight to the dominance of traditional donors such as the United States, Europe, and China (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2025).

As the UAE advances toward surplus renewable energy production, including green hydrogen through mega-projects like Masdar's global hydrogen portfolio and Dubai's Green Hydrogen Project, new opportunities emerge to channel this output into African markets. For Kenya, this means access to lower-cost hydrogen and ammonia imports for industrial use, as well as partnerships to build a significant domestic capacity for renewable energy through wind (4,600 MW) and high-DNI solar zones (Ministry of Energy and Petroleum, 2023). For the UAE, it secures export diversification and deeper geopolitical influence in Africa.

Crucially, by leveraging oil revenues to finance green transition, the UAE challenges conventional models of energy diplomacy. But the promise of equitable gains, illustrated by projections of up to $351 million in GDP boosts from similar Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPAs), depends on mutual political will and policy alignment (Menon, n.d.). Without mechanisms for local capacity-building, technology spillovers, and fair risk-sharing, Kenya risks remaining primarily a consumer rather than a co-producer of clean energy solutions.

Existing Renewable Energy Initiatives Between Kenya and the UAE

Engagement with Africa, including Kenya, has become a strategic priority for the UAE, particularly in promoting economic growth and improving livelihoods (PourEsmaeili, 2025). A potential area for enhanced cooperation lies in renewable energy, encompassing initiatives, commitments, and projects, as well as broader forms of engagement. This includes bilateral efforts with African countries under frameworks such as the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). Kenya is among the African countries that will benefit from the UAE's green finance pledge. The UAE offered a pledge of $4.5 billion during the African Climate Summit in Nairobi, held between 4th and 6th September 2023, marking a significant milestone in green financing for Kenya and other African countries (Payton, 2023). The UAE pledge was to be sourced from various commercial institutions, including AMEA Power, Masdar, Etihad Credit Insurance (the UAE's export credit agency), and the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (Dal Maso et al., 2020).

Although this pledge was directed broadly toward African countries, Kenya's inclusion signifies a notable evolution in UAE-Kenya relations, reflecting a shift beyond traditional oil diplomacy toward cooperation in renewable energy financing and sustainable development. Notably, the UAE is not just a financer but also seeks to develop a mutual and strong partnership by supporting technical and regulatory aspects and acting as a channel to global green finance. For example, while the UAE uses green sukuk and green bonds nationally and globally (Richardson, 2020), it has also adopted international guidance on renewable energy, including the Paris Agreement and the UAE Energy Strategy 2050 domestically (Locke et al., 2023; Ibrahim et al., 2022).

Beyond the $4.5 billion commitment, other initiatives and commitments between African countries, such as Kenya, include the Africa Green Industrialization Initiative (AGII) and Etihad 7 Program. AGII emanated from the $4.5 billion UAE commitment and was championed mainly during the 28th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP28) in Dubai. At the COP28, both Kenya and the UAE jointly promoted AGII. AGII's key objective is to mobilize financing for up to15GW of renewable energy capacity in Africa by 2030. Among African countries, Kenya is a prospective frontrunner beneficiary of this initiative (Roscoe, 2023). The Etihad 7 Program, on the other hand, not only facilitates access to green financing but also seeks to ensure that renewable energy development is aligned with national development priorities and long-term sustainability objectives (Dal Maso et al., 2020). This contributes to sustainable development by de-risking renewable energy investments and encouraging greater public and private sector participation in the renewable energy sector.

These renewable energy initiatives are also championed through bilateral joint ventures. The UAE-Kenya CEPA, signed in 2025, marks a pivotal step in fostering renewable energy cooperation, shifting from traditional oil diplomacy to sustainable energy partnerships (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). The UAE, through its Masdar Initiative, launched in 2006 with construction in Masdar City beginning in 2008, has positioned itself as a global leader in renewable energy, targeting a 7% renewable energy share in its domestic mix while exporting expertise and capital (Kolek, 2025; Christley et al., 2021). CEPA facilitates investment protections and technology transfer, enabling UAE firms to tap into Kenya's growing energy market, particularly in green hydrogen projects, solar, and geothermal sectors.

Kenya benefits from the UAE's advanced renewable technologies, including photovoltaic systems, concentrated solar power, and smart grid solutions, which are compatible with the country's high solar radiation of 4–6 kWh/m^2/day (Dal Maso et al., 2020). CEPA pilot programs should prioritize solar micro-grids in ASAL areas to expand rural electricity access. The UAE has financial resources from ADFD, the sovereign wealth fund, and green sukuk that support renewable energy projects. For instance, the green sukuk frameworks support renewable energy projects, such as solar energy initiatives, by providing Shariah-compliant financing mechanisms that mobilize capital for project development and implementation (Richardson, 2020). Such resources provide subsidies and low-interest loans to help in overcoming economic limits (Fields et al., 2023). In addition to financial resources, there have been several training initiatives for Kenyan engineers to enhance local capability in battery storage and grid control. These trainings are conducted in various UAE facilities such as Masdar City.

Despite the implementation of several initiatives aimed at advancing renewable energy development, significant challenges remain. Key obstacles include policy misalignment, inadequate local manufacturing capacity, and limited technology transfer. In many instances, UAE investments have concentrated on the deployment of finished products and infrastructure rather than on developing local production capabilities (Ubaid and Gulrez, 2025). One recommended strategy to help close this gap is through the expansion of the CEPA to include joint ventures in solar panel and wind turbine manufacture. Kenya can effectively curb or minimize its dependency rate on fossil fuels in various ways, including utilizing the UAE's technological and financial strengths, aligning its policies with the 2030 non-carbon economy objective and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 7, and encouraging South-South cooperation as an alternative to Western domination (Komendantova et al., 2019).

