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Agency in Flux

Networkability, Maneuver-ability, and Leveragability between West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa

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Contents

Acronyms

ADD	Abu Dhabi Dialogue
AFC	Africa Finance Corporation
QGC	Africa’s Q Global Commodities
ACMI	African Carbon Markets Initiative
AfCTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AU	African Union
AL	Arab League
CEPA	Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement
CT	counter-terrorism
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
DD	Doha Dialogue
EAA	Education Above All
EU	European Union
F4DP	Football 4 Development Playbook
GAL	Global Aerospace Logistics
GERD	Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IR	international relations
IRH	International Resources Holding
IHiT	Iran Innovation and Technology House
IsDB	Islamic Development Bank
IMN	Islamic Movement in Nigeria
LNG	liquified natural gas
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MGI	Middle East Green Initiative
MWL	Muslim World League
NOC	national oil company
NDB	New Development Bank
OFID	OPEC Fund for International Development
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation

OBC	Otterlo Business Corporation
OOSC	out-of-school children
PIF	Public Investment Fund
QC	Qatar Charity
QFFD	Qatar Fund for Development
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
RVCMC	Regional Voluntary Carbon Market Company
SFD	Saudi Fund for Development
SPL	Saudi Pro League
SSC	South-South Cooperation
SWF	sovereign wealth fund
S4D	Sport for Development
SME	sport mega-event
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WASSAP	West Asian and Sub-Saharan African Partnerships in Flux

This CARPO Study explores the evolving strategic partnerships between West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, which have deepened amid the rise of a multipolar world order that allows for greater flexibility and maneuvering in international relations. It examines how both state and non-state actors – from governments and companies to diaspora networks and influential individuals – exercise agency in shaping these ties through diplomacy, economic cooperation, security engagement, and soft power. Using the concept of agency and introducing the conceptual framework of the "NML nexus" (networkability, maneuverability, and leveragability), the Study highlights that while structural asymmetries remain – particularly with Gulf states wielding financial and security influence – African actors are increasingly asserting their agency. By embedding Gulf partnerships within African-led frameworks such as the AU and AfCFTA and leveraging regional rivalries to their benefit, they are actively shaping the terms and outcomes of engagement. The Study concludes that the future of West Asia–Sub-Saharan Africa relations will be co-defined by both Gulf ambitions and African agency, with the NML nexus offering a comprehensive lens to understand this dynamic relationship in an increasingly volatile global order.

Introduction

In a world of shifting power dynamics, the relationship between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states – primarily Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar, – Iran, and Sub-Saharan African nations has evolved significantly. Once a peripheral set of interactions, these ties now represent a critical area of economic, political, cultural, and strategic cooperation.

This relationship is no longer defined by Gulf states' initiatives alone. Increasingly, Sub-Saharan African nations are asserting their own agency by leveraging Gulf rivalries, the relative decline of Western influence, and opportunities for South-South Cooperation (SSC) to shape these partnerships on their own terms. This shift marks a move from a relationship based on dependency to one of negotiation, contestation, and strategic alignment.

This CARPO Study examines this dual dynamic at play by deconstructing how Gulf powers are projecting influence and how Sub-Sahara African states are actively recalibrating their external relations to assert sovereignty and optimize strategic opportunity. In this regard, it is necessary to move beyond the traditional, stereotypical, one-dimensional and simplistic view of 'Africa' as a monolithic bloc; a passive recipient of external pressures; a "theatre" of conflict and geopolitical competition from foreign powers such as the United States, China, Russia, Europe; or a victim of exploitation. Instead, the Study explores how both state and non-state actors in these regions navigate the international system, assert their interests, and shape regional and interregional dynamics through diplomacy, economic partnerships, and security cooperation between a relationship characterized by confrontation and cooperation.

The analysis thus focuses on examples from the countries included in CARPO's West Asian and Sub-Saharan African Partnerships in Flux (WASSAP) project: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Iran on the West Asian side; and South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, and Ethiopia on the Sub-Saharan African side.[1] This selection highlights states in both sub-regions with significant economic, diplomatic, or geostrategic influence.[2] To provide a clear analytical lens, this paper first delves into the concept of agency. It defines and operationalizes this concept to show how it is manifested and exercised by both West Asian and Sub-Saharan African actors. This conceptual framework will guide our analysis throughout the Study, demonstrating how these actors are not simply responding to external forces but are actively shaping their strategic environments. Afterwards, the complex agency in relations between West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa is analyzed in newly developed conceptual terms such as networkability, maneuverability, and leveragability which is defined as the 'NML nexus'. This nexus provides an analytical framework to assess and categorize different forms of communication and exchange, and to thus offer concrete examples in the complex partnership between actors from West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. As this CARPO Study is an exploratory work, the focus will primarily be on developing a theoretical lens and applying it to several case studies. The focus is less on equal representation of each of the example countries selected. Less light is shed on Iran, for example, in comparison with Gulf states. However, this Study will also serve as a framework for future research within the context of CARPO´s WASSAP project, to allow more in-depth research on the cases less emphasized in this paper.

1 CARPO, 'West Asian and Sub-Sahara African Partnerships in Flux', *https://carpo-bonn.org/en/projects/west-asian-and-sub-sahara-african-partnerships-in-flux*.

2 However, such selected countries cannot describe the multidimensional and complex relations between West Asia and Sub-Sahara Africa in total terms, but they do provide a nuanced and detailed contribution to the ongoing political and discussion about agency in mutual relations and South-South Cooperation (SSC) by outlining and deconstructing specific examples and their relevance for networkability, maneuverability, and leveragability in West AsianSub-Sahara African ties. It thus intends to observe a number of trends but does not aim to provide a comprehensive overview as only a small number of case studies is selected as part of the WASSAP project.

Agency in International Relations

In international relations (IR), the concept of agency has taken on multiple interpretations and definitions, largely shaped by how scholars approach the enduring structure-agency debate. This central issue concerns the extent to which actors can, at different levels and through specific forms of agency, shape international outcomes, as opposed to being constrained or enabled by overarching structural forces (Friedman & Starr 2024: 22). Put differently, it pertains to both the nature of agents – *who* they are and *how* they exert agency – and the nature of structures, including the spaces and conditions that shape actors' engagement in international relations. It also examines how these two elements interact and are interrelated (Wendt 1987: 339). Different theoretical traditions within IR offer distinct perspectives on this issue, leading to varied understandings of the nature of agency and its capacities (Coole 2022).

- **Realism**, for instance, prioritizes the role of sovereign states as rational actors pursuing national interest within an anarchic international system.
- In contrast, **liberalism** expands the notion of agency to include actors such as international organizations, transnational networks, and non-governmental entities, by highlighting the importance of cooperation, institutional frameworks, and interdependence.
- Lastly, **constructivism** offers a more fluid view of agency by emphasizing how it is socially constructed and embedded in normative and ideational structures.

Despite these theoretical contributions, the concept of agency remains contested, particularly regarding its ability to include all the different elements that define it and its analytical utility. A key point of debate centers on what qualifies as an agent – whether individuals, states, institutions, civil society actors, etc. – and what capacities are necessary for agency to be meaningful (Braun, Schindler & Wille 2019: 788). Critical voices further underscore that the ability to exercise agency is unevenly distributed, varying significantly across time, geography, and political context (Coole 2022). This has prompted scholars to consider how structural asymmetries, historical legacies, and geopolitical hierarchies condition the ability of actors to act effectively on the global stage.

Operationalizing Agency in Relations between Sub-Sahara Africa and West Asia: The NML Nexus

Building on the theoretical foundations of agency in international relations, this CARPO Study focuses on the role of agents and the exercise of their agency in shaping relations between Sub-Sahara Africa and West Asia, rather than focusing on structural determinants. It seeks to answer the following research questions:

- How is agency exercised in relations between Sub-Sahara Africa and West Asia?
- What are the main desired outcomes pursued through agency strategies within these relational networks?
- What are the broader implications of agency in the evolving relations between the two regions?

To explore these questions, the report adopts an actor-centric approach, referred to as the NML nexus, analyzing agency through its practical and policy-oriented dimensions, which is the *how* of agency. Within this framework, three interrelated concepts are introduced to better understand the multiple dimensions of the concept in contemporary Sub-Sahara Africa and West Asia relations:

- **Networkability (N)** refers to the capacity of actors to form, sustain, and utilize networks for foreign policy, economic, security, and cultural engagement.
- **Maneuverability (M)** refers to the ability of state and non-state actors to strategically position themselves within international relations to influence outcomes and pursue goals through diplomatic maneuvering, economic strategies, and hedging.
- **Leveragability (L)** refers to the ability of state and non-state actors to use leverage as the ability to influence other actors' behavior by strategically exploiting their dependencies or vulnerabilities.

Together, this Networkability–Maneuverability–Leveragability (NML) nexus provides an analytical framework for better understanding the diverse forms of agency, reciprocal channels of communication, and shifting patterns of influence that characterize relations between Sub-Sahara Africa and West Asia. To enable a more nuanced analysis of the NML framework, it is essential to first outline the structural context within which actors from both regions operate. This includes examining the current geopolitical landscape that shapes and constrains the exercise of agency. Importantly, these dimensions are not linear but recursive: while networks expand the scope for maneuverability and leveragability, it is through maneuvering and leveraging that networks are also built and maintained. The NML nexus is thus best understood as mutually reinforcing dynamics or process that allow to look at West Asia Sub-Saharan African relations through a relational and holistic perspective.

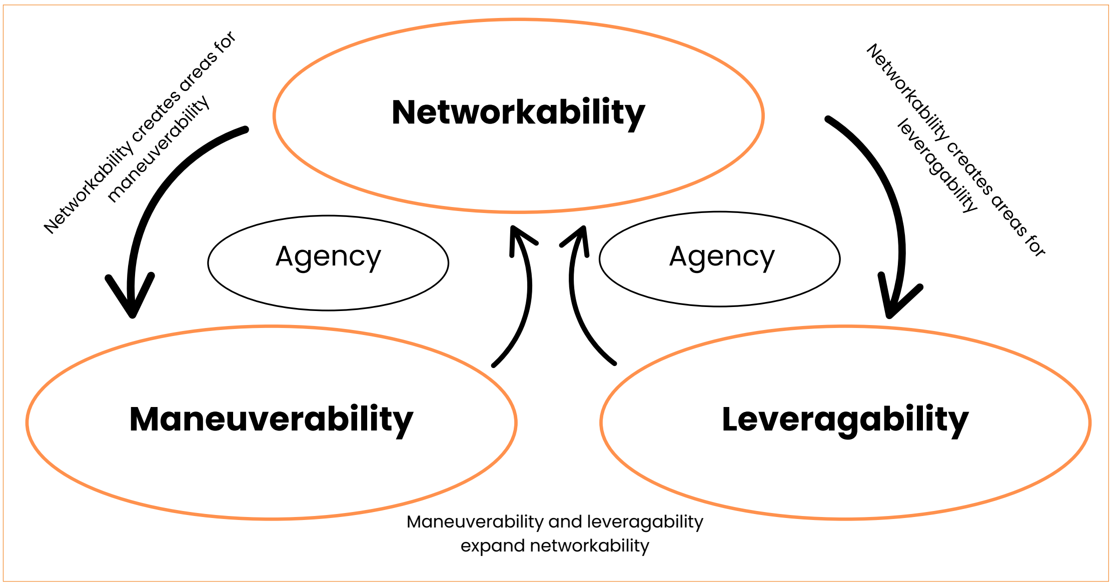

Figure 1: The NML Nexus *Source: Authors' depiction*

Relations between Sub-Sahara Africa and West Asia in a Multipolar World Order: Between Cooperation and Contestation

Intersecting Agencies, Competing Strategies: Multi-Alignment in a Multipolar World Order

Despite abundant shared interests, Sub-Sahara Africa and West Asia have historically remained relatively disconnected. Both regions, particularly Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, occupy a semi-peripheral status within the global capitalist economy. At the same time, both regions serve as critical suppliers of resources to global markets, creating natural incentives for deeper cooperation.

Following the end of the Cold War, some African countries began actively seeking new international partnerships, marking a shift from geopolitics to geoeconomics – from ideological alignments towards economic pragmatism. This realignment has unfolded within a broader transformation of the global order. The rise of multipolarity, whether understood as a material reality or a 'global imagination', has reshaped conceptualisations of global influence. Simultaneously, the rules-based international system, built through multilateral institutions over the past century, is increasingly undermined by inconsistent application of norms and fragmented consensus. As a result, international institutions now play a diminished role, giving way to bilateral, minilateral, transactional, and ad hoc multilateral arrangements. This shift has led to the rise of summit diplomacy, with a growing number of high-level meetings taking place between Sub-Saharan and West Asian countries. For many in the so-called 'Global South',[3] multipolarity is viewed as a functional reality – offering opportunities to project political influence while maximizing their leverage, preserve geoeconomic interests, and expand non-Western partnerships in what is often described as the 'rise of the rest' (Benedicte 2015).

