

Aleksi Ylönen, *The Horn Engaging the Gulf: Economic Diplomacy and Statecraft in Regional Relations*. London: Bloomsbury Academic (hb £85 – 978 0 7556 3515 3). 2024, 272 pp.

Aleksi Ylönen covers an important subject and one not given due attention in academic literature, even while the Red Sea has increasingly grown in strategic significance and presently pits Ansarallah (the Houthis) against a Western armada in a deadly war. His critique of realist international relations is sometimes insightful and his emphasis on the growing importance of middle-ranking powers and non-state actors in the Middle East is important. But it is an oddly framed book. The Gulf States considered do not include Iran but instead include Türkiye, while Egypt and the most powerful Red Sea state, Israel, are ignored. On the other side of the Red Sea, the author does not include Sudan in the Horn. This may have to do with the author's particular expertise, but it leads to some questionable analyses.

Ylönen is correct to reject perspectives that focus entirely on big power competition and conflict and assume that, because states in the Horn are fragile, they should always be viewed as victims. But he fails to recognize that the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front set aside its plans to carry out a socialist transformation upon coming to power in 1991 because of the unipolar dominance of the USA and went on to cooperate with the USA in maintaining stability in the Horn. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front and the Sudan People's Liberation Army also set aside their revolutionary agendas because of US power.

In downplaying the role of the big powers in shaping the foreign relations of the states he considers, Ylönen largely ignores the significance of the shift from the unipolar dominance of the USA to a multipolarity that now includes China and Russia. Neither of these countries figure in his theoretical framework, even though China has become a leading foreign actor in the Middle East and the Horn and has demonstrated its diplomatic prowess by reconciling arch enemies Saudi Arabia and Iran. Indeed, China does not warrant a mention until page 29, and then only to consider the 'debt trap' China has set for African states by providing badly needed infrastructure, a discredited hobby-horse of the West, which stopped constructing infrastructure in Africa years ago.

Lacking too is a consideration of how waning US power in the Middle East unleashed former client states that are now free to pursue policies in the Horn that run contrary to US interests. Examples include Türkiye and the UAE providing drones to Ethiopia in the Tigray war after the USA repeatedly demanded they stop. Another example is Gulf States' financing of the Sudanese military during the 2018–19 popular uprising to forestall a democratic transformation, which was also ineffectively opposed by the USA. Yet another is the UAE provision of weapons to the Sudan Rapid Support Forces of General Hemedti. Equally important was the ability of Sudan and Ethiopia to counter the power of the USA by their relations with China in a period of declining US power.

Ylönen contends that states of the Horn frequently dominate relations with their Arab counterparts, which has sometimes been the case, but it is a stretch to think that this is the norm. Omar al-Bashir spent years begging the Gulf States for money to finance his bankrupt regime and to intercede with the USA to end American

sanctions. Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki employed an American public relations firm to convince the USA to establish a base on Eritrea's Red Sea coast, and when that failed, he appealed to the Gulf States. Meanwhile, Ethiopia permitted its young women to be abused by wealthy Gulf employers so that the country could gain badly needed foreign currency. While there are exceptions, the relationship of the Gulf and Horn states gives meaning to the old Ethiopian adage of 'bowing at the front and farting at the rear'.

Ylönen considers Ethiopia 'the desired partner' of the Gulf States and Türkiye, but that is easier to do when he does not consider Sudan. While the Red Sea has been the focus of enormous attention in recent years, unlike Sudan, Ethiopia does not have access to the Red Sea – and hence Abiy Ahmed's current efforts to acquire such access. Nor is there anything comparable in Ethiopian experience to the interference that the Gulf States, Türkiye and Egypt played in the internal affairs of Sudan when they attempted to influence the outcome of the 2018–19 Sudanese popular uprising. Moreover, unlike Ethiopia, Sudan is part of an Arab-Islamic cultural milieu.

Ylönen's emphasis on the growing significance of middle powers is an important corrective, as is the view that, with their long-shared history, the Gulf and Horn should not be considered two distinct regions. Also insightful is the argument that weak states in the Horn have led to non-state actors assuming a critical role in foreign relations, and that narrow realist statist perspectives fail to grasp this important dimension. But he does not appreciate that the recent heightened engagement of middle powers and non-state actors in the Horn is a product of the declining power of the USA in the context of an emerging multipolarity, the most significant development in international relations thus far in the twenty-first century.

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Besi Brilliant Muhonja and Babacar M'Baye (eds), *Gender and Sexuality in Kenyan Societies: Centering the Human and the Humane in Critical Studies*. Washington DC: Rowman and Littlefield (hb US\$111/£85 – 978 1 66691 747 5). 2022, 256 pp.

This volume offers an inter- and multi-disciplinary approach, exploring conceptions and representations of sexuality and gender in oral tradition, literature, film, civic spaces and digital worlds. It also provides ethnographic studies that prioritize people's experiences in their everyday lives. As outlined in Muhonja's introduction and M'Baye's conclusion, the two editors curated a selection of essays by authors inclusively drawn from Africa, Europe and America using an *utu/ubuntu* critical framework that values inclusivity, empathy, intersubjectivity and the humane, centering a shared human condition.

As a whole, this volume emphasizes the significance of humane scholarship in critical knowledge production and approaches to African cultures, societies and living experiences. In her thoughtful and self-reflexive chapter, Betty Wambui rereads the Gikuyu mythological stories of Mumbi and Wangu, two female figures, with