Outside the umbrella of Africa's broad development and CEPA, Kenya and the United Arab Emirates have concluded several renewable energy investment agreements and implemented a range of collaborative projects. One notable example is the partnership between G42, an Emirati artificial intelligence and technology company, and Ecocloud to develop a geothermal-powered data center in Olkaria. The project is designed to leverage Kenya's substantial geothermal energy resources while supporting the growth of sustainable digital infrastructure. By integrating renewable energy with advanced data-processing technologies, the initiative demonstrates the potential for UAE-Kenya cooperation to extend beyond traditional energy relations and contribute to innovation-driven, low-carbon economic development. It also boosts the green tech capacity of Kenya by almost 100 MW at the initial phase, with the capacity to scale up to 1 GW (Matata, 2024).

This investment expands Kenya's pathways toward decarbonization by fostering technological development and innovation in the renewable energy sector. It also presents an opportunity for sustainable economic growth and strengthens Kenya's aspirations to become a leading digital hub in Africa. By leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) and cloud computing technologies, the project is expected to enhance digital service delivery, improve data-processing capabilities, and support the development of the country's digital economy (Matata, 2024). Importantly, G42 is collaborating with Microsoft in the development of the Olkaria Geothermal-Powered Data Centre, thereby bringing an additional international dimension to the project. This partnership introduces a new form of renewable energy diplomacy, whereby UAE investors collaborate with other global technology and infrastructure partners to implement renewable energy projects in Kenya. Such arrangements not only facilitate investment and technology transfer but also strengthen transnational networks for innovation, knowledge exchange, and sustainable development. As a result, the Olkaria initiative illustrates how renewable energy cooperation can serve as a platform for broader economic, technological, and diplomatic engagement between Kenya, the UAE, and other international actors.

Another project that showcases renewable energy collaboration is the proposed 300 MW Suswa Geothermal Project, where Masdar is involved through financial support. As evident from the Green Energy Africa Summit 2023, this project is intended to generate more electricity for the Kenyan national grid. The project has also attracted the Indonesian government as a key partner through its company, Pertamina Geothermal Energy Company (PGEC) (Green Energy Africa Summit, 2023). The $1 billion project reflects a collaborative effort between the UAE and Kenya to advance sustainable industrialization in Kenya by harnessing the country's renewable energy potential, especially geothermal resources.

Kenya has also made an agreement with AMEA Power to establish the 200 MW Paka Geothermal project, which will cost almost $800 million to enhance energy security (Cariaga, 2023). Additionally, Mombasa's 1 GW electrolyzer green hydrogen project is planned to be undertaken by AMEA Power, with support from Softbank. This aligns well with Kenya's energy transition plan, which puts hydrogen energy generation as key to advancing its technology in decarbonization, as outlined in its Energy Transition Plan 2023–2050 (Reul et al., 2025). However, it should be noted that the latest public update for the hydrogen project was in September 2023, and its realization remains uncertain as the project's status remains at feasibility stage (Reul et al., 2025).

While these cooperation initiatives and agreements remain at an early stage, and their full implementation is not yet guaranteed, they nevertheless signal positive trends in UAE-Kenya collaboration in the areas of clean energy, renewable energy development, and carbon market investments. This emerging partnership contrasts with the more established and longstanding oil-based cooperation between the two countries. The UAE continues to play a critical role in Kenya's energy security as a major supplier of refined petroleum products, including kerosene, jet fuel, gasoline, and diesel. Furthermore, alongside Saudi Aramco, Kenya has engaged the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) and the Emirates National Oil Company (ENOC) to facilitate the importation of petroleum products from the UAE under credit arrangements. These agreements underscore the continued importance of hydrocarbons in bilateral relations, even as both countries explore opportunities for cooperation in renewable energy and sustainable development.

The government-to-government (G-to-G) agreement, originally signed in April 2023, has since been extended and is expected to remain in force until 2028. Given its success in facilitating petroleum imports through deferred payment arrangements, a similar financing mechanism could be explored to support renewable energy projects. Such an approach could help address financing constraints and accelerate investment in clean energy infrastructure. In contrast to oil-sector agreements, renewable energy initiatives often experience slower implementation due to higher upfront costs, regulatory complexities, and longer project development timelines. Consequently, oil diplomacy continues to dominate economic engagement between Kenya and the UAE. The persistence of this imbalance, coupled with the slow pace of renewable energy project implementation, underscores the need to deepen and expand UAE-Kenya cooperation in renewable energy. Strengthening collaboration in areas such as green financing, technology transfer, infrastructure development, and capacity building would help accelerate the energy transition while broadening the foundations of bilateral relations beyond hydrocarbons.

Conclusion

Kenya remains vulnerable to climate impacts and continues to experience slow economic growth, despite its significant renewable potential in hydrogen, geothermal, wind, and solar. However, the country's heavy reliance on fossil fuels has allowed oil diplomacy to dominate its energy relations with the Middle East, while renewable energy initiatives often take longer to materialize. Kenya-UAE renewable energy partnerships offer a transformative pathway to transcend oil diplomacy, aligning with global decarbonization and SDG 7. Kenya's vast solar, wind, and geothermal potential, combined with the UAE's technological expertise and oil-funded capital, can address energy access deficits for millions while fostering economic diversification.