The transition from Cold War bipolarity to a fragmented multipolar landscape has created new strategic space for maneuvre. Countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia have stepped into this space with a strategic posture that reflects both opportunism and intent. For instance, Kenya's insistence on anchoring Gulf engagement in Sudan peace talks within the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and African Union's (AU) frameworks demonstrate high networkability. Ethiopia's participation in AU and BRICS+ diplomacy further illustrates its ability to channel Gulf engagement into multilateral arenas.[4] Meanwhile, South Africa's coordination with both Global South and Western actors on climate, trade, and security showcases how strategic networking can amplify diplomatic returns.

On the other side, Gulf states – particularly the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar – pursue multi-alignment strategies to maximize influence and minimize risk, reflecting their omni-balancing approach amid great power rivalry. This omni-balancing approach defines their foreign and regional policy towards Sub-Saharan Africa. These states are promoting a "geoeconomic turn" (Belhaj 2024) characterized by regional de-escalation (Bianco 2024), risk minimisation (Ulrichsen 2023), and strategic autonomy, and driven by geoeconomic interconnectivity and geopolitical interdependence. For Gulf monarchies, regional security is a prerequisite for economic diversification and de-escalation is seen as the most viable pathway to realizing their economic objectives (Koch 2023).

Their engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa, and beyond, is thus guided by three core imperatives: (1) consolidating political legitimacy; (2) advancing economic diversification; and (3) ensuring regional security (Sons & Wiese 2015). To achieve these objectives, Gulf states deploy a hybrid strategy blending soft and hard power encapsulated in their pursuit of 'brilliance, benignity and beauty' (Vuving 2009). In this context, *benignity* is defined as the "kindness of behaviour and attitude" (Vuving 2009: 19); it reflects a nation's capacity to foster positive relations through generosity, altruism, and selflessness.

3 For more information on the contested concept of 'Global South', please refer to Wessel 2023.

4 Originally, BRICS comprised of Brazil, Russia, China and South Africa. In 2024, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran and the UAE became new members.

Brilliance evokes admiration and a sense of invincibility and inevitability, positioning nations as models to be emulated, thereby enhancing their soft power and influence (Vuving 2009: 10). Finally, *beauty* represents the alignment of shared ideals, visions, values, and goals; the ability to build trust, friendship, and cooperation, which could result in inspiration and leadership (Brannagan & Perkin 2023: 95). Together, these elements – brilliance, benignity, and beauty – aim to brand Gulf states as 'good' alternatives (Sons 04.12.2024) for post-colonial Western powers or newly interventionist powers in Africa such as China.

While countries in both regions cite shared history and cultural ties as a basis for engagement, individual state involvement is fundamentally driven by intertwined security and economic motivations and could result in competition and rivalry (Al-Zubair 2024). Each Gulf state promotes SSC while vying for diplomatic allegiance in Sub-Saharan Africa. This competition was especially visible during the Gulf crisis (2017-2021), when intra-Gulf rivalries spilled into Africa. Financial incentives were used to sway allegiances, and the diplomatic blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt intensified regional rivalries between Saudi Arabia and the UAE on one side, and Qatar and Turkey on the other. In light of this conflict, Qatar's efforts to secure port deals in Sudan and Somalia, for instance, were either short-lived or ultimately fell through, underscoring the instability that internal Gulf frictions can create (Al-Zubair 2024). The Horn of Africa, with its strategic maritime routes and abundant natural resources, emerged as a key geopolitical battleground during this period. Today, Gulf states are filling a strategic vacuum left by other major powers, often projecting their own rivalries onto the region (Ding 2024).

This dynamic is particularly evident in Sudan, where the ongoing civil war reflects not only domestic strife but also external interference. The UAE has been described as a 'sub-imperial' power actively backing the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) – a paramilitary group accused of war crimes and ethnic cleansing (Mahjoub 2025). The RSF's ties to the UAE deepened through transactional arrangements, including military support in Yemen and control over Sudan's lucrative gold trade, much of which is smuggled to the UAE. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has provided financial backing to the opposing Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2025). This direct support for rival military factions illustrates how Gulf competition can amplify conflict and fragility in Sub-Saharan African nations. The Egypt–Ethiopia dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) further demonstrates how Gulf rivalries can reshape African alliances. As tensions escalated, Egypt aligned with Qatar and Turkey, while its former Gulf allies – Saudi Arabia and the UAE – adopted more neutral or even opposing positions. These shifting alignments underscore the fluid and often unpredictable nature of these relationships. Such patterns are likely to intensify, shaping the future of relations between Sub-Saharan African states and their allies in the Gulf region.

Following the Arab Spring, the UAE reportedly bankrolled the military coup in Egypt and supported factions in Libya, aiming to preserve a regional order rooted in authoritarian stability. This approach is not seen as an isolated incident but rather part of a broader, well-funded strategy that combines economic extraction with "authoritarian alliance-building and counterrevolutionary politics, under the cover of diplomatic sophistication and global partnerships" (Mahjoub 15.08.2025). The UAE's reported backing of the RSF in Sudan is widely viewed as a prime example of this strategy in action. Saudi Arabia's invitation of suspended AU member states – Gabon, Niger and Sudan – to the inaugural Saudi–Africa summit held in Riyadh in November 2023 further raised concerns about the Saudi's commitment to Africa's governance principles and long-term interests. Experts argued that the move appeared to undermine AU norms designed to promote good governance, and suggested a preference for engaging with specific, often undemocratic, factions (Kinkoh 2023). Such selective support risks straining relations between Gulf states and the AU, a critical agent in promoting African interests on the global stage. It also stands in contrast to the diplomatic mediation efforts that some Gulf states, like Qatar, have undertaken in conflicts such as the one between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda (Custers & Kinkoh 2025). While some argue that Saudi Arabia's engagement with coup leaders reflects a pragmatic approach resulting in cooperation agreements across various sectors, it also highlights the Gulf states' ability to maintain ties during periods of political instability (Wilson April 2025). This dual strategy, combining mediation with military or financial backing for one side of a conflict, underscores the often contradictory nature of Gulf foreign policy in Africa.

The notion of a unified Gulf approach to Sub-Sahara Africa is therefore an oversimplification. Intellectual elites across the region remain skeptical of Gulf interests, viewing them as temporary and lacking a long-term strategic vision. Moreover, Gulf engagement is often perceived as infringing on African states' sovereignty. A clear example of this is the projection of the Iran–Saudi rivalry onto African soil. In Nigeria, this proxy conflict intensified sectarian tensions in 2016 between the Saudi-backed Sunni Izala Movement and the Iran-linked Shia Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN). Saudi Arabia was accused of financing anti-Shia campaigns and supporting the Nigerian military's crackdown on the IMN. In contrast, Iran's former President Hassan Rohani called for restraint, and Iran's envoy in Nigeria publicly advocated for the release of the IMN leader (The New Arab 06.11.2016). This case illustrates how regional rivalries can be imported into African countries, exacerbating existing internal divisions and threatening national stability. Given the ongoing political interventions and escalating conflicts, such divisions and fault lines are likely to deepen and become entrenched in fragile and conflict-ridden states across Sub-Saharan Africa where various powers, including Gulf states, pursue specific economic interests by carving out zones of interest (Hassan & Mandouh 2024).

Security and Diplomatic Engagement: Maritime Control and Stability as Precondition for Growth

Security interests – particularly around the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa – are central Gulf states strategic interests. Saudi Arabia and the UAE perceive instability in Sub-Sahara Africa as a direct threat to maritime security, oil trade routes, and flagship initiatives such as Saudi Arabia's NEOM smart city project (Heiberg 2020). Conflict spillovers (e.g., Yemen–Somalia) and irregular migration are also viewed as shared threats, framing security cooperation not only in terms of counterterrorism but also geoeconomic stability. Saudi Arabia, in particular, has linked its military intervention in Yemen since 2015 to broader regional dynamics, exerting significant pressure on governments in the Horn of Africa to support its campaign against the Shi'i Houthi militia. Sudan, for instance, deployed between 7,000 and 30,000 troops and militiamen (Amin 22.06.2019) while Eritrea sent 400 soldiers (Tadesse 2016). In exchange, Riyadh deposited over USD 1 billion into Sudan's Central Bank in 2015 (Cafiero 23.11.2015). The kingdom has also supported counter-terrorism (CT) initiatives such as the Sahel Joint Military Force, aimed at combating violent extremism and human trafficking in Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad (La Lettre du Continent 2018). Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia subsequently joined the Saudi-led military coalition. The establishment of the Red Sea Council in 2020 further signalled Riyadh's intent to consolidate its leadership in a region critical to its economic and geostrategic ambitions.

In recent years, the UAE has emerged as the most militarily active Gulf state in Sub-Saharan Africa. Following the onset of the Yemen war, the UAE persuaded Eritrea to sever ties with Iran and allow the construction of a military base in Assab to support its operations. This growing Emirati presence in Eritrea has raised concerns in Ethiopia, which has experienced regional tensions since 1998. In response, Ethiopia has engaged in diplomatic efforts to encourage the UAE to recalibrate its relationship with Eritrea (Cannon & Rossiter 2017). The UAE has since supported Ethiopia's efforts to gain access to seaports via Berbera,[5] a move that sparked tensions with Somalia and other regional actors including Egypt, Eritrea, and Djibouti (Gebru 2025). The UAE has cultivated strong ties with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed through a blend of security cooperation and infrastructure investment: Shortly after Abiy assumed office, the UAE pledged USD 3 billion in aid and investment (Maasho 2018). Today, the UAE maintains military bases, counterterrorism partnerships, and provides training and arms to allied governments and non-state actors. Investments such as those by UAE logistical companies DP World and AD Ports in Somalia, Senegal, and Tanzania form part of a broader strategy to control maritime security and trade. Between 2016 and 2024, the UAE signed eight CT agreements with Somalia, Puntland, Ethiopia, Chad, Mauritania, Mali, Senegal, Kenya, and Mozambique (Ardemagni 2025). It has also supplied military equipment to state and non-state actors in Sudan, Libya, and Ethiopia. Notably, the UAE has been accused of delivering drones to Ethiopian forces during the Tigray conflict and training Ethiopia's elite Republican Guard, formed in 2018 to protect the prime minister. This underlines the close ties between President Abiy and the Emirati leadership on a personal level. In January 2025, experts from the Dubai Police and UAE Ministry of Interior trained the Ethiopian Federal Police in cybercrime investigations, VIP protection, and counterterrorism, further strengthening bilateral security cooperation (Horn Review 2025). Kenya has also benefited from Emirati military support. In 2018, it purchased helicopters from the UAE to bolster its operations against al-Shabaab. In 2019, UAE-based Global Aerospace Logistics (GAL), part of the EDGE defence conglomerate, signed an agreement with the Kenyan Air Force to provide aircraft maintenance and overhaul services (Edge Group UAE 2019).

Iran, meanwhile, views the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea as vital for its strategic depth and as conduits for arms distribution to regional proxies. This has led to increased military cooperation, including the supply of drones and riot-control technology to regimes in Sudan, Mali, and Burkina Faso. Iran has notably provided combat drones, ammunition, and technical training to the SAF, contributing to the prolongation of Sudan's civil war (Webb 2025). These developments have prompted regional powers such as Turkey to build rival security and infrastructure networks in the Horn of Africa to counter Iranian influence.

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5 In March 2018, the UAE and Somaliland signed a deal for the development of Berbera Port, where UAE's DP World holds 51% of shares, Somaliland 30%, and Ethiopia 19%. The agreement allowed Ethiopia to establish a commercial hub at Berbera, with a commitment to invest USD 80 million in a 260-kilometer road linking the port to its borders. However, Ethiopia failed to fulfill this infrastructure pledge, leading Somaliland to declare in June 2022 that Ethiopia lost its ownership stake in the port due to non-compliance (Idaan 2024; Khan, 2018).

