On Wednesday 12th of December, the Foreign Ministers of Egypt, Djibouti, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen met in Riyadh to discuss the formation of an entity for the Arab and African coastal states of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Grouping seven states, this entity is said to be part of Saudi Arabia's growing efforts to protect its interests and those of its neighbours in terms of security, regional development and investments. Not only strengthening stability in the region by increasing regional cooperation to discard negative outside influence, the entity would be structured so as to create synergies between various countries and act principally as an engine for economic development and maritime security.

Gulf states are increasing their presence and investments in East Africa. The coastal states in that region have seen increasing investments from Gulf states and companies, particularly by the Emirati DP World which has built ports across the region. Saudi Arabia is also seeking to transform its Western coast into a regional trade and logistics hub. In 2017, the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced his plans to create NEOM across Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan. Worth $500 billion of investments, this mega-project city would become the equivalent of Dubai on the Red Sea and be directed towards the fourth industrial revolution by focusing on biotechnologies, renewable energies and advanced manufacturing. Infrastructure projects are in fact plenty across the region. In March 2018, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which despite not bordering the Red Sea has shown great involvement in the region, announced $10 billion of investments to develop a mega-city in Egypt's southern Sinai Peninsula. The UAE is already Egypt's first investor as its businesses spent $6.2 billion in 2017, particularly in the construction sector which is currently at work for the expansion of the Egyptian capital with new projects such as New Cairo and Obour City.

Accompanied by Kuwait, the two aforementioned countries have also pledged $2.5 billion to Jordan this Summer, when the Kingdom was experiencing protests against austerity measures. Yemen has also benefitted from $500 million from Saudi Arabia and the UAE to tackle the desperate food shortages hitting the war-torn country. The UAE also pledged $1.4 billion to Sudan in March, a country that is facing inflation as high as 50% and a foreign exchange crisis. The growing financial involvement of Gulf states in East Africa is not solely restricted to coastal states. Back in September, Eritrea and Ethiopia signed a peace treaty in Riyadh, a welcome event which followed the April election of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in Addis Ababa, who received $3 billion from the UAE, to be mainly invested in tourism, renewable energies and agriculture. Last week also, Saudi Arabia pledged more than $110 million to the G5 Sahel Group, which gathers Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger under an institutional framework for coordination in the economic development and security realms.

Gulf states might not be the only Middle Eastern actors interested in the region, even less the sole international players present there. China, the United States and France are countries with significant military and economic presence in the region. Turkey itself is another important actor which has heavily invested in Somalia and Sudan, where $2 billion of aid for petroleum purchases and wheat were provided in March of this year. Nonetheless, the Gulf states, chiefly Saudi Arabia and the UAE seem to be increasingly coordinating their actions and investments in the region through joint funds and ventures, whilst keeping the economic interests of their regional neighbours at the heart of such measures. The security entity devised this Wednesday in Riyadh should therefore be seen as an important path toward the institutionalisation of Gulf influence in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden countries.

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