To effectively address challenges such as financial constraints, policy misalignments, and technological gaps, it is essential to develop targeted bilateral agreements, public-private partnerships (PPPs), and green financing mechanisms. This is illustrated by emerging frameworks and early-stage agreements, including the UAE-Kenya CEPA 2025, the agreements in different specific renewable energy projects – including the Suswa Geothermal Project, the agreement between G42 and Ecocloud on the Geothermal Powered Data Centre, and the planned Mombasa 1 GW electrolyzer green hydrogen project.

Furthermore, both Kenya and UAE can achieve energy security and sustainability through the establishment of a regional task force to assure the African renewable energy initiative, particularly the Africa Green Industrialization Initiative and Etihad 7 Program, harmonizing regulations, and diversifying renewable investments. This requires swift action to transform potential into concrete projects, ensuring a balanced transition that fosters South-South bilateral cooperation, meeting climate-related goals, and economic progress.

This policy paper thus recommends the formation of a UAE-Kenya Renewable Energy Task Force, involving Kenyan and UAE expertise and think-tanks, to develop a 5-year roadmap with an overall target of 6,260 MW increase of renewable energy capacity by 2030. Both governments should harmonize regulations by drawing strongly on elements of the UAE's transparent PPP model. They should also diversify investment risks mitigation as outlined in the Kenya National Energy Compact 2025–2030 (KNEC) through insurance mechanisms and consolidated green funds. This will enable an increased diversification of energy mix investment with an increased renewable energy capacity growth rate of 2.8% annually, as projected in the KNEC 2025–2030. These measures will align with Kenya's 2030 non-carbon goal, enhance energy security, and position both countries as emerging leaders in the global energy transition.

Policy Options and Recommendations

The following policy options and recommendations are proposed to address the financial, policy, and technological barriers affecting renewable energy cooperation between Kenya and the UAE:

For the UAE and the Kenyan Governments

1 - Strengthening Bilateral Renewable Energy Agreements

Both governments should expand the UAE-Kenya CEPA to include specific renewable targets within a specific timeframe (e.g., by scaling up the installed capacity to 1,800 MW of geothermal, 2,060 MW of hydro, 965MW of wind, 577 MW of solar by 2030, with an overall target of 6,260 MW increase of renewable energy capacity), with clauses for investment protections and technology transfer. The current CEPA 2025 provides limited detail on green investments and sustainability. It does not provide specifics of renewable energy projects and initiatives to be implemented, creating persistent gaps in implementation and fulfillment of commitments.

The CEPA must thus be geared towards catalyzing renewable energy cooperation in three ways: establishing direct sections stipulating green investment programs, embedding sustainability clauses in all CEPA agreements, and grounding the Memorandum of Understanding on a legal framework that provides for the implementation process, including the timelines of green energy projects and initiatives. These bilateral agreements should also align with international renewable energy commitments and legal standards for viability. To make the bilateral agreements lucrative, agreements should be based on mutual benefit and fairness. The Kenyan government should develop plans to mitigate investment risks and offer tax incentives, while the UAE should ensure favorable investment terms and local participation.

2 - Encouraging Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)

The two countries should encourage UAE firms such as Masdar and DEWA to collaborate with Kenya's Ministry of Energy on co-funded projects, such as geothermal expansion in the Rift Valley. PPPs can leverage the UAE's hydrocarbon-based capital to reduce Kenya's fiscal burden. Currently, renewable-energy cooperation between the two countries remains largely confined to private actors, often overlooking public priorities. This makes most PPPs in renewable energy insufficiency adapted to the Kenyan context.

The two governments should partner to prioritize renewable energy infrastructure through PPPs, but consider local interests, such as job opportunities. This will provide the projects with the social license required to gain community support and ensure sustainability. Lack of social licenses invites social protests as the locals feel their interests are overlooked. This means that the Kenyan government should follow the stipulations of the PPP Act, while the UAE investors should work within the international norms and standards.

3 - Promoting Technology Transfer and Capacity Building

Both governments should establish UAE-led technical training programs for Kenyan engineers in smart grid and battery storage technologies. Masdar and other UAE companies, such as AMEA Power, should be encouraged to set up solar panel manufacturing in Kenya by 2030, thus reducing costs and building local expertise.

Additionally, both governments can facilitate exchange studies and benchmarking to ensure that Kenyan laborers are equipped with first-hand technical capacity on PV technology, hydrogen generation, and wind power establishment. However, technology transfer must go beyond equipment and technical training. It should include selective sharing of proprietary information, licenses, and patents to enable genuine local innovation. Capacity building can also be enhanced through joint research initiatives and co-creations, offered both physically and digitally.

4 - Advancing Innovative Financing Mechanisms

The two countries should create a specific UAE-Kenya Green Energy Fund Initiative to mobilize a share of UAE hydrocarbon revenues in the form of grants and loans with specific timelines. This can be both a multilateral and a bilateral initiative. Kenya has already established the Africa Green Industrialization Initiative. This specific funding channel can build on this, but within the framework of Kenya's green energy cooperation with the UAE.

5 - Enhancing Policy Alignment, Institutional Strengthening, and Creation of Country-based Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Department:

Both governments should re-examine their green energy diplomacy and align the existing policies to the current needs of renewable energy. Institutions for negotiations, such as Kenya's Ministry for Energy and Petroleum and the UAE Ministry of Energy and Infrastructure, must also be strengthened towards energy diversification endeavors. This involves the nomination of qualified green energy envoys.