Economic Engagement: Investment-Led Geoeconomic Projection

Geoeconomic statecraft and economic diversification are central to Gulf states' engagement with Sub-Sahara African states. While each Gulf country's engagement varies in scope and sectoral focus, all aim to promote their brilliance through investment-led influence and trade. The UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have emerged as prominent investors across African economies, particularly in strategic sectors such as ports, energy, agribusiness, and critical minerals. In 2022, exports from the six GCC countries to Africa totalled approximately USD 169 billion accounting for 15 percent of their global export value of USD 1.08 trillion. These exports primarily comprised petroleum products, machinery and transport equipment, chemicals, building materials, edible products of animal origin, meat and edible offal, edible fruits, nuts and fruit peels, among others. Imports from Africa stood at USD 59.4 billion, representing 12.5 percent of the GCC's total imports valued at USD 475.8 billion (Kinkoh 2024).

Countries like Nigeria and South Africa have strategically anchored their economic engagement with Gulf states within broader continental frameworks. Nigeria, for instance, leverages the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to promote local beneficiation and industrial development in extractive and manufacturing sectors (Economic Commission for Africa 2025). South Africa, meanwhile, has used its trade relations with the UAE – its largest Gulf partner – to negotiate on issues such as environmental standards, digital infrastructure, and critical minerals processing (UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2025). Its role within BRICS+ amplifies its ability to embed African priorities in regional and global trade dialogues.

Among Gulf actors, the UAE is the most economically embedded in Africa. Between 2019 and 2023, it invested over USD 110 billion, primarily in ports, agriculture, mining, energy, and ICT infrastructure (AEW Week 10.04.2025). This accounts for roughly 60 percent of all Gulf capital inflows into East Africa (Chido 2024). The number of African companies registered with the Dubai Chamber rose by 15.5 percent since 2019, reaching 32,000 by 2023 with new offices established in Ghana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, and South Africa (iAfrica 22.08.2023). Kenya and Ethiopia are top-priority markets. In Kenya, the UAE leads Gulf investment, spearheading major initiatives such as the USD 800 million Galana Kulalu irrigation project, which involves leasing 250,000 acres of farmland to three Emirati firms. This is complemented by a planned USD 1 billion geothermal-powered data center co-financed by Emirati AI firm G42 and Microsoft. The UAE is also in advanced negotiations to extend the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway into Uganda and South Sudan.

Additionally, the Abu Dhabi Sovereign Wealth Fund has a pending USD 500 million investment in Kenya's mining sector (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2025). Kenya's signing of a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the UAE in 2024 marked a historic milestone as Kenya became one of four countries in Sub-Saharan Africa to have signed the CEPA pending ratification, alongside Angola, Central African Republic and DRC (Kenya Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs 2025). Kenyan negotiators strategically framed the agreement around local value addition, trade facilitation, and investor accountability. Demonstrating financial agency, the Kenyan government delayed the drawdown of a USD 1.5 billion loan from the UAE in early 2025 to align the transaction with domestic fiscal plans and ongoing International Monetary Fund (IMF) engagements (Miriri 2025).

Similarly, Ethiopia, leveraging its geostrategic position in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea corridor, has attracted substantial UAE investment. Abu Dhabi-based real estate firm Eagle Hills announced a USD 1.5 billion housing project in Addis Ababa known as La Gare, while Dubai's ALEC Engineering & Contracting LLC invested USD 50 million in renovating the Addis Ababa municipality headquarters and was also engaged in refurbishing the Prime Minister's office (Gelila 22.08.2020). While the UAE views Ethiopia as a key gateway to the region, Ethiopian authorities have positioned themselves as gatekeepers rather than mere beneficiaries, channelling investment toward logistics and infrastructure while avoiding exclusive alignment with any one Gulf actor (Verhoeven 2018). These cases reflect a broader trend of African states engaging in strategic multi-alignment by increasingly managing and balancing external competition to secure national and regional advantages.

Through firms like DP World, Masdar, and AMEA Power, the UAE leads in renewables, data infrastructure, and port operations, particularly in Kenya, Ethiopia, Angola, and Senegal. In total, DP World and the Abu Dhabi Ports Group have operated 13 port infrastructures across the continent since 2006 and signed agreements with international partners such as the UK-based CDC Group and India's Adani Ports (Maddalena & Corrado 2024). This 'string of ports' approach (Baabood 2023) not only facilitates the UAE's access to African markets, but also reflects the broader context of deepening Gulf-Asia ties. At the center of this network is Dubai's Jebel Ali port, functioning as a major hub connecting Africa with Asia (Ardemagni 2023).

In the energy sector, clean energy firms such as Dubai-based AMEA Power, Abu Dhabi-based Masdar, and the Egyptian-Emirati joint venture Infinity Power have been key drivers of renewable energy expansion in Africa (Energy Capital and Power 2023). AMEA Power, for instance, has committed to installing 1GW of green hydrogen capacity in Angola, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Mauritania, as well as currently building or operating energy plants across Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia Ivory Coast, Kenya, Morocco, South Africa, Togo, Tunisia, and Uganda, with plans for further expansion (AMEA Power (n. d.))

In the minerals sector, Emirati investments are increasingly geared toward supporting the emerging AI industry. Minerals such as copper are essential for AI development, especially in energy-intensive applications such as defense systems and date centers powered by sustainable energy (Ardemagni 2024). In 2023, Abu Dhabi's F9 Capital Management partnered with South Africa's Q Global Commodities (QGC) to produce green metals – primarily lithium, nickel and copper – across South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, Tanzania, and Namibia. In 2024, the UAE signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Kenya to collaborate in mining and technology, targeting mineral exploration, mine development, processing, refining, and marketing. Kenya's copper and tantalum reserves are central to this partnership (Emirates News Agency 24.04.2024).

Saudi Arabia, a more recent geoeconomic entrant, is rapidly scaling its presence. Unlike the UAE's diversified approach, Saudi investments are more concentrated and transactional, with a primary focus on mining, agriculture, and food security – sectors critical to the kingdom's long-term transformation. Although comprehensive data on land deals is limited, Saudi Arabia is the leading Gulf investor in overseas agriculture, with 70 percent of its investments located in Sub-Saharan Africa primarily in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Djibouti (African Farming 05.06.2012). The 2023 Saudi–Africa Summit marked a turning point, with USD 10 billion pledged and multiple MoUs signed across key sectors (Institute for Security Studies 2024). Riyadh's model is more state-led and sector-specific, emphasizing strategic assets over broad commercial engagement.

Qatar's economic approach is targeted but cautious, emphasizing aviation, infrastructure, and finance (Fenton-Harvey 2019). As one of the world's leading exporters of liquified natural gas (LNG), Qatar considers Africa as a promising market for LNG exports. However, its investment footprint remains relatively modest. As of 2020, only 18 major Qatari investment projects had been recorded in the Horn of Africa, totaling approximately USD 600 million. These include twelve projects in Ethiopia, four in Sudan, and two in South Sudan (Mosley 2021). Its key infrastructure investments include a USD 1.3 billion stake in Rwanda's Bugesera Airport (Ooredoo 2025), fintech ventures such as Airtel Africa, and bilateral infrastructure initiatives in Kenya and Ethiopia (Sahota 2025). While smaller in scale, Doha's investments often support its broader diplomatic objectives, reinforcing its soft power and strategic positioning.

When it comes to Iran, its engagement with Sub-Sahara Africa reflects a dual strategy, presenting itself as a benign development partner while simultaneously advancing geopolitical interests. In response to international sanctions and strategic imperatives, Tehran has increasingly pivoted toward Africa to expand its economic, diplomatic, and security footprint, positioning itself as a counterweight to traditional Western and regional influence. Economically, Iran has intensified its commercial diplomacy, establishing trade centers in, and signing bilateral agreements with, countries like Uganda and Tanzania. Kenya has emerged as a key partner, with Iran exporting mineral and vegetable products, and proposing the establishment of a manufacturing plant for Iranian vehicles. Tehran is also actively pursuing joint mining ventures across the continent, particularly in the Sahel region, to secure access to strategic minerals such as uranium, lithium, and cobalt, which are vital for its industrial and defense sectors (de Rohan Chabot & Deutschmann 2024). In the energy domain, Iran is leveraging its technical expertise through government-to-government agreements to support African nations in developing their oil and gas value chains. Discussions have been initiated with Uganda, Kenya, and South Africa (Tehran Times 2024). Additionally, Iran has positioned itself as an innovation partner, launching the Iran Innovation and Technology House (iHiT) in Kenya and investing in knowledge-based enterprises focused on medicine and food supply chains.

Despite differing approaches, Gulf states uniformly view states in Sub-Saharan Africa as economic partners rather than passive aid recipients. Investment flows are driven by sovereign wealth funds (SWF), national oil companies (NOC), and state-linked conglomerates, seeking long-term returns and strategic leverage. However, structural asymmetries persist: Gulf investments often prioritize extractive or logistics infrastructure, echoing colonial-era patterns of resource extraction. To counterbalance these dynamics, Sub-Saharan African states must move beyond rhetorical demands and adopt strategic conditionality. This includes integrating foreign investment into national industrial plans, mandating technology transfers, and enforcing labour protections to ensure inclusive and sustainable development (UNCTAD 2023).

Cultural and Religious Soft Power: Framing Benignity and Legitimacy

While economic engagement, minerals extraction, energy diversification and diplomacy dominate discourse on West Asian–Sub-Sahara African relations, cultural diplomacy is emerging as another vital arena for mutual agency. Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE all deploy soft power through culture, sports, education, media, and humanitarian diplomacy – via institutions such as Qatar Charity and the King Salman Relief Center – to frame themselves as constructive, benign actors. These efforts aim to position Gulf countries as attractive alternatives to Western partners, who are often perceived across Africa as overbearing or unreliable. Centuries of shared religious traditions, migration histories, and civilizational ties across the Red Sea provide a foundation for reimagining relations between the two regions. Cultural diplomacy is thus a core element of West Asian engagement in Sub-Sahara Africa. Qatar and Saudi Arabia have historically used religious outreach to shape ideological influence. Qatar supports educational institutions and scholarship programs, while Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi institutions have operated through NGOs and religious councils – though these efforts have drawn criticism for marginalizing indigenous African Islamic traditions. In recent years, Saudi Arabia's state-sponsored Wahhabi proselytization has declined, reflecting Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's push for a "return to moderate Islam"(BBC 25.10.2017). This shift is evident in the sidelining of ultra-conservative religious elites (*ulama*) and the promotion of a more centrist religious narrative. The UAE emphasizes nation branding and modernization, projecting itself as a model of 'beautiful, benign, and brilliant' stability, innovation, and governance. It promotes the 'Dubai model' – a blend of economic dynamism, administrative efficiency, and social control – through elite visits, strategic media, and educational hubs. Iran's soft power initiatives have also played a significant role in its engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa. To strengthen its ideological influence in Sub-Sahara Africa, Iran has actively promoted Shi'i Islam (Kohnert 2024), cultivated networks through religious and cultural organizations, and established business ties aimed at mitigating the impact of international sanctions. Iran has sought to build goodwill and expand its influence by engaging with local Muslim communities in countries such as Nigeria and Kenya, funding development projects, and supporting grassroot initiatives. Islamic cultural institutes have served as key vehicles for this outreach, offering education and vocational training (Keynoush 2021), and providing hundreds of annual scholarships to African students.

The NML Nexus in Flux: Deconstructing Relations between Sub-Sahara Africa and West Asia

As the previous section has demonstrated, Gulf states are no longer passive oil exporters or peripheral regional actors. They have evolved into active geopolitical entrepreneurs shaping the future of Sub-Saharan Africa through their strategic, differentiated, and increasingly institutionalized engagement. While their models differ, these Gulf states and Iran are engaging in Sub-Sahara Africa to consolidate domestic legitimacy, drive economic diversification, and project soft and hard power abroad. For Sub-Sahara African states, this evolving relationship presents new opportunities for financing, cultural diplomacy, and infrastructure development. However, it also introduces asymmetric partnerships that require careful negotiation to preserve agency and long-term interests. As ties between West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa deepen, the continent is becoming not only a partner, but also a strategic arena in broader Gulf ambitions with regional and global implications which is indicated in the outlined NML nexus.

Networkability: Balancing Bilateralism, Multi- and Minilateralism, and Informal Networks

Networkability refers to the capacity of state and non-state actors in both regions to form, sustain, and strategically utilize networks for foreign policy, economic, security and cultural objectives. This dimension of agency enables Sub-Saharan African actors to embed bilateral partnerships within broader regional, continental, or global frameworks, thereby diffusing risks and amplifying diplomatic voice. For West Asian states, networkability involves building complex webs of engagement beyond formal institutional frameworks, often through individual, bilateral, or minilateral arrangements. Informal networks – rooted in cross-border migration flows, cultural, tribal, and religious ties – also play a critical role. These connections, reinforced by soft power instruments such as sports diplomacy, also shape mutual perceptions and provide avenues for enhanced understanding and cultural dialogue. However, they can also be sites of miscommunication and contested narratives.

