Webinar "The US/Israel War on Iran: Implications on Relations between the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa"

On April 23, 2026, CARPO, in partnership with the HOME Institute (Horn of Africa and Middle East Institute), convened the webinar "The US/Israel War on Iran: Implications on Relations between the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa." The event formed part of the joint CARPO-HOME webinar series "The Middle East and Africa in Flux." Bringing together policy experts from the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, the webinar examined the implications of the US/Israel war on Iran for interregional relations, with a primary focus on economic vulnerabilities, security externalities, and evolving geopolitical alignments.

The session was moderated by Nimo Jirdeh, Director of the HOME Institute, and Sebastian Sons, Senior Researcher at CARPO. Contributions were provided by Shirley Achieng, Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at the United States International University – Africa (USIU-Africa), Damyana Bakardzhieva, Senior Research Fellow leading the Economic Diplomacy Programme at the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, Eyad Alrefai, Lecturer in the Department of Political Science at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and Bob Wekesa, Director of the African Centre for the Study of the United States at the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS), South Africa.

Economic Pressures and Fiscal Vulnerabilities

The discussion underscored the immediate and systemic economic pressures facing African states as a result of the conflict. Rising global prices for oil and fertilizer were identified as key transmission channels through which the war is exacerbating fiscal and balance-of-payments constraints across the continent. These pressures are compounding existing currency shortages and intensifying debates around debt sustainability and relief mechanisms. Increased transportation costs driven by both higher energy prices and disruptions to established trade routes further constrain economic resilience and undermine growth prospects. In light of the economic fallout on the Gulf states due to disruption of energy supply chains, destruction of critical infrastructure, and ongoing regional fragility, a central policy question emerged regarding the capacities and willingness of Gulf states to further provide substantial financial or strategic support to African economies navigating these shocks.

Strategic Infrastructure and Maritime Security Risks

The strategic importance of regional infrastructure and maritime corridors was highlighted as a critical dimension of the conflict's broader implications. Land-based transport networks within Saudi Arabia, particularly its East-West pipeline connecting to the Red Sea, are gaining prominence as alternatives to vulnerable maritime routes in light of the blockade of Strait of Hormuz. At the same time, the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab Strait were identified as pivotal chokepoints in the global economy, now subject to heightened security risks. These routes face multidirectional threats, including potential actions by Houthi forces in Yemen and instability emanating from the Horn of Africa. The risk of miscalculation in threat perception was also emphasized as a significant destabilizing factor, with the potential to trigger wider regional escalation. In this context, Saudi Arabia's security doctrine is increasingly framed as multidimensional, requiring stability across interconnected domains. Hence, disruption in any single area could generate cascading effects across the broader system and impact the wider region dramatically.

Human Security and Socioeconomic Stability

The human security implications of the conflict are also a central concern. Rising costs of living across African countries are disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations, reducing purchasing power and deepening socioeconomic inequalities. This deterioration in living conditions is likely to increase susceptibility among youth populations to recruitment by extremist and terrorist groups and engagement in illicit economic activities, thereby linking economic distress directly to security risks. Additionally, the potential decline in remittances from African migrant workers in Gulf countries represents a significant threat to household incomes and local economies in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly if the conflict leads to labor market disruptions or economic contraction in host countries.

Geopolitical Realignment and Strategic Balancing

From a geopolitical perspective, the discussion highlighted the fluid and adaptive nature of relations between African states, Gulf countries, and the United States. The case of South Africa was presented as illustrative of broader trends. The country faces mounting economic challenges, including a widening current account deficit and rising inflation, which undermines its policy flexibility. At the same time, South Africa's longstanding strategy of maintaining balanced relations with both Iran and the United States is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain amid intensifying geopolitical polarization. While relations with the United States have recently deteriorated, economic interdependence necessitates efforts to stabilize and repair this partnership as the conflict evolves.

Continuity in Gulf Engagement and Multi-Alignment Strategies

Participants broadly agreed that Gulf states are unlikely to significantly alter their long-term strategic objectives in Africa, nor are they expected to reduce or even stop development assistance or investment commitments. Instead, continuity in engagement is anticipated, albeit within a more complex and risk-prone environment. In response to these dynamics, multi-alignment strategies are emerging as a pragmatic approach for African states. This involves simultaneously managing relationships at both regional and global levels, balancing ties with Gulf partners alongside engagement with major powers. Such strategies are seen as essential for mitigating exposure to external shocks while preserving strategic autonomy and African agency.