Finally, Monitoring and Evaluation departments in both countries should be established to track renewable investment progress, inform decision-making, and assess performance. Many investment agreements are signed, but their implementation pathways often remain undefined. The country-based M&E departments will collaboratively address this gap and inform policy alignment and institutional strengthening.

For the Private Sector

6 - Enhancing Private Sector Involvement in Policymaking

While private actors such as Masdar, AMEA Power, and G42 remain key actors in innovative green financing and technology transfer, a major gap in UAE-Kenya renewable energy cooperation is their limited involvement in green energy policymaking. They tend to play a reactive rather than proactive role in government-led initiatives. This is particularly common in Kenya. The private sector should aim to contribute to policy formulation through structured consultation and collaborate with governments to ensure policy adoption and implementation.

7 - Fulfilling Renewable Energy Commitments

Oil-sector commitments are often fulfilled more efficiently, which contributes to the dominance of oil diplomacy. The UAE private sector commitment, such as the planned Mombasa 1 GW green hydrogen project to be established by AMEA Power through its support to Softbank, must be honored. Honoring renewable-energy commitments would expand green-energy diplomacy by demonstrating success and attracting additional UAE investors.

For Experts and Researchers from Both Countries

8 - Formation of a Renewable Energy Taskforce

Experts and researchers from both countries should establish a Renewable Energy Taskforce composed of representatives from Kenya and UAE to develop periodic roadmaps for green energy diplomacy. Additionally, the taskforce should be attached to the Monitoring and Evaluation departments at the Energy ministries to provide technical insight and help in developing a performance assessment report.

9 - Promoting Joint Research Initiatives to Boost Technical Capacity Building

Experts and researchers from both countries should engage in joint research initiatives to enhance technical capacity and support the development of viable renewable energy projects. Such partnerships would help identify and assess investment opportunities, including wind energy projects in high-potential regions such as Marsabit County. By generating robust empirical evidence on project feasibility, costs, and expected returns, joint research would reduce investment uncertainty and strengthen the case for funding from donors, financial institutions, and private investors. Ultimately, these initiatives would contribute to more effective renewable energy planning and reinforce bilateral cooperation in the clean energy sector.

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Rethinking Regional Security: Linking the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa for Sustainable Peacebuilding

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This policy paper explores the overlooked strategic potential of security collaboration between the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite shared challenges, differentiation in security provision persists. This fragmentation stems from inherited colonial spatial logics and the failure to recognize that space plays a dynamic role in shaping security production. This paper argues that sustainable peacebuilding requires regional self-awareness and a recalibration of how regional security is conceptualized and practiced. By reviving collective memory, reimagining security architectures, and remapping the regions as interconnected zones of cooperation, new possibilities for collective agency and resilience emerge. The paper calls for a paradigm shift in how security is approached, urging Sub-Saharan African and Middle Eastern states to build grounded, relational, and autonomous security architectures.

Keywords: Regional security cooperation, Middle East–Sub-Saharan Africa relations, security architecture, peacebuilding, interregional cooperation, regional resilience

Context and Problem Statement

This policy paper is situated within the context of persistent disparities in security provision between the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, which have been exacerbated by the treatment of the regions as distinct theaters of insecurity. This separation is especially glaring in the face of growing shared threats. According to a relevant Security Council Report (2025), the Sahel region of Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 19% of all terrorist attacks worldwide and 51% of global terrorist related deaths in 2024, up from 48% of global terrorism deaths in 2023. While the epicenter of global terrorism has shifted to the Sahel, the Middle East increasingly faces terrorist attacks. Climate-related displacement is surging, with more than 7.5 million people displaced across the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa in 2023 alone (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2024).

The impact of one region's conflict on the other reveals a complex interplay of regional dynamics that goes way beyond the immediate geographic boundaries of the conflicts themselves. The Syrian civil war and the Yemen crisis, for instance, have continuously destabilized the Middle East, with their impact increasingly manifesting as wider regional instability and disruption. The impact of cross-border threats is a pressing issue that calls for recognition of the interconnectedness and interactions between the two regions. Historical factors, including geography, trade, migration, and cultural exchange, have long shaped the relationship between the two regions and continue to influence contemporary security dynamics (Fukutomi, 2024).

Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa security problems cannot be reasonably analyzed or resolved separately from one another (Kirchner, 2007). The problem arises from the failure to view space as a relational construct. As a result, security is often treated as static, while insecurity unfolds in fluid and interconnected spaces. Resolution demands a rethinking of regional security because it is a relational matter. Reviving collective memory, reimagining security, geographing security are essential pathways towards overcoming the divide between the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa and fostering greater interregional cooperation. These strategic resources are largely untapped and neglected. If effectively harnessed, they could create significant opportunities for strengthening connections and cooperation between the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Collective Memory as Strategic Security Capital

Collective memory, being the recollection of historically embedded past experiences, plays an important role in constructing shared identities that are critical for building trust and cooperation (Mamdani, 2001). The capacity to bridge the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa lies in the ability to engage with historical solidarities and networks that once tied these regions together. These ties constitute an organic security fabric that is vital for the design of contemporary security frameworks. The lack of memory results from colonialism that deconstructed the regions' uniform identity (Mamdani, 2001). Categorization and deconstruction of the identities of the regions as separate resulted in an identity crisis that continues to shape how the regions are perceived.