- **Hybrid networkability: Bi-, multi- and minilateralism:** Gulf engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa is increasingly framed as a collaborative partnership, with Gulf states positioning themselves as benign actors offering alternatives to traditional Western models. This includes involvement in conflict resolution (Dent & Ferragamo 2024). Qatar has mediated in the DRC and Rwanda conflict, while Saudi Arabia has pursued conflict resolution in Sudan. Ethiopia and Kenya have cautiously welcomed Gulf involvement, ensuring alignment with African-led peace and security architectures. Yet, without clear African institutional anchoring, these partnerships risk serving Gulf strategic ambitions more than African stability. Embedding Gulf cooperation within the AU's Agenda 2063 and regional peacebuilding blueprints is thus essential to safeguard African agency in the security domain.

  In a multipolar world, West Asian actors are also engaging more strategically at the multilateral level. AfCFTA has emerged as a key instrument of collective leverage, enabling African states to negotiate with the Gulf bloc from a more consolidated position. Officially launched in 2021, AfCFTA aims to create a single market projected to grow to 1.7 billion people and USD 6.7 trillion in consumer and business spending by 2030. For instance, Nigeria has leveraged its role in AfCFTA negotiations and various summits between Gulf and African actors to push for investment aligned with digital transformation and sustainable development. These platforms offer African states the ability not only to influence global norms, but to redefine them – ensuring Gulf engagement aligns with Africa's priorities and standards.

Saudi Arabia has also pursued multilateral platforms, such as the Council of Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden also referred to as 'Red Sea Council' established in 2020.[6] While its tangible outcomes remain limited, the Council serves as a vehicle for Saudi Arabia to establish regional alliances, counter rivals such as Iran, and advance shared security interests – though issues of environmental protection and economic integration remain peripheral (Custers 2021). Another Saudi initiative, the Middle East Green Initiative (MGI), launched in 2021, aims to address transregional environmental challenges. Sub-Saharan African countries, increasingly affected by climate change, could benefit from such cooperation. Saudi Arabia positions itself as a leader in this space, anticipating future migration pressures from neighboring Arab states and the Horn of Africa (Fanning & Mekelberg 2021).

The rise of SSC platforms such as BRICS+ has further opened new avenues for African countries to assert themselves in global economic governance. South Africa and Ethiopia, both active participants, have used these forums to advocate for equitable development models grounded in mutual benefit, non-interference, and reform of global financial institutions. The inclusion of the UAE and Iran as BRICS+ members in 2024, alongside Saudi Arabia's observer status, further enhances the potential for West Asian–Sub-Sahara African networkability. Some BRICS+ members anticipate new funding opportunities through the membership of the resource-rich UAE (Sons 19.09.2023). In this context, the UAE has signaled its willingness to inject capital into the New Development Bank (NDB) which has faced financial constraints due to international sanctions linked to Russia's war in Ukraine (de Mott 2023). In 2023, Emirati Minister of Economy Abdulla bin Touq Al Marri announced that the UAE could provide new deposits to support the bank's operations (Middle East Briefing 2023). Through the NDB, individual BRICS countries can be economically stabilized and strengthened with financial support from Gulf states. The expansion of BRICS countries thus signals a broader commitment by emerging and middle powers from the Global South to foster mutually accelerated economic growth, sustainable development, and a more representative, reinvigorated, and

6 The Saudi initiative includes Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia.

reformed multilateral system. It reflects the growing recognition of SSC as a catalyst for deepening economic ties between West Asia and Sub-Saharan African countries, positioning them as influential actors in global economic governance (Ferragamo 2024).

West Asian states have also increased their participation in African-led forums such as the AU, while supporting peacekeeping and development efforts, particularly in the Horn of Africa. In parallel, African nations have engaged with Middle Eastern institutions like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), reflecting their shared religious, political and cultural affinities.

Finally, Sub-Saharan African states hold significant voting power within international organizations such as the United Nations (UN). By pushing for permanent seats at the UN Security Council through the AU, these Africa states become valuable diplomatic partners for Gulf states as both regions share similar perspectives of reforming global governance structures for peace and security. Gulf governments seek African support on a range of issues – from human rights to economic development – and in return, offer investment and political backing. These partnerships are also shaped by regional priorities, including countering Iranian influence, enhancing Gulf legitimacy in global governance bodies, and promoting regional stability. This engagement unfolds in an increasingly competitive environment, as China, the United States, and the European Union vie for influence across Africa. For many Western observers, the expansion of BRICS+ reflects a fragmenting international order, marked by intensifying East–West rivalry and a widening North–South divide. Against this backdrop, networkability within the framework of SSC is likely to expand, fostering deeper collaboration with other non-Western actors active in Africa, such as China and Turkey. The March 2023 resumption of diplomatic ties between Tehran and Riyadh further opened avenues for Gulf–Iranian dialogue, potentially facilitated through BRICS+ frameworks and in partnership with Sub-Sahara African states.

- **African diasporas in the Gulf as a cross-regional network of exchange:** African diaspora communities in the Gulf have emerged as vital cross-regional connectors. In recent years, these communities have developed vibrant subcultures that blend with Gulf art, cuisine and music. Although comprehensive data is limited, Saudi Arabia alone hosts approximately 715,000 Sub-Saharan African nationals in 2022, including 160,000 from Ethiopia, 123,000 from Uganda, 91,000 from Kenya, and 80,000 from Nigeria (De Bel-Air 2024). The majority of these are women working in the domestic and health sectors (Kinkoh 2025).

  These diaspora communities serve as bridgebuilders between the two regions, offering opportunities for cultural exchange, nation branding, business development, identity construction, and soft power projection. They contribute significantly to both host and home economies through remittances, trade facilitation, and investment linkages. Returnees often catalyze Gulf investment in their countries of origin by leveraging transnational networks to attract capital and establish enterprises. Despite their potential, African diaspora communities remain an underutilized yet potent force for peace and development. Their strategic location in resource-rich Gulf states grants them access to financial institutions, philanthropic networks, and Islamic charitable platforms such as *zakat* foundations, which could be mobilized for green and peace-oriented initiatives. In this regard, financial as well as social remittances remain crucial revenue streams for Sub-Sahara African countries. In Ethiopia, for example, remittances reached USD 4.5 billion in 2019, which is equivalent to approximately 5 percent of their GDP and surpassed their total export revenues (Feyissa, Gebresenbet & Zeleke 2020). Beyond financial flows, educational exchanges and knowledge transfer also shape Gulf–Sub-Saharan African relations. Students from Sudan, Eritrea, and to a lesser extent Kenya and Somalia, pursue higher education in Gulf institutions such as the King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (Saudi Arabia) and Khalifa University (Abu Dhabi) (Mosley 2021).

Despite recent improvements in legal frameworks across the Gulf, however, African migrant communities continue to face significant migration-related challenges (BBC 23.10.2018; The Economist 15.09.2022). These include physical and psychological abuse, excessive working hours, low wages, high migration costs, and exploitative recruitment practices. Structural inequalities embedded in the *kafala* [sponsorship] system exacerbate power imbalances, often placing migrants in vulnerable and precarious conditions. Common abuses include wage theft, passport confiscation, and in some cases, sexual violence (Amnesty International 2025). Migration corridors from East Africa, such as the route from Djibouti through Yemen to Saudi Arabia, remain among the most dangerous globally (Ashley 2024). Female domestic workers are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. These abuses have, at times, triggered diplomatic tensions. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the detention of Ethiopian migrants in Saudi deportation centers drew sharp condemnation from the Ethiopian government (Abdi 2017). Some countries, like Kenya, have taken steps to formalize labor migration through a bilateral agreements with Saudi Arabia, aimed at improving worker protections and regulatory oversight (Human Resources and Social Development 2017). Pre-departure orientation programs have also been introduced in Ethiopia and elsewhere. However, systemic exploitation persists, as governments, recruitment agencies, and sponsors highly benefit from the status quo.

To address these structural challenges, the UAE regularly hosts the Abu Dhabi Dialogue (ADD) – a multilateral forum launched in 2008 that brings together Asian countries of origin and destination to improve labor migration governance and promote safe, orderly, and fair migration processes.[7] The ADD remains the only multilateral forum where relevant Asian and Gulf Arab actors regularly engage in dialogue on labor migration. While it provides a value platform for exchange, the ADD has faced criticism for its non-binding agreements and imbalanced decision-making structures, which tend to favor the Gulf states due to asymmetrical power relations between sending and receiving countries. Despite these limitations, the ADD offers a model for structured engagement that could be replicated in the African–Gulf migration corridor.

Currently, cooperation between Sub-Saharan African countries such as Kenya or Ethiopia and destination countries such as the UAE or Saudi Arabia is largely shaped by bilateral agreements that lack the institutional depth and multilateral coordination present in forums such as the ADD. However, in May 2024 Qatar initiated the Doha Dialogue (DD) to serve as a platform for migrants coming from member states of the AU to the GCC.[8] The DD serves as a strategic mechanism to advance regular migration pathways by promoting fair recruitment practices, thereby safeguarding that the mobility of migrant workers from African countries remains safe, orderly, and regular. Despite these initiatives, the forum suffers from weak accountability mechanisms and is perceived by some as an arena of Qatari–Emirati rivalry in migration diplomacy, aimed at projecting influence and securing leverage over African countries of origin.

- **Historical and cultural ties:** The networkability between Sub-Saharan Africa and West Asia is deeply rooted in historical and cultural connections dating back to the Aksumite era. These ties have been sustained through centuries of trade, migration, and the formation of diaspora communities on both sides of the Red Sea. Such communities carried with them cultural practices, family and tribal affiliations, and a shared Islamic identity that continues to shape interregional relations. The scholar Ali Mazrui has described the Red Sea not as a dividing line, but as a cultural continuum,

7 Members include the UAE, the other five members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, as well as countries from the Colombo Process (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam) and Malaysia. Observers include the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, and several NGOs such as the Migrant Forum in Asia.

8 In Doha, representatives of the following countries participated. From Africa: Algeria, Libya, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, Cameroon, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Senegal, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, and Ethiopia. From the Middle Eastern countries, participants included representatives from the UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, and Lebanon. See International Labour Organization 2024.

with its eastern and western shores forming a unified civilizational space (Mazrui 1992: 52,53).

Trade routes across the Indian Ocean and Red Sea, such as the Muscat–Zanzibar route, played a central role in these exchanges. Arab traders, often connected through kinship networks and tribal affiliations, exchanged gold, ivory, spices, and textiles with African merchants. These transactions were commonly mediated by trusted kin-based intermediaries rather than formal institutions. This history also encompasses the Arab slave trade, which drew heavily from East Africa including present-day Kenya. Enslaved African populations later became part of Gulf societies in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, and Iran. Notably, African soldiers served in the army of Saudi Arabia's founding monarch, King Abd al-Aziz Ibn Sa'ud, in the 1930s (Coates 2023). Gulf migration to Sub-Sahara Africa also occured, with Omani traders settling along the Swahili coast, intermingling with local populations and forging enduring transregional ties (Nicolini 2017: 206).

As part of the historical networkability, religion has served as a cornerstone of West Asian and Sub-Saharan African relations. A foundational moment in Islamic history – when the Prophet Muhammad sought refuge in Ethiopia from persecution in Mecca – remains embedded in collective memory and symbolizes the spiritual and historical bonds between the regions. Over time, religious networks expanded to include theological and scholarly exchanges, connecting families and tribes across the Red Sea. Pilgrimage further reinforced these ties, and Islam continues to be a driving force in Gulf engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa (Meester, van den Berg & Verhoeven 2018: 12). Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, invest in religious institutions, educational scholarships, and humanitarian aid, cultivating goodwill and cultural influence. Organizations like the Muslim World League (MWL) have promoted Islamic education, supported mosque construction and funded community development projects. These initiatives offer Gulf states soft power benefits, reinforcing Islamic cultural bonds and enabling them to maintain a favorable image in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, the spread of conservative religious ideologies has raised concerns about radicalization, especially in countries where Gulf-sponsored organizations promote conservative interpretations of Islam.