Fragmentation in security provision between the two regions is partly the result of forgotten shared cultures, histories, and belief systems, which have undermined efforts to collectively address the common threats confronting both regions (Musambanyi, 2014). Collective memory can foster a reimagining of the regions, leading to a greater appreciation of their historical interconnectedness and a deeper recognition of the transregional nature of the threats they face. A shift in the conceptualization of the regions could engender a unified securitization process emanating from common threat perception. The outcome will be uniformity in security models consequential in deterring threats.

The lack of a shared inter-regional threat narrative and doctrine was evident in the case of piracy in the Gulf of Aden, which led to different analyses and responses. Sub-Saharan actors largely securitized piracy as a manifestation of state fragility and governance failure centered on Somalia. On the other hand, Middle Eastern actors securitized it as threat to maritime trade, energy security, and the safety of a strategic chokepoint. Gulf efforts emphasized naval protection of shipping while Sub-Saharan Africa responses prioritized capacity building. The coordination architecture that proved most effective was led by external regional actors, which was not entirely effective, highlighting the absence of a joint African Union (AU) and League of Arab States (LAS)/ Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) securitization process and leaving limited institutional memory on the African and Arab side once the incident declined (Onuoha & Ezirim, 2010).

Initiatives alone are not adequate; counteraction of threats also requires devising mechanisms that ensure lessons learned are preserved and circulated. Institutional memory is important because without it, regional security frameworks that have ineffectively countered threats risk becoming cyclical (Pierson, 2011). Contemporary security frameworks' loss of organic memory is as a result of their operation within external systems of governance delinked from the solidarities that tied these regions together.

Achieving institutional memory and solid security frameworks demands a strong interregional strategic culture that can influence the regions' perception of each other's security. Differences in threat perceptions in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa region demonstrate the lack of such a strategic culture. The result has been misaligned security provision due to colonialism and sovereignty anxieties.

Misalignment was also evident in 2006 when the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) advanced into Jubaland and seized Kismayo, prompting Ethiopia to deploy forces into Somalia in support of United States interests. Despite the transregional nature of this security threat and its impact on both the Horn of Africa and broader Red Sea stability, responses remained largely reactive and fragmented, lacking a coherent strategic doctrine to guide collective action. The AU, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and Gulf states did not share threat assessment and mobilize joint planning, reflecting a lack of shared strategic culture (Menkhaus, 2007).

Collective memory is a strategic resource that would enable the regions to reclaim narrative power and regenerate their own security cultures. With this, the regions will not only be subjects of insecurity but also authors of its resolution.

Historically, the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa were linked through corridors of trust, trade, and spiritual kinship (Ajú & Ylönen, 2022). The pilgrimage networks, Swahili-Arab trading routes, spiritual kinship and interfaith conflict resolution mechanisms were foundational security structures and constituted “invisible regionalism” that implied regional security built from shared practices where cooperation emerged organically (Acharya, 2018). These regions are no strangers to one another.

During the decolonization era, leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Gamal Abdel Nasser (Egypt) and Patrice Lumumba (Congo) advocated for African and Arab unity as a cornerstone of global south cooperation. In 1961, the Casablanca group brought together progressive African and Arab leaders to push for Pan African and Pan Arab liberation. Nasser supported independence movements in Algeria, Sudan and Congo, framing the struggle as a shared regional responsibility.

These acts of solidarity would challenge today’s external models of security and invite the regions to build frameworks rooted in shared political imagination and collective agency (Adogamhe, 2008 & Mazrui, 1967). Tools of transformation, such as music and sports, exist as dead capital although they have the capacity to bridge the two regions. These informal networks of connectivity embody shared memory, identity, and solidarity, serving as important resources for fostering interregional understanding and cooperation (Nye, 2011). They are not sufficiently formally recognized by policy frameworks, therefore their potential remains invisible yet invincible in fostering integration if embedded in integration policies.

Football players from North Africa often serve as bridges between Middle Eastern and Sub-Saharan African leagues, yet these exchanges are treated more as entertainment than as instruments of regional integration. This neglect perpetuates existing divisions and obscures the unifying role of sports. If these practices are harnessed, they could reinforce shared identity and mitigate divides. The invisibility of these tools in official regional security narratives has created gaps in governance and sustainable security developed systems.

In addition, interfaith conflict resolution practices and pilgrimage networks marginalized and disrupted by colonialism could also serve as tools of transformation. They reveal a forgotten infrastructure of trust and coordination. Persistence of threats experienced in the regions because of a disregard of informal tools of transformation raises the need to institutionalize collective memory. The outcome of this process would be regional self-awareness, as both regions would be able to turn inwards and realize the solutions to insecurities rather than turning outward.

Without regional self-awareness, institutions such as the Red Sea Council risk reproducing old hierarchies rather than creating new solidarities in their efforts to recenter regional initiatives around shared geographic and strategic interests (De Wall, 2019). Sustainable peacebuilding is not only about infrastructure development or security pacts but also about cultivating memory as a strategic asset ensuring that institutional learning becomes the backbone of long-term inter-regional cooperation. Collective memory is the foundation on which a reimagination of regional security can be built.

Towards a Reimagination of Regional Security

As collective memory reveals the erased solidarities between the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, reimagining extends this logic by exposing the inadequacies of the contemporary security frameworks. Reimagination implies constructing new ways of thinking and practicing security to increase the capacity of addressing today's transnational threats. The Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa are part of an interlinked security complex where interactions and interdependencies shape security dynamics (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Linking the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa demands a nuanced understanding of technology, geography, and strategy. These three elements do not operate in isolation but intersect, providing the institutional and infrastructural backbone for sustainable cooperation (Drew & Snow, 1988). Space becomes strategic not merely by location but by how one chooses the utilization of space while technology amplifies these choices. Strategy, therefore, becomes less about deterrence but more of building systems of shared resilience (Bailes & Cottey, 1992). This should be operationalized through a shift toward a cohesive strategy integrating geography, technology and strategic planning, while articulating a common vision for peace.