Saudi Arabia, in particular, has faced criticism for inadequate oversight and alleged links to extremist funding (Teague Beckwith 19.11.2015; Hugler 06.12.2015). In some Sub-Sahara African countries, the promotion of Wahhabi and Salafi doctrines is seen as undermining the long-standing Sufi traditions which have shaped Islamic practice in East and West Africa for centuries. In Ethiopia, for instance, tensions escalated in 2011 when the government attempted to counter perceived foreign-backed Wahhabi extremism by promoting the Al-Habashi school of thought as a “more moderate” alternative (Eresso 2013: 6–9). This move was viewed by many in the Muslim community as unwarranted state interference, sparking widespread protests in 2011 and 2012 (Ibid.). Since 2015, under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Riyadh has pivoted toward diplomatic de-escalation, engaging African states to support its Vision 2030 economic diversification agenda. As a result, efforts to promote Wahhabi and Salafi proselytization in Africa have diminished in relevance, marking a strategic recalibration of Saudi soft power.

Iran has similarly faced scrutiny for its soft power initiatives, particularly those rooted in religious and ideological outreach. Its strategy often emphasizes the promotion of Shi’i Islam, which may not resonate with the predominantly Sunni populations in many African countries, such as Nigeria. This religious focus can diminish the appeal and effectiveness of Iran’s outreach, limiting its ability to build broad-based alliances. Moreover, international sanctions continue to constrain Iran’s economic capacity, making sustained investment and long-term partnerships in Africa difficult. Cooperation is further hampered by African states’ skepticism toward Iran’s contested foreign policies and its affiliations with militant groups. These associations have, at times, clashed with local norms and prompted increased scrutiny from African governments. However, growing US disengagement under the Trump administration is pushing more Sub-Saharan African governments toward Iran. Kenya, for example, struck a new deal with Iran, agreeing to a sweeping set of collaborations spanning trade, renewable energy, agriculture, and diplomatic engagement. This came amid the US showing increasing signs of wariness over Kenya’s growing relationship with Iran – a key indicator in a recent US Senate motion to review Kenya’s status as a ‘major non-NATO ally’ (Islamic Republic of Iran, Nairobi 2025).

While colonialism disrupted centuries-old cultural and religious ties between West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, the post-independence era witnessed a revival of these deep-rooted connections that have grown in the contemporary era. Shared experiences of colonial domination, conflict, and marginalization on the world stage have created empathetic bonds between the regions. Today, cultural and religious practices – such as pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina – continue to reinforce these ties. Culture and religion have also become powerful tools of soft power, contributing to informal dimensions of networkability. These layered structures of interaction complement formal diplomatic and economic relations, allowing for more flexible and multidimensional engagement. Hence, the existence of diverse networks – bilateral, multilateral, minilateral, and cultural

– provides agents in both regions with multiple channels to interact with each other and exercise agency. This flexibility enables networkability across various arenas, adapting to shifting geopolitical and socio-cultural contexts.

Maneuverability: Balancing Agency in Times of Uncertainties

Maneuverability in relations between West Asian and Sub-Sahara African refers to the ability of state and non-state actors to strategically position themselves in international affairs – shaping outcomes and achieving strategic goals through diplomatic, economic, and geopolitical maneuvering and hedging. This dimension reflects the freedom of movement available to actors from both regions within a competitive and fragmented geopolitical landscape, enabling recalibration among multiple external partners, resistance to rigid alignments, and preservation of space to advance autonomous geoeconomic priorities. To showcase maneuverability in West Asia–Sub Sahara African agency, two key examples are presented.

- **The emerging development–investment nexus:** A key expression of maneuverability is the emerging development–investment nexus. Historically, Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait provided development aid to Sub-Sahara African countries largely as part of humanitarian outreach, political alliance-building, and regional influence. In recent years, however, Gulf aid strategies have shifted toward a hybrid development–investment model, aligning with Gulf economic diversification agendas and Sub-Saharan African states' aspirations for more autonomous and strategic partnerships. This recalibration enhances maneuverability for both regions, enabling more flexible, transactional, pragmatic, and mutually beneficial cooperation. In this regard, aid is no longer viewed solely as a tool of benevolence or 'suitcase diplomacy' (Young 2022), but as a tool for geoeconomic statecraft, particularly in the infrastructure, agriculture, and energy sectors. This shift reflects the Gulf states' broader efforts to reduce dependence on oil revenues and reposition themselves as influential global economic players. In turn, many Sub-Saharan African countries are engaging Gulf donors not as passive recipients of aid but as co-developers, actively shaping the terms of engagement. This dynamic supports broader trends of omni-balancing and multi-alignment, allowing African states to navigate complex partnerships while preserving agency and advancing their domestic and regional priorities.

One compelling illustration of this transformation is the 2024 announcement by the Saudi government of a USD 41 billion commitment over the next decade to support African startups, facilitate export–import credit, and stimulate private sector development (Hammond 2024). Spearheaded by the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD), the initiative also includes strategic partnerships with the Africa Finance Corporation (AFC) to co-finance infrastructure projects across the continent (Africa Finance Corporation 2023; King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Center 2023; Zumbrägel, Raouf & Sons 2023). The scale and scope of this investment signal a clear departure from traditional humanitarian aid toward a strategic, growth-oriented model of engagement. The UAE has similarly recalibrated its aid strategy, placing greater emphasis on concessional loans and rural development programs. Countries such as Chad and the Comoros have been prioritized for support in social welfare, housing, and public service delivery. Meanwhile, Ethiopia, Mali, Somalia, and Sudan have emerged as key recipients of UAE assistance, with aid increasingly delivered through mechanisms that demand greater accountability and economic returns. This shift reflects a growing recognition that conventional grants alone are insufficient to drive sustainable development or align with the economic interests of donor and recipient.

Several interrelated factors underpin this transformation. Geostrategic considerations remain central, with aid serving as a tool for Gulf states to secure access to African markets, natural resources, and vital trade routes. Concurrently, economic diversification remains a top priority. By aligning aid with trade and investment objectives, Gulf states are embedding their influence more deeply within Sub-Saharan African economies. This dual-purpose approach has resulted in a more transactional, yet still cooperative, model of engagement, moving beyond the charity-centric paradigms of the past.

For Sub-Saharan African countries, this development–investment nexus offers new avenues for increasing leverage and strategic maneuvering. The abrupt termination of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in 2025, under the administration of US President Donald Trump, marked a significant shift. USAID had previously provided USD 72 billion in global humanitarian aid, with countries such as Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda receiving 8 percent of its funding in 2023 (Čok 2025). Sudan, which relied on the US for nearly half of its external assistance, now faces substantial funding gaps that Gulf states are well-positioned to fill. This vacuum has enabled Gulf donors to present themselves as Global South alternatives to Western aid, offering more flexible, rapid, and less bureaucratic assistance while advancing their geoeconomic interests (Procopio & Čok

2025). This emerging development–investment nexus aligns with broader multi-alignment strategies pursued by both Gulf and Sub-Saharan African states, where "aid, investment, and statecraft are the tools of (…) relationship management" (Young 2022: 4). In this context, Gulf states' increasingly project themselves as brilliant, beautiful, and benign non-Western development partners.

Multilateral platforms such as the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) and the OPEC Fund for International Development (OFID) further facilitate Gulf–Sub-Saharan African cooperation. Of the IsDB's 57 member states, 22 are from the African continent. Headquartered in Saudi Arabia and mainly financed by the Kingdom, the IsDB operates eleven regional hubs, including three in Sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria, Senegal and Uganda), focusing on agriculture, energy, education, and mining (Islamic Development Bank n.d.). OFID has supported projects in 53 African countries, including road infrastructure in Ethiopia (the Dilla-Bulle-Haro Wachu Road), rural water management in Chad, and the prevention of water-borne diseases in Ethiopia's Tigray region. Approximately 50 percent of OFID's cumulative funding targets the energy–water–food nexus with a strong emphasis on agricultural development, irrigation infrastructure, and sustainable rural livelihoods in African countries (OFID n.d.).

These multilateral frameworks further enhance coordination between Gulf and Sub-Saharan African states, enable more effective, rapid, and targeted interventions, and support institutional capacity building, technological transfer, and public-private partnerships that transcend the limitations of bilateral aid models. Importantly, they also reflect the increasing professionalism and centralization of Gulf aid delivery mechanisms, supported by the recruitment of international experts and the adoption of global standards of transparency and impact assessment.

However, such initiatives are increasingly framed not as acts of charity, but as strategic investments in stability, development, and long-term influence. Ultimately, the development-investment nexus between Gulf states and Sub-Saharan Africa reflects a broader realignment of international development cooperation. Gulf countries are repositioning themselves not merely as "ATMs" (Al Maeena 2019) of financial benefactors, but as 'master developers' (Young 2022: 3), offering fast, flexible, and pragmatic assistance tailored to the priorities of partner countries. In turn, Sub-Saharan African countries are asserting themselves as ambitious, self-reflective actors seeking equitable partnerships that advance their national and regional development agendas.

As the global development landscape continues to change drastically in a multipolar word order, the development–investment nexus thus stands as a model for pragmatic maneuverability between Sub-Saharan African countries and West Asia. It leverages aid not only as humanitarian support but as an instrument of economic diplomacy, infrastructure development, and political influence.

Table 1:
Saudi Arabia's Development Cooperation in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa

Country	Number of projects	Main sectors (projects)	Budget (in USD)	Main donor entities[9]
Eritrea	18	Education (14), agriculture (2), energy (1)	63,032,843	SFD, MOE
Ethiopia	28	Education (18), transport (6), energy (2)	764,146,667	MOF, SFD, MOE
Nigeria	29	Education (29)	38,606,400	MOE
Kenya	34	Edcuation (20), transport (5), water (3)	228,236,180	SFD, MOE
South Africa	9	Education (9)	1,571,733	MOE

Source: KSrelief, Saudi Aid Platform, as of 11 July 2025

- **Green developmentalism and climate action:** The growing emphasis on sustainability and climate action has become a core pillar in the evolving strategic engagement between Gulf states and Sub-Saharan African states. Notably, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are repositioning themselves as global leaders in the renewable energy transition, aligning with broader energy diversification strategies and the development of 'green economies' (Abdelraouf & Luomi 2016). These efforts reflect not only a response to global shifts away from fossil fuels but also a drive to maintain political legitimacy, unlock new economic sectors, and enhance their influence in international climate governance (Akhonbay 2019). This emerging model of 'green developmentalism' is increasingly shaping external relations, particularly with Sub-Saharan African countries, in terms of maneuverability that possess significant untapped potential in renewable energy and carbon markets.

  As global demand for fossil fuel declines and climate change mitigation becomes a priority on the global agenda, Gulf states are adopting innovative energy strategies to remain competitive and relevant (Luomi 2012; Koch 2022). National programs such as Saudi Arabia's MGI and the UAE's Regional Climate Dialogue, along with active participation in forums like COP28, underscore their growing leadership in climate diplomacy. Investments in solar, wind and green/blue hydrogen technologies further demonstrate their commitment to decarbonization (Ansari 2022). Saudi Arabia and Qatar have likewise begun embedding climate objectives into their foreign

9 MOE = Ministry of Economy; MOF = Ministry of Finance; SFD = Saudi Fund for Development; MOM = Ministry of Minerals; KAHF = King Abdullah Humanitarian Foundation; SRCA = Saudi Red Crescent Authority

aid and investment portfolios. For example, Qatar pledged USD 200 million in 2022 for climate adaptation projects in Africa, targeting drought and flood mitigation and expanding renewable energy access in off-grid communities (State of Qatar – Ministry of Foreign Affairs 13.10.2022). These initiatives reveal a calculated shift toward integrating sustainability with development cooperation aiming at enhancing influence, building capacity, and establishing long-term economic footholds across the continent.

Complementing state-led efforts are driven by Gulf-based SWF and energy companies that play pivotal roles in Africa's green transformation. State-backed firms such as Masdar (UAE), ACWA Power and Saudi Aramco (Saudi Arabia), and Nebras (Qatar) are actively investing in renewable energy infrastructure and local capacity building across Africa (Zumbrägel 2020: 32). These companies are not only aligning their business strategies with national decarbonization goals but also investing in local infrastructure and knowledge production necessary for Sub-Sahara Africa's energy transition.

ACWA Power, for instance, is constructing South Africa's largest solar power plant and has already completed two major solar facilities in Ethiopia with a total capacity of 250 megawatts (Casey 2021). Saudi Arabia has invested USD 2.76 billion in renewable energy projects in South Africa, while Emirati investments in 2024 included USD 1.8 billion in Kenya, USD 801 million in Ethiopia, and USD 100 million in Nigeria. In 2022, Masdar Clean Energy signed agreements with Angola, Uganda, and Zambia to develop renewable energy projects under the UAE's Etihad 7 Program, coordinated by the Ministry of Climate Change and Environment and the COP28 office. These efforts align with the UAE's pledge, made in the lead-up to COP28, to finance USD 5 billion in clean energy projects across Africa (Masdar 20.01.2023). AMEA Power, a UAE-based company, is currently operating in Uganda, Burkina Faso, and Togo, with projects planned in 13 other African countries (AMEA Power n.d.).

The UAE further pledged USD 5 billion in clean energy financing across Africa by 2035, with Masdar and AMEA positioned as key implementers. These investments not only support Africa's green energy ambitions, but also open new markets for Gulf technologies and services. Complementing these national efforts, regional multilateral institutions such as the IsDB have also introduced frameworks like the Climate Change Action Plan (2020–2025) to promote triangular cooperation on climate action, further reinforcing Gulf–Africa collaboration (Islamic Development Bank 2020).

Despite these advancements, Gulf countries continue to export fossil fuels to African markets. Qatar, in particular, has prioritized gas exports, leveraging Africa's continued reliance on fossil energy (Koch 2022; Zumbraegel 2025). Saudi Arabia and the UAE are pursuing a hybrid model, investing in renewables while maintaining fossil fuel supply chains. This dual strategy ensures both immediate profitability and long-term adaptation to global energy transitions, preserving Gulf leverage in African economic partnerships. Carbon markets represent another emerging frontier of cooperation. Africa's rich biodiversity, forest resources, and land availability make it an ideal partner for carbon offset initiatives, an area where Gulf states are becoming increasingly influential. The African Carbon Markets Initiative (ACMI), launched at COP27 in Cairo, provides a key platform for Africa's integration into global carbon trading. The UAE has positioned itself as a leading supporter, with the UAE Carbon Alliance committing in 2023 to purchasing USD 450 million in carbon credits from ACMI over six years (Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet n. d.). A notable example is Blue Carbon, a UAE-based firm owned by Sheikh Ahmed bin Dalmook Al Maktoum, which has signed offset agreements with Liberia, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and reportedly Kenya (Adebayo 07.04.2024). These agreements collectively cover up to 10–20 percent of the landmass in several countries, facilitating forest preservation in exchange for carbon credits (Hanieh 2024). Saudi Arabia is also actively shaping carbon market governance through the Regional Voluntary Carbon Market Company (RVCMC) – a joint venture between the Public Investment Fund (PIF) and the Saudi stock exchange. Between 2022 and 2023, Saudi Arabia hosted the world's two largest carbon auctions, selling over 3.5 million tons of credits, 70 percent of which were sourced from African offset projects. The 2023 auction was notably held in Kenya, underscoring Africa's central role in this emerging market. In sum, Gulf states are not only participating in but also in shaping the governance and financing of carbon markets, with Africa as a strategic partner.

Climate cooperation between the Gulf and Africa also includes capacity-building efforts and educational investments. Gulf universities and non-governmental organizations are increasingly investing in training and scholarship programs focused on renewable energy, water management, and climate science. For example, Qatar's Education Above All (EAA) Foundation is integrating environmental themes into its educational programming. In Kenya, EAA's Green Youth 360 project empowers young people through organic farming, green agriculture, and waste management (Education Above All 2023). In areas such as environmental peacebuilding and climate action, African diaspora communities in the Gulf are engaging in cross-regional efforts to promote ecological restoration, social cohesion, and long-term stability. For instance, Sudanese diaspora members in Saudi Arabia and the UAE initiated reforestation and flood recovery projects following the 2020 Nile floods. Similarly, Somali migrants in Qatar and the UAE have supported solar-powered water infrastructure in Puntland and Galmudug, enhancing both environmental resilience and regional stability. Nigerian professionals in Kuwait have contributed to climate-smart agriculture through virtual mentoring and knowledge exchange.

These efforts are helping to raise climate awareness among younger generations in Sub-Saharan Africa, promoting green entrepreneurship and creating indirect employment opportunities in fields such as research and development, manufacturing, and engineering. Gulf-based NGOs and universities are actively promoting climate awareness through training programs, capacity-building initiatives, and educational campaigns focused on waste and water management, green entrepreneurship, energy efficiency, and pollution control (Zumbrägel 2022). These efforts embed climate action as a component of civic education, particularly among eco-conscious youth and promotes maneuverability in Sub-Sahara African–West Asian relations. The strategic alignment between Gulf states and Sub-Sahara Africa around climate action and green developmentalism marks a significant evolution in South–South cooperation and provides a sector of maneuverability and leverage.

Table 2:
Gulf States' Energy Projects in South Africa, Ethiopia, Kenya and Nigeria: Detailed Profiles

Target country	**Year**	**Investment country**	**Company**	**Activity**	**Project category**	**Capacity (in MW)**	**Investment (in million USD)**
South Africa	2023	Saudi Arabia	ACWA Power	Electricity	Solar + Battery Storage	1,642	800
	2021	Saudi Arabia	ACWA Power	Electricity	Solar	100	724
	2015	Saudi Arabia	ACWA Power	Electricity	Solar	100	724
	2013	Saudi Arabia	ACWA Power	Electricity	Solar	50	517
	2023	UAE	AMEA Power	Electricity	Solar	85	168
	2022	UAE	AMEA Power	Electricity	Solar	120	120
	2020	UAE	Neutral Fuels	Manufacturing	Biomass	n/a	2,288
	2016	UAE	Phanes Group	Sales, Marketing & Support	Solar	n/a	3
	n/a	UAE	Masdar	Electricity	Wind	143.1	n/a
	n/a	UAE	Masdar	Electricity	Wind	143.1	n/a
	n/a	UAE	Masdar	Electricity	Wind	112.6	n/a
	n/a	UAE	Masdar	Electricity	Wind	143.1	n/a
	n/a	UAE	Masdar	Electricity	Wind	82.1	n/a

Target country	Year	Investment country	Company	Activity	Project category	Capacity (in MW)	Investment (in million USD)
Ethiopia	2019	Saudi Arabia	ACWA Power	Electricity	Solar	125	181
	2019	Saudi Arabia	ACWA Power	Electricity	Solar	125	181
	2024	UAE	AMEA Power	Electricity	Wind	320	620
	2023	UAE	Masdar	Electricity	Solar	500	181
Kenya	2023	UAE	Masdar	Electricity	Geo-thermal	300	1,000
	2022	UAE	Geo-thermal Devel-opment Company	Electricity	Geo-thermal	22	800
Nigeria	2015	UAE	Access In-fra Africa	Electricity	Solar	50	100

Source: Gulf Renewable Power Tracker, 2024

Leveragability: Balancing Cultural and Economic Relations

In the context of West Asian and Sub-Sahara African relations, leveragability refers to the capacity of state and non-state actors to influence the behavior of other actors by strategically exploiting their dependencies or vulnerabilities. It goes beyond mere participation in external engagements: It is about shaping the terms of those engagements. Leveragability involves the use of limited resources, such as financial assets or political capital, to negotiate rather than simply accept offers. This influence can be moral, economic, social, or cultural leverage, and may also derive from factors like domestic market size (as in Nigeria), normative power, or geographic centrality (as in Ethiopia's Red Sea position).

- **African leverage in Middle East conflicts such as the Gaza war:** Ongoing regional conflicts such as the Gaza war provide an opportunity for leveragability in West Asian–Sub-Sahara African relations on a normative level. Since the escalation of the Gaza war in October 2023, both the Gulf states and African countries have extended their agency in multilateral diplomacy. The war has impacted security and economic interests across both regions and catalyzed widespread pro-Palestinian sentiment at societal and political levels, prompting a shared interest in de-escalation (Institute for Security Studies 2024). In all Gulf states, solidarity with the Palestinians has become an integral part of public diplomacy and state branding (Sons March 2025). Meanwhile, pro-Palestinian demonstrations in countries like Kenya (Wandera 24.07.2025) and South Africa faced suppression by security forces, revealing differing domestic approaches (Brachet 07.05.2024).

In light of the devastating Gaza war, both Gulf and some Sub-Saharan African states are positioning themselves as vocal advocates of the Global South, promoting Palestinian statehood and challenging Western influence in crisis diplomacy. Despite limited coordination, these actors are converging around multilateral approaches to the conflict. For instance, Saudi Arabia, alongside France, has established the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution in September 2024 (European Union External Action Service 2024), which provides a dialogue platform for governments supportive of Palestinian statehood.[10] This platform has attracted participation from Algeria, Morocco, South Africa, Libya and all Gulf states. Additionally, Saudi Arabia hosted the Arab–Islamic Summit in November 2024 in collaboration with the Arab League (AL) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), issuing a strong condemnation of Israeli actions and forming an international ministerial committee comprising foreign ministers from countries including Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar to coordinate diplomatic efforts aimed at halting hostilities. The AU reinforced this alignment by expressing robust support for Palestine, demonstrating how multilateralism fosters consensus and policy convergence between West Asia and African states (Wilson April 2025).

The conflict further promotes the AU's role as an influential global actor despite internal fractions and ongoing inner-African fault lines. At its 37th AU Summit, member states condemned the violence in Gaza and urged an end to hostilities and the Israeli occupation (Hegazi 18.02.2024). Notably, Gulf states and the AU expressed their solidarity with South Africa's case against Israel in 2024/2025 about allegations of genocide in Gaza before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) (Mhlambiso & Maunganidze 2024). This case marked a pivotal moment in African global leadership (International Court of Justice 2024), positioning South Africa at the moral center of international politics. It compelled Gulf states such as Qatar and the UAE to respond to African-led international legal and diplomatic initiatives.

As neither the Gulf states nor Sub-Saharan African countries seek further escalation in Gaza or between Iran and Israel, coordinated efforts toward regional de-escalation could become a key driver of strategic leveragability between West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. In this context, BRICS+ offers

10 The main mission of the Alliance is to coordinate international efforts toward implementing a two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, supporting ceasefire negotiations, humanitarian efforts, and the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel within the 1967 borders.

a promising platform for enhancing bargaining power and coordination (Naidu & de Carvalho 2025). It could facilitate dialogue on the Gaza war and Iran–Israel tensions among actors such as Iran, the UAE, Saudi Arabia (as an observer) and Sub-Saharan African countries, such as South Africa and Ethiopia (Gopaldas 2024).

- **Flexible communication channels:** West Asian–Sub-Saharan African relations are underpinned by flexible state and non-state communication rooted in centuries-old networks of trade, cultural exchange, and religion. Reciprocal dialogue has long existed between these societies, fostering trust, strategic depth and leveragability. Concepts such as benignity, beauty, and brilliance are essential to cultivating trust, mutual understanding, and credibility in a multipolar world. Hence, leveragability manifests across political, economic, cultural, and social domains. Here, non-visible dynamics – tribal affiliations, personal relationships, and informal networks – play a decisive role in shaping leveragability. At the political level, Gulf states seek alliances with Sub-Sahara African states by investing in local elites who are part of entrenched kinship or tribal systems, using informal channels to facilitate military, economic, and diplomatic relationships. These networks make Gulf involvement more resilient and harder to disrupt than purely formal, state-based alliances. In addition, these political ties and relationships tend to be personality-driven, rather than institutional. When it comes to informal networks of labor migration as outlined above, kinship and informal social networks continue to shape the nature of migration, employment, and social relations.