This can be seen in platforms such as the African Union/League of Arab States dialogues and the Horn of Africa initiatives that already gesture towards cooperative governance. These initiatives foreground regional economic security as a foundation for stability and can further be strengthened by moving away from crisis response to mutual capacity building (Williams, 2011). Regional security reimagination therefore becomes a blueprint for cooperation between the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Threats within the Red Sea corridor, such as arms trafficking from Sahel to Yemen and ideological radicalization, cannot be contained by deterrence alone. Counteraction demands a shift towards broadening security discourse to interregional levels. This demands a shift towards collective security, grounded in a broader conception of security that extends beyond military force to encompass social, economic, and human dimensions as essential foundations of resilience (Kaldor, 2007). Addressing insecurities in the two regions demands a cooperative framework that moves beyond ad hoc military coalitions and integrates broader inter-regional security strategies that combine development, governance, and resilience building for sustainable peace (Richmond, 2007).

The tendency to pursue security reforms that are detached from the nature of contemporary threats and the interconnectedness of the regions not only misguides policymakers in the present but also obscures the prospects for a sustainable and secure future. In shaping interregional collaboration, strategic planners and policymakers must have a good understanding of the historical interconnectedness of the regions. This is inherently where the past meets the future (Kissinger, 2014). An excessive focus on immediate security concerns, without a thorough understanding of their underlying causes, undermines the development of effective and consequential models for addressing the complex nature of the threats experienced across the regions (Hakkarainen, 2016).

Globalization that has intensified inter-connectivity has produced new security challenges that call for new responses tailored to the nature of the threats and the spaces in which they operate. Achieving congruence between security strategies and the operational dynamics of transnational organized criminal networks that destabilize the regions requires a reimagination of security practice. Threats such as drug trafficking, money laundering, human trafficking, and the trafficking of contraband goods require a shift from deterrence to an adaptive security model (Mutimer, 1999).

The case of Libya demonstrates the implications of such misalignment. Organized crime networks exploited the power vacuum emerging from political instability and weak institutions using the state as a transit point. Similarly, migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa use Libya as a transit point to the Middle East and Europe. While states have predominantly focused on border militarization, criminals have shifted their strategies. As a result, these measures have often produced counterproductive outcomes, highlighting the disconnect between the nature of the threats and the responses designed to address them (Lacher, 2012).

Reimagination would mean shifting from militarized, state-centric models. Such a shift would be crucial in allowing the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa to engage in joint long-range planning shaped by similar strategic cultures. This forward thinking is a visionary approach that integrates other aspects of security, such as food and health security, ensuring sustainable regional stability and peace. The lack of joint long-term strategic planning has contributed to fragmented and differentiated security provision across the region, as demonstrated by the war in Yemen, which has spilled directly into the Horn of Africa.

Consequently, Somali, Djibouti, and Ethiopian ports have been strained by refugee inflows and Red Sea trade has been disrupted. Yet the Gulf states and the countries of the Horn of Africa have not engaged in coordinated long-term planning on critical issues such as food security and public health. Instead, the Gulf states have largely prioritized military engagement through coalitions such as the Saudi-UAE intervention in Yemen, while states in the Horn of Africa have been left to contend with the conflict's humanitarian, economic, and security consequences (Mahmood, 2024). This lack of integrated planning has worsened famine and disease outbreaks, undermining regional stability that visionary cooperation could have prevented.

Sustainable regional security frameworks between the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa must, therefore, move beyond military logic to also include economic and technological cooperation as security pillars. Climate security, youth employment, and digital infrastructure must also be considered security priorities. Their exclusion from regional security agendas reflects the erosion of a broader security fabric that historically linked the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. This neglect has constrained the capacity of both regions to address the structural drivers of insecurity and build long-term resilience. Reviving this security fabric requires the restoration of collective memory and a reimagining of security beyond traditional military concerns, embracing social, economic, environmental, and technological dimensions as integral components of sustainable peace and stability. This will, in turn, inform the design of a security framework that encompasses these aspects as critical elements of security. Cooperation cannot be limited to deterrence alone, hence the need to move toward a new regional security vision.

By investing in port infrastructure in Berbera, Gulf states have reframed the Red Sea as both a commercial artery and a security buffer. Such a strategy is a demonstration of how economic infrastructure and spatial control are not separable from each other. Yet, Sub-Saharan African states still lag in developing similar strategies.

This is sufficient indication of the absence of a shared strategic culture anchored in a combination of security and economic interests. Such a strategic culture exists among Middle Eastern states such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia in their activities in Sub-Saharan Africa. African countries are yet to develop a similar strategic culture by developing a unifying framework that deliberately ties economic and security interests with foreign policy.

A people-centered regional security approach is essential. Such an approach recognizes that the legitimacy and effectiveness of security frameworks depend on their ability to address everyday vulnerabilities. Regional security frameworks are often shaped by elite dominance and military agreements, often sidelining the experiences of ordinary people. Migrant workers exploited in the Gulf, and pastoralist communities facing resource conflict along cross border zones all highlight populations for whom security must have real meaning (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2007; Bilgin, 2016). This calls for a reimagination of security from below and across, and not from above and within. Regional security should extend to political voice, economic dignity, and environmental justice to ensure sustainability. This reimagination of security will lead both regions to move towards inclusive frameworks that address structural injustices and strengthen inter-regional trust (Craze, 2013).