  However, these dynamics can also mean that relations may shift rapidly with changes in leadership, undermining long-term institutional trust. In this regard, the relevance of particular figures as actors of agency in West Asian and Sub-Saharan African relations should not be underestimated. In Gulf political affairs personalities matter, as close advisors to the respective leaders with a broad portfolio of responsibilities and positions in state companies and investments entities are serving as modernization managers and influential power brokers. In the UAE, figures like Tahnoon bin Zayed Al Nahyan, deputy ruler and brother of UAE President Muhammad bin Zayed Al Nayhan, plays an omnipresent role as a key power broker. As a well-connected businessman, chairman of the Abu Dhabi Investment Fund, and the UAE-owned AI company G42, he is central to the UAE's geo-economic engagement in Africa, serving as a gatekeeper and facilitator of business deals in energy, infrastructure, and mining (Ardemagni 2024). Similarly, Sheikh Shakhboot bin Nahyan Al Nahyan, another member of the UAE's ruling family, appointed in 2021 as the first Minister of State for African Affairs, has cultivated a broad network across the continent, meeting with numerous African heads of state such as the DRC, Congo, Guinea, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe between 2022 and 2023 (Procopio & Cok 2024). In Saudi Arabia, the Ambassador for African Affairs, Ahmed Qattan, also personalizes the growing political commitment of the kingdom in Africa.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, a diverse and influential group of personalities, operating across political, business, and cultural spheres, are also demonstrating a proactive continental agency by moving the relationship from a transactional to a deeply strategic and institutionalized footing. At the political realm, African leaders are proactive in courting specific investments, aligning partnerships with national development goals, and leveraging their geopolitical positions to attract strategic capital. Here, the case of Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is notable. His personal relationship with Muhammad bin Zayed Al Nahyan has played a pivotal role in shaping Ethiopia's strategic partnerships and security through substantial economic, military and diplomatic support. Shortly after Abiy took office in 2018, the UAE pledged USD 3 billion in aid and investment to support Ethiopia's political and economic reforms and alleviate foreign currency shortages. By 2022, Emirati investments in Ethiopia reached USD 2.9 billion, spanning sectors like agriculture, logistics, pharmaceuticals, and real estate (Gebru 2025). Abiy further secured Emirati military assistance, including drone support during the Tigray conflict, which reportedly helped shift the balance in favor of the federal government (Horn Review 2025). Moreover, Abiy's diplomacy helped broker UAE-backed deals for Ethiopia to gain access to the Berbera Port in Somaliland, with the aim of reducing dependency on Djibouti and enhancing maritime connectivity. Overall, the UAE's support has helped consolidate Abiy's domestic authority and elevate Ethiopia's regional profile. Abiy's alignment with UAE interests has steered Ethiopia's domestic policies towards regional cooperation, in line with Emirati strategic goals, and inherent strategic risks (The Habesha 11.04.2025). However, opacity in investment deals and land agreements, debt exposure to Gulf-backed initiatives and potential erosion of policy independence are some concerns emerging from this growing Ethiopia–UAE relations.

Other African heads of state, such as Rwanda's President Paul Kagame and Zambia's President Hakainde Hichilema, are other notable examples of influential personalities with close ties to leaders of the GCC. Kagame's vision for Rwanda as a regional leader in logistics and aviation has positioned the country as a hub for Qatari investment. He and Qatar's Amir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, personally witnessed the signing of a major aviation deal in 2019 that has since defined the relationship (The Peninsula 13.02.2025). This deal saw Qatar Airways acquire a 60 percent stake in Rwanda's new Bugesera International Airport and a 49 percent share in the state-owned carrier, RwandAir (Republic of Rwanda – Ministry of Infrastructure 09.12.2019). This is not simply a financial transaction. It is rather a strategic partnership aimed at developing a world-class aviation hub in the heart of Africa. Kagame's influence lies in successfully positioning his nation as a key strategic partner for Gulf interests, thereby providing a new, non-extractive model for other African countries to emulate. As a second example, Hichilema's influence is most evident in his direct involvement with the Mopani Copper Mines deal. He officially unveiled the UAE's International Resources Holding (IRH) as the new strategic equity partner for the mine, framing the event as a "significant turnaround" for the country's economy. Beyond this high-profile deal, Hichilema has directly appealed to the UAE to expand its investment portfolios beyond mining into other sectors such as energy, health, and tourism (Sichula 2025).

The deepening relationship between the Gulf and Sub-Sahara Africa is not solely the domain of heads of state. Similar to the Gulf states, it is increasingly defined by influential business leaders and entrepreneurs who are building the institutional, technological, and operational frameworks that facilitate trade and investment flows. Suleiman Shahbal, for example, had dedicated his career in investment banking to building the institutional channels that facilitate capital flow particularly from the Gulf into African development projects, especially in sectors like real estate and housing. His role in chairing Kenya's largest affordable housing initiative further demonstrates how his specialized knowledge translates into large-scale, tangible development projects on the ground (Government of Kenya n.d.). Beyond business and political ties, various intellectual figures are also shaping the narrative around Africa's relations with Gulf States and the Middle East broadly, including Iran. These individuals are instrumental in challenging stereotypes, facilitating dialogue, and laying the groundwork for a more robust and respectful long-term partnership.

Flexible communication channels thus add to leveragability, as actors from both the African and Gulf side have multiple entry points to exhort agency that advances their foreign policy interests, such as negotiation, alliance-building, or network-creation. Furthermore, flexible communication channels allow for quick adaptation when shifts occur in international relations, while individual personalities, such as Sheikh Shakhboot, are able to easily move between different arenas such as business and diplomacy.

- **Sports diplomacy:** Sports have emerged as a dynamic area for building people-to-people networks and preserving leveragibility. Sub-Saharan African markets have become increasingly attractive targets for West Asian sports investments, in particular from Arab Gulf states. These efforts are part of a broader strategy to diversify geopolitical engagements beyond traditional Western alliances while projecting Gulf states as benign, modern and globally engaged actors. Gulf leaderships view sports as a multifaceted strategic tool to advance domestic and international objectives. Domestically, investments in sports are designed to develop national industries, create employment opportunities for Gulf nationals, and enhance the regional prestige as a leading beautiful and brilliant non-Western hub for elite sports. Internationally, therefore, sports serve as a vehicle for nation branding, identity construction and soft power projection.

Saudi Arabia, in particular, has integrated sports into its broader cultural diplomacy and Vision 2030 strategy (Sons December 2023). In this regard, sports functions as a strategic instrument for identity construction, aligning expressions of nationalist pride with traditional religious sentiment. As the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina (Commins 2009), the kingdom leverages its spiritual and Islamic centrality to attract Muslim footballers and fans from Africa. High-profile Muslim footballers with African roots including Karim Benzema, Riyad Mahrez, Hakim Ziyech, Yassine Bounou and Sadio Mané have cited religious affinity and the opportunity to play on 'holy soil' as key motivations for joining Saudi football clubs, alongside the financial incentives. Benzema notably stated: "I'm Muslim and this is a Muslim country, and I have always wanted to live here" (McVitie 08.06.2023). Demonstrating their religious commitment, both Benzema and Sadio Mané performed the *umrah* pilgrimage, symbolizing the fusion of sport and spiritual identity (Khaleej Times 07.08.2023).

By integrating professional sport into its broader cultural and religious diplomacy, Saudi Arabia seeks to position itself simultaneously as a modern sporting nation and a devout Islamic homeland for both athletes and fans. For Muslim players from Africa, participation in the Saudi Pro League (SPL) also offers a platform to engage audiences across the Islamic world, enhancing their personal brands and cultural resonance with global Muslim communities. Players like Mané and Bounou serve as strategic connectors, linking African Muslim communities (such as the homelands of both players, Senegal and Morocco) with Saudi Arabia's sport diplomacy and its branding as a leading Islamic sports nation. This phenomenon reflects a broader process of leveragibilty through 'glocalization', where modern and traditional elements are deliberately interwoven to create a distinct cultural narrative (Giulianotti & Robertson 2004). Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy also aims to increase visibility across African societies, with the strategic objective of gaining access to emerging African markets. Other strategic goals include negotiating broadcasting rights, establishing business partnerships, and facilitating club-to-club agreements in anticipation of hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2034.

Relatedly, many African footballers playing in Gulf leagues, particularly the SPL, have publicly discussed the financial benefits as another significant factor in their career moves (Ekanem 26.12.2024). Kalidou Koulibaly of Senegal, playing for the Saudi top team Al Hilal, highlighted his ability to support his family and fund social projects in “at least 15 villages” in Senegal (Jabar 27.06.2024). Similarly, Sadio Mané of Al Nassr has used his substantial earnings to build schools, hospitals, and mosques in his hometown, while providing monthly allowances to local residents. These examples underscore how Gulf sports investments not only serve state-led strategic goals, but also empower African athletes to contribute meaningfully to development in their home countries.

From an internal Gulf perspective, Saudi Arabia’s current sports strategy appears to mirror Qatar’s approach in the lead-up to its hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Through long-term investments in sport, Qatar cultivated a form of subtle power (Kamrava 2013). By organizing one of the world’s most high-profile sport mega-events (SMEs) (Black 2022), Qatar successfully positioned itself on the global stage and leveraged football as a tool for diplomacy, branding, and global visibility. This strategy enabled the country to achieve what is termed ‘virtual enlargement’ – an expansion of international presence and influence disproportionate to its geographic or demographic size (Brannagan & Reiche 2022). Since 2010, Qatar has significantly expanded its Sport for Development (S4D) initiatives, prioritizing project implementation and exchange programs with partner countries across the African continent (Sons 2023). A flagship example is the Aspire Academy, established in 2008 in Doha. It has a state-of-the-art hub for athletic training, sports medicine and youth empowerment. The academy exemplifies Qatar’s ambition to showcase its brilliance and beauty, positioning itself as a prestigious, welcoming and globally responsible actor. As part of its outreach, the academy developed extensive scouting networks in Africa to identity and recruit promising young athletes, offering capacity development and professional training opportunities (Brannagan & Perkin 2023).

In the lead-up to the World Cup, several Qatari development organizations intensified their activities in Africa. As part of its focus on supporting children affected by armed conflict, the Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD) launched the initiative ‘Let Them Play: A Child’s Place is on a Football Field, Not a Battlefield’. In line with this commitment, QFFD also supported the photography exhibition From Despair to Hope: Children beyond Armed Conflict, which featured powerful imagery from conflict-affected contexts in Africa, such as the DRC, South Sudan, and Sudan (Darfur), aiming to raise awareness and mobilize international support for the protection and empowerment of children through sport and humanitarian engagement (Qatar Fund for Development 20.11.2022).

Furthermore, the Qatari philanthropic charity EAA, in collaboration with UNHCR and the Generation Amazing Foundation, launched the Football 4 Development Playbook (F4DP). This S4D toolkit aimed at supporting vulnerable children and out-of-school children (OOSC) in Chad, Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda. The playbook provided practical learning resources, including physical games and training modules to foster resilience, social cohesion, and inclusion among marginalized youth (Education Above All 17.08.2022). Qatar Charity (QC) initiated the Sport for Peace and Development in Darfur project, promoting sport as a vehicle for counter-radicalization, social integration, peacebuilding, and reconciliation in Sudan (Qatar Charity 13.02.2022). These efforts illustrate how humanitarian networkability between Sub-Sahara Africa and West Asia is expanding – particularly in light of upcoming SMEs in West Asia, such as the FIFA World Cup 2034. Sport-based humanitarian development is likely to intensify in areas such as youth and women's empowerment, talent recruitment, deradicalization, training facilitation, and people-to-people exchange.

The Limits of Maneuverability, Networkability and Leveragability: Challenges for Mutual Agency

Growing maneuverability, networkability and leveragability provide a number of different forms of agency in West Asia–Sub-Sahara African relations, and can thus be defined as a transforming and evolving process of engagement that also offers windows of opportunity for enhanced cooperation, sustainable and equal partnership models, regional integration, economic collaboration and political alignment.

However, a number of challenges remain, as such new models of agency also entail asymmetric power structures, the risk of neo-colonial dependencies, a rise in transactional and populist authoritarianism resulting in the disruption of democratic structures, as well as personalized power relations based on corrupt and clientelist patronage networks.

As such, the NML nexus also provides a lens to analyze the challenges in the complex relationship between multiple players from West Asia and Sub-Sahara Africa as outlined in the following examples:

- **Gulf interventionism in African problems:** Relations between the Gulf states and Sub-Saharan African countries are inherently asymmetrical. Countries such as Nigeria or Ethiopia are marked by poverty, political volatility, and conflict, while its partners across the Red Sea are comparatively wealthy, politically stable, and increasingly assertive as emerging middle powers. This power imbalance has enabled Gulf states to emerge as key external actors in Sub-Sahara African competitive political landscape, often in a transactional manner which neglects African agency and thus undermines social resilience, national economic development, governance structures, and self-reliance (Mosley 2021).

- **Inter-African and inter-Gulf frictions and fault lines:** In particular, the Horn of Africa has become a focal point for intensifying rivalries among Gulf states. During the Gulf crisis, the inter-Gulf conflicts between the UAE and Saudi Arabia on one side, and Qatar on the other intensified and spilled over to East Africa (Vertin 08.08.2019). In June 2017, the intensifying intra-Gulf rivalry reached a critical point when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain imposed a land and sea blockade on Qatar, accusing its leadership of supporting terrorism, Islamism, and fostering close ties with Iran (Coates Ulrichsen 2020). Through a list of 12 demands, the so-called "blockading quartet" sought to marginalize Qatar as a regional competitor. In response, Qatar adapted by diversifying its foreign policy and strengthening alliances with Turkey, Iran, and China while actively safeguarding its interests with European and US partners. In this context of power projection, the Horn of Africa has gained increasing strategic importance. In light of the Gulf crisis, Saudi Arabia and the UAE exerted pressure on Somalia in 2018 to sever its ties with Qatar and support the blockading states in their actions against Doha. Somalia (Fakhro 2021), Sudan, Djibouti, Somaliland, and Ethiopia eventually supported the blockading states during the Gulf crisis, while Eritrea preferred a more neutral stance in order not to jeopardize its conciliatory economic relations with Qatar. Such intra-Gulf conflicts highlighted the volatility and fragility of East African states and underscored the asymmetric power dynamics favoring Gulf countries, which have gained significant leverage over African political decision-making in recent years. In this regard, Gulf problems became African problems.

- **The 'Economy First' approach and the risk of neo-colonialism:** Despite its growing prominence, the emerging model of the Gulf development–investment nexus faces significant challenges and criticisms. A key tension lies in reconciling humanitarian goals with the pursuit of economic returns. While integrating aid with investment can enhance efficiency and sustainability, it risks deprioritizing urgent humanitarian needs in favor of strategic or commercial objectives. Concerns over transparency and governance also persist. Limited public accountability and oversight in some Gulf aid and investment projects raise doubts about their long-term effectiveness and social impact. Despite the rhetoric of "win-win" partnerships, the development-investment nexus remains fundamentally asymmetric in nature. Geopolitical risks further complicate this landscape, as investments in fragile or conflict-prone countries remain vulnerable to asset loss, instability, or political backlash. These dynamics feed into broader fears of 'authoritarian capitalism,' where external investments may reinforce repression and entrench systemic inequities (Young 2022: 10).

In particular, Gulf agricultural investments in Africa have faced widespread criticism and are often labeled as 'land grabbing' by analysts, human rights advocates, and environmentalists. A significant share of Gulf investment has gone into agriculture and land acquisition, driven by food security concerns. From 2004 to 2014, Gulf monarchies invested over USD 30 billion in this sector (Feierstein 2017), including Saudi Arabia's acquisition of more than 2 million hectares of farmland under the King Abdullah Initiative, with 124,000 hectares located in Ethiopia (Yousif 05.04.2022). Critics highlight a range of negative impacts associated with these large-scale land acquisitions, including the disruption of local livelihoods, restricted access to water and grazing land, and the erosion of cultural ties to ancestral lands. In many cases, communities have been displaced without adequate compensation or consultation (Al Jazeera 30.01.2014). Additionally, these investments have been linked to environmental degradation, including the depletion of natural resources such as land, water, and biodiversity, and thus undermining efforts in climate action and green developmentalism (Liu 2014).

In this regard, investments in carbon offset projects sparks further controversies. Critics question the transparency and verifiable impact of such projects, and express concern over their potential negative effects on indigenous communities, including displacement, restricted land access, and the undermining of traditional rights (Greenfield 30.11.2023). In Eastern Kenya, the indigenous Ogiek people were forcibly evicted from the Mau Forest in November 2023, an action that human rights lawyers have linked to ongoing negotiations between the UAE-based company Blue Carbon and Kenyan President William Ruto (Marshall 09.11.2023). The eviction raised serious concerns about the impact of carbon offset projects on indigenous land rights, with critics warning that such initiatives risk displacing communities under the guise of environmental conservation.

- **Disrupting impacts on social cohesion:** West Asian countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, along with Sub-Sahara African nations like South Africa and Kenya are increasingly positioning themselves as emerging and attractive tourist destinations within their respective regions. These efforts are often tied to broader strategies of economic diversification and cultural diplomacy. In this regard, Saudi Arabia constitutes a relevant destination for African Muslims to perform hajj and umrah. Thus, religious tourism remains a traditional pillar in Saudi-Africa relations. Countries such as Senegal and Nigeria have actively supported greater access to the pilgrimage by subsidizing travel and accommodation costs. In 2024, over 207,000 African pilgrims completed the Hajj which reflects the relevant scale and significance of religious tourism as a pillar for deepening people-to-people ties (Wilson January 2025).

In recent years, Gulf states such as the UAE have also started to invest into East African tourism sectors which aim to increase market access and leveragability. By the end of 2025, Africa is expected to represent approximately three percent of outbound travelers from the Gulf states. Currently, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have already invested in interconnectivity with African countries through aviation. Emirates Airlines, for instance, currently operates flights to 22 destinations across Africa and is actively expanding its presence on the continent with a special focus on Kenya, Ethiopia, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe. By the end of 2025, it aims to offer 161 weekly flights to African destinations such as Angola, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Mauritius, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (Kinkoh 2024). In 2022, approximately 4.7 out of a total of 46 million of all air passengers departing from Dubai's airports traveled to African destinations (Fualdes, Rizk & Hajbi 08.12.2023). Qatar Airways has also established as a main carrier between Sub-Sahara Africa the West Asia by offering 29 flights per week from Nigeria, South Africa, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, Uganda, Djibouti, Cote d'Ivoire, DRC, Tanzania, Angola, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Zambia, and Seychelles. In 2020, Qatar Airways invested USD 1.3 billion via a 49 percent stake in Rwanda Air and 60 percent for the Bugesera International Airport in Kigali (Wilson January 2025). Furthermore, the Saudi airline Saudia has also extended its aviation network by offering regular flights to and from Ethiopia, South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Sudan, Mauritius, and Tanzania, whereas African airlines such as Ethiopian Airlines and Kenya Airways has started to fly to Dubai (Kinkoh 2024).

However, Gulf investments in Sub-Sahara African tourism also raise significant concerns regarding local social cohesion and are therefore highly controversial. For example, UAE-backed projects in rural areas of Kenya and Tanzania have led to the displacement of local communities, including the Maasai, disrupting traditional livelihoods and social structures (Nyeko & Nnoko 02.02.2023). For instance, it was reported in 2022 that 70,000 Maasai pastoralists faced the threat of eviction following the Tanzanian government's announcement of plans to lease land to the Otterlo Business Corporation (OBC), a company based in the UAE. OBC, reportedly owned by members of the UAE royal family, aimed to establish a wildlife corridor for trophy hunting and elite tourism (Sutherland 18.02.2022). The development of luxury resorts often exacerbates these issues by altering local ecosystems and negatively affecting working and living conditions. Moreover, large-scale investments in domestic tourism sectors within the Gulf, such as Saudi Arabia's Red Sea coast projects, may intensify competition with East African tourism destinations like Kenya. This could lead to a decline in tourist inflows and increased unemployment in Africa's hospitality sector by undermining regional economic stability.

Conclusion

This CARPO Study demonstrates that the complex and multi-dimensional relations between West Asia and Sub-Sahara Africa are in flux. In recent years, the level of interconnectivity and exchange has further intensified and is likely to increase in times of multipolarity. As such, agency is exercised by multiple actors such as governments, influential power brokers such as individuals, companies, or diaspora communities in a plethora of areas such as diplomacy, security, energy, economy, culture, climate action, development cooperation, sport diplomacy, education and capacity development, or via investments in infrastructure, mining, food security and tourism. As state and non-state players from both sub-regions are following respective strategies to promote national social and economic development, they are finding themselves in flexible and fluid relations based on different levels of networkability, maneuverability and leveragability.

Networkability

The presence of diverse networks offers agents in West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa multiple channels for interaction and the exercise of agency through bilateral, multilateral, minilateral, or cultural frameworks. These networks enable actors to navigate and operate across various arenas, each characterized by its own flexibility in networkability.

➲ First, West Asian engagement with Sub-Sahara Africa is part of a broader South-South strategy that links diplomacy, security cooperation, and investment with soft power initiatives, while also seeking leverage in multilateral platforms such as AfCFTA or BRICS+. Although these interactions offer Sub-Sahara African states opportunities to assert agency and shape global norms, they also carry risks of Gulf strategic overreach unless firmly embedded within African-led frameworks like the AU's Agenda 2063 and regional peacebuilding architectures.

- Second, Sub-Sahara African diaspora communities in Gulf states serve as cultural and economic bridges, contributing through remittances, trade, investment, and knowledge transfer, while also enhancing soft power and identity construction between Sub-Saharan Africa and the Gulf states. Yet, systemic challenges such as exploitation under the *kafala* system, wage theft, and unsafe migration routes persist, with limited multilateral frameworks to protect African migrants compared to existing Asian-focused mechanisms like the Abu Dhabi Dialogue.
- Third, centuries-old cultural, religious, and trade networks have long connected Sub-Sahara Africa and West Asia with the Red Sea, functioning less as a barrier than as a shared civilizational space. While these ties rooted in Islam, migration and commerce continue to generate soft power benefits for Gulf states, even as their promotion of conservative religious ideologies has also sparked tensions with local traditions and drawn scrutiny over political and security implications.

Maneuverability

Maneuverability in West Asian–Sub-Sahara African relations means the ability of states and non-state actors to shift positions and use diplomacy, economics, and security to reach their goals. It allows stakeholders from both regions to move flexibly between different partners, avoid rigid alliances, and protect their own priorities as indicated in different fields.

- First, Gulf states have shifted from traditional humanitarian aid toward a development–investment nexus by linking assistance with trade, infrastructure, and energy projects to align with their economic diversification strategies and Africa's demand for more strategic partnerships. This recalibration enhances maneuverability for both Gulf states and Sub-Sahara African partners, positioning Gulf donors as pragmatic Global South alternatives to Western aid while enabling Sub-Sahara African states to leverage these ties for economic growth, political agency, and multi-alignment in a multipolar world.
- Second, Gulf states, especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia, are further positioning themselves as leaders in renewable energy and climate governance, using green developmentalism to align domestic diversification goals with

external partnerships in Sub-Sahara Africa. Through investments in renewable projects, carbon markets, and climate-focused education, they are creating new channels of maneuverability that blend sustainability, economic influence, and soft power in Africa's energy transition.

Leveragability

Finally, leveragability is tightly linked to both networkability and maneuverability. In this sense, leverage emerges not simply from raw resources or power, but from the combination of network positioning and strategic mobility, enabling actors to exploit asymmetries, negotiate advantages, and mitigate vulnerabilities in their transregional interactions.

- First, the Gaza conflict has created opportunities for leveragability between Gulf states and Sub-Saharan African countries, allowing both to assert influence in multilateral diplomacy, promote Palestinian statehood, and position themselves as active Global South actors challenging Western-dominated forums. By engaging in several multilateral initiatives, these states leverage networkability and maneuverability to coordinate diplomatic efforts, enhance their bargaining power, and mitigate asymmetries in international relations.
- Second, leveragability in West Asian-Sub-Sahara African relations relies on flexible communication channels that allow both state and non-state actors to advance political, economic, and social objectives. Personalities on both sides ranging from Gulf royals and diplomats to African presidents, entrepreneurs, and intellectuals play a decisive role in shaping strategic partnerships, facilitating investment, and ensuring adaptive, resilient, and multifaceted cooperation.
- Third, Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are increasingly using sport diplomacy as a tool of soft power to strengthen ties with Sub-Saharan Africa, blending economic investment, nation branding, and religious-cultural identity to project themselves as modern yet devout global actors. Through initiatives such as player recruitment, training academies, humanitarian sport-for-development programs, and preparation for mega-events like the FIFA World Cup, these states cultivate leveragability, expand market access, and enhance their geopolitical influence across the Global South.

As a consequence, the relevance of agency in West Asian–Sub-Sahara African relations will become more prominent amid an era of multipolarity and shifting global power balances. Actors in both Sub-Sahara Africa and West Asia are challenging old orders and concepts of agency by engaging more strategically across the the NML nexus. Such fundamental shifts will not only reshape regional partnerships and interconnectivity but will also have serious implications for external actors such as Europe in terms of leverage and agency. Here, research gaps still remain concerning both the constructive and disruptive roles of Europe and European actors in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the absence of coordination and dialogue with the Gulf states. Moreover, further studies are needed to quantitatively and qualitatively examine perceptions in Sub-Saharan African societies of West Asian engagement, especially in comparison to Europe or other external actors such as China. In this context, the NML nexus offers a valuable analytical lens to better illuminate the multidimensional and complex relationships between Sub-Saharan Africa and West Asia, as well as their interconnectedness with other players, including Europe, within an evolving multipolar world order.

As this CARPO Study forms an exploratory start, it is the aim of the WASSAP project to explore further the initial thoughts raised in this study. As such, future research could look more carefully into some of the specific dynamics between countries (such as the role of Iran in Sub-Saharan Africa) as well as some of the examples mentioned above.

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CARPO is a Germany-based think tank with a focus on the Orient that works at the nexus of research, consultancy and exchange. Our work is based on the principles of partnership, inclusivity and sustainability. We believe that a prosperous and peaceful future for the region can best be achieved by engaging the creative and resourceful potential of all relevant stakeholders. Therefore, CARPO opens enduring channels for trustful dialogue and interactive knowledge transfer.

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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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