Distance decay due to the failure to address the root causes of insecurity, such as poverty and neglect, has created a power vacuum conducive for the emergence of alternative informal structures. The absence of state authority in both regions has fostered insecure environments that perpetuate persistent cycles of violence. Marginalized groups need to be recognized as stakeholders rather than potential threats, thereby reducing the appeal of both organic and organized criminal networks.

Yet for a reimagined security vision to take root, it must be grounded in the very spaces through which insecurities and opportunities flow. Geographing security through connectivity becomes the operational terrain where memory and reimagination converge in practice.

Geographing Security Through Spaces of Connectivity

Geographing security entails moving beyond the traditional understanding of geography by reshaping and rethinking the space in which insecurity operates. One cannot understand security or insecurity without understanding geography. Geographing is therefore indispensable in addressing security challenges between the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. Geographing helps redefine the role of space in strategic thinking by facilitating the reimagination of territoriality and connectivity, thereby revealing and reflecting the transregional nature of contemporary security challenges.

Geography is not just territory, it is constructed and politicized and so acquires meaning through practices and discourses that define space (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Port construction, surveillance technologies and trade routes turn geography into an instrument of power. It enables a rethinking of territoriality and connectivity that highlights the transregional nature of security challenges. Through this lens, scholars and policymakers can craft more contextually grounded security frameworks.

Today, networks of illicit trade and armed group mobility stretch from Libya through the Sahel and Sudan to Yemen, forming a corridor of more than 4,500 km shaped by ungoverned spaces and transnational economies. This highlights how fragmented spatial governance fuels instability (Small Arms Survey, 2024). Geographing this space requires spatial coordination, which involves infrastructures that transform space into a shared resource rather than a contested frontier. Regional maritime data-sharing platforms and jointly managed border systems are mechanisms that can embed shared governance into geography itself (Maluki & Njoki, 2024).

Regional security must also be rethought through the ways in which infrastructure transforms space into shared value. Shared corridors can reproduce dependency or foster interdependence depending on how they are socially and economically integrated. Strategic hubs such as Lamu, Berbera, and Djibouti risk becoming dead capital when they only serve external supply chains rather than the needs of the communities they traverse. For instance, although the UAE has backed expansion of Berbera to enhance connectivity with the Gulf, the benefits to Somaliland's local communities remain limited. Similar tensions are evident in Kenya's Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor, where pastoralist communities face displacement and livelihood disruptions without clear socioeconomic gains. To avoid reproducing such inequalities, infrastructure development must be people-centred, ensuring that local communities share meaningfully in the opportunities it creates.

Designing corridors that connect sea to land and branch into communities would foster interdependence and trust across the Red Sea arena. When communities from both sides of the Red Sea benefit from this infrastructure, the corridors become zones of cooperation rather than contestation. When Gulf states invest in Sub-Saharan Africa, investments should not only serve the investing Gulf states. For example, UAE firms should reinvest part of the income into Somaliland fisheries, schools and roads. Policy frameworks should therefore institutionalize community inclusion through measures such as local employment quotas, revenue-linked social development funds, and co-managed infrastructure authorities. Such mechanisms can help ensure that the states of the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa build mutually owned and locally rooted structures of resilience.

Such integration will operationalize peacebuilding by turning vulnerable maritime and border zones into platforms of shared prosperity rather than frontiers of contestation. In addition, equity and inclusion will prevent geo-economic hegemonism by promoting more inclusive forms or regional integration by embedding Gulf and Horn of Africa interactions into local production chains.

Such integration also ensures that trade corridors become mutually reinforcing rather than extractive, aligning investment with community development and regional security.

It is not enough to build ports as platforms of interdependence and maritime domain awareness; security architectures cannot be separated from the maritime dynamics that shape them. In the Red Sea arena, the maintenance of ‘good order at sea’ has become a strategic imperative, reflecting Mahan’s (1890) insight that maritime security underpins both prosperity and stability. Arms smuggling to and from Yemen or illegal fishing in the Gulf of Aden threaten not only national economies but also the viability of regional governance itself. While Gulf states such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia have invested heavily in naval capacity and surveillance systems, Sub-Saharan states remain weak in this regard. This imbalance perpetuates insecurity across both regions, as maritime routes constitute shared strategic spaces whose security depends on collective rather than unilateral efforts.

This disparity also produces unequal dependencies. Bridging the two regions requires turning maritime corridors into spaces of cooperative awareness through shared satellite surveillance, joint coast guard training and community-based fisheries monitoring. By embedding Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) into regional frameworks, ports can become engines of resilience rather than hubs of external rent extraction. Such an approach reconceptualizes regional security as a form of sustainable peacebuilding grounded in mutual maritime interdependence, shared responsibility, and collective stewardship of strategic sea lanes.

The operationalization of these frameworks would enable Sub-Saharan and Middle Eastern states to escape the trap of externally imposed spatial logics and build an interregional system that reflects their collective agency and fluid territorial realities. In this way, the regions are positioned not as theaters of insecurity and conflict but as active channels of peacebuilding and collective security. Therefore, collective memory, reimagination and geographing are tools of transformation that generate a sustainable regional security framework that bridges the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Conclusion

Looking towards the future, the Middle East and Sub-Sahara African countries must anchor security cooperation in shared historical memory, spatial interdependence and regional agency. To realize this vision, IGAD, the AU, and the League of Arab States should create a joint security and resilience forum to coordinate maritime governance, border management, and climate adaptation. Kenya, Ethiopia, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, together with regional development banks, should co-finance resilience corridors linking Masdar Green City and Konza Techno City, integrating climate-smart agriculture, fintech and youth innovation hubs.

The GCC Secretariat and AU Peace and Security Council ought to transform the Lome Charter into a binding maritime security agreement, operationalized via satellite platforms and surveillance centers in Djibouti, Mombasa, and Sudan ports. IGAD, EAC and the GCC should establish a joint infrastructure authority to jointly manage Berbera, Djibouti, and Lamu ports. Civil society and academic networks should revive cultural and interfaith solidarities. These measures have the capacity to turn the shared vulnerabilities of the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa into strategic resilience shaping self-authored regional security order.

Policy Recommendations

This section presents action-oriented policy options for strengthening inter-regional cooperation between the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa by translating existing proposals into implementable directives.

1 - Establish a Joint Inter-Regional Initiative Between IGAD, the AU, and the League of Arab States Bridging the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa

IGAD and the AU, in collaboration with the League of Arab States, should create a joint interregional initiative bridging the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. This platform would curate historical trade documents, shared archives, and religious networks. It would also host annual interfaith and cultural dialogues to revive traditions that once tied these regions together. The platform should be co-financed by a levy on port revenues from Berbera, Djibouti and Lamu to ensure sustainability.

2 - Institutionalize Collaborative Ownership of Critical Infrastructure through a Joint IGAD-EAC-GCC Infrastructure Management Authority

Collaborative ownership of critical infrastructure should be institutionalized by regional organizations as the foundation for sustainable peace. A joint infrastructure management authority should be established by IGAD, the East African Community (EAC), and the GCC with the duty of co-managing the Berbera, Djibouti and Lamu ports as integrated regional growth corridors. Financing should be anchored in membership contributions.

3 - Direct Regional Development Banks of Kenya, Ethiopia, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia to Co-Finance Integrated Resilience Corridors Linking Masdar Green City and Konza Techno City

The governments of Kenya, Ethiopia, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia should direct their regional development banks to co-finance joint resilience corridors linking Masdar Green City and Konza Techno City. These corridors should incorporate climate-smart agriculture, fintech infrastructure, and youth innovation hubs. Investment in sustainable infrastructure should be treated as a security priority as this reduces vulnerabilities associated with ecological stress, unemployment and environmental degradation.

4 - Partner the GCC Secretariat with the AU Peace and Security Council to Establish a Binding AU-GCC Maritime Security Agreement

The GCC secretariat should partner with the AU Peace and Security Council to transform the Lome Charter into a binding AU and GCC maritime security agreement. This agreement should be operationalized through satellite-based maritime data sharing platform and three joint surveillance centers (Djibouti, Mombasa, and Sudan port) and satellite-based maritime data sharing platform. The internationally recognized government of Yemen should be considered as a further co-signatory.

5 - Establish Joint Labor Rights Monitoring Mechanisms for Migrant Workers under ILO Oversight in Sudan, Libya, Lebanon, and Gulf Host States

The governments of Sudan, Libya, Lebanon and the Gulf states hosting migrant labor should establish joint labor rights monitoring mechanisms under the oversight of the International Labour Organization (ILO). These mechanisms should enforce protections against exploitation, ensure access to grievance address systems, and create bilateral social protection agreements for vulnerable workers.

6 - Develop Cross-border Pastoralist Resource-Sharing Frameworks under IGAD, AU, and UNEP Coordination

IGAD and the AU, in collaboration with the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), should design cross-border pastoralist resource sharing frameworks. The frameworks should include community managed grazing corridors, climate resilience water points, and conflict mediation structures reducing tensions between pastoralist groups across fragile borders.

7 - Establish an AU-GCC Red Sea Security College and Joint Curriculum Integrating African Land Security Traditions and Gulf Maritime Expertise

The establishment of a joint curriculum built on both African land security traditions and Gulf maritime expertise should be advanced through the creation of an AU-GCC Red Sea Security college that trains officers from both regions on common doctrines of transregional threats. Exchange programs could foster shared strategic culture beyond elite military cooperation.

8 - **Institutionalize Social Investment Quotas in Gulf-Funded Port and Corridor Projects**

This should be operationalized through a mandate that at least 20% of revenues from foreign operated ports (e.g. Lamu and Djibouti) go into local social funds (e.g. schools, clinics, fisheries and pastoralist services) co-managed by local authorities and regional blocks (IGAD and GCC).

9 - **Co-Host Annual Pan-Africa and Arab Games and Establish Cultural Exchange Grants.**

Such cultural exchange grants should be established for artists, musicians and filmmakers to embed popular memory of shared identity.

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About West Asian and Sub-Sahara African Partnerships in Flux

The project explores the multi-dimensional and complex relations between selected Gulf countries (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Iran) and four Sub-Saharan countries (South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia). It aims to deconstruct and analyze their economic networks, cultural and religious affiliations, and political and security cooperation. Based on empirical research, the project provides a better understanding of Gulf-African exchange, its challenges and opportunities, as well as its implications for Europe. The project is financed by the Robert Bosch Stiftung and runs from March 2024 to February 2027.

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