

Contested Waterfronts: Port Imperialism and Insecurity in the Red Sea

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Abstract

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The dissertation examines how port development shapes regional power in the contemporary Red Sea, with a particular emphasis on Portsudan, Djibouti, and Aqaba. It argues that Gulf-backed port expansion, especially by the United Arab Emirates via companies like DP World and AD Ports Group, should be seen as an example of port imperialism. This kind of power exerts its influence on coastal areas through the use of concessions, logistics corridors, free zones, security agreements, and selective alliances. Unlike traditional empires, which annex territory, port imperialism exercises control over movement, land, labor, revenue, and infrastructure without involving direct annexation.

The argument in the dissertation is built up using ethnographic research at a number of locations, which involves conducting interviews, making field observations, and carrying out an analysis of archival and documentary materials as well as corporate records, legal cases, and media reports. It shows that ports are not merely smooth sites that are ready for modernization; on the contrary, they are complex social settings in which workers, traders, customs officials, port police, tribal leaders,

state agencies, investors, and protest groups interact. Therefore, port concessions involve more than just business agreements; they also reflect continuous struggles concerning sovereignty.

Each case study shows a different form of port imperialism. In the case of Portsudan, the UAE's plans for a port development encountered Beja political issues, labor activism, protests, and the ongoing marginalization of eastern Sudan. The Abu Amama project was put forward in order to avoid the complicated politics associated with Portsudan. In Djibouti, the legal dispute with DP World over Doraleh shows how a small country can make use of its strategic location and its foreign military bases to offset the effects of DP World. In Aqaba, the UAE-supported development met with fewer obstacles since the Jordanian government was able to centralize control, handle matters with the tribes, and ensure the port and tourism infrastructure.

This dissertation is concerned with the discussions surrounding logistics, sovereignty, infrastructure, empire, and the political economy of the Red Sea. It maintains that sovereignty in port cities is complicated and consists of state institutions, contracts, labor systems, tribal mediation, security arrangements, and the everyday regulation of movement. The conclusion uses this approach in relation to the Sudan war, indicating that Portsudan turned into a wartime capital and an evacuation route after April 2023. Finally, the dissertation asserts that ports are places where trade and war, development and displacement, sovereignty and dependence take place.

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DEDICATION

To the peoples of the Red Sea, whose ports and shores have borne the weight of empire, and who continue to imagine connectivity without extraction, opportunity without dispossession, and development without invasion.

And to the peoples of the Global South who have resisted, endured, and challenged imperialism in all its forms.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The Red Sea is not an empty corridor

I cannot say whether my interest in the Red Sea began from a childhood trip to Port Sudan, together with the biblical and Qur'anic tales which give the sea a sense of antiquity, or whether it arose from the more recent scenes depicted in films and news reports which have turned the waterway into a setting for rescue operations, danger, and strategy. In Hebrew tradition the Red Sea is known as Yam Suph, usually rendered as the "Sea of Reeds". In Arabic historical sources it is called *Bahr al-Qulzum*, the Sea of Clysma. These names go beyond merely designating a body of water since they refer to a long-standing history in which religion, empire, commerce, migration and war have all come together along the same maritime route.

Most modern depictions of the Red Sea retain this earlier notion of drama at the expense of ignoring the area's local histories. A case in point is the Netflix movie *The Red Sea Diving Resort*. This film shows the Sudanese coast primarily as a destination for the evacuation of Ethiopian Jews who were transported through Sudan to Israel by a Mossad operation. Although the film focuses on secrecy, rescue, and danger, it pays very little attention to the Sudanese coastal world in which this operation took place. The Red Sea is shown merely as a background setting in the film rather than as a place with social and political significance. The shores are treated as secured areas, yet the people who live there are almost unknown.

This dissertation begins from a different premise. The Red Sea is not merely an empty channel lying between Europe and Asia, or just a strategic route for great powers; it is a coastal area that is in fact experienced. Its ports have been the outcome of labor, tribal authority, state actions, imperial routes, shipping agreements, wars, and continual struggles over access. They are not only

involved in global trade; they are places where sovereignty is negotiated, leased, shunned, and at times violently reasserted.

My interest in the Red Sea grew as an unusual port actor became more confident in its movements along the coastline—the United Arab Emirates. Through companies such as DP World and AD Ports Group, and by means of broader financial, military, and diplomatic networks, the UAE became one of the most prominent external actors in the development of ports in the Red Sea. Its companies were operating in Djibouti, Somaliland, Eritrea, Sudan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan; they did not go there just as investors, but came with a model involving ports linked to free zones, logistics corridors, security arrangements, real estate projects, digital systems, and political alliances.

This dissertation then asks why the UAE model succeeds in some places, fails in others, or adapts in others. Why did Emirati port ambitions face resistance in Portsudan? Why did Djibouti become a site of legal conflict and strategic bargaining? Why did Aqaba become a relative success story for UAE-backed development? What do these differences reveal about sovereignty, logistics, and power in the contemporary Red Sea?

I answer these questions through the concept of port imperialism. By Port Imperialism, I do not mean every foreign investment or every reorganization of coastal space. All governance regimes reorganize space and social relations, but imperialism describes a more specific relationship in which an external state-corporate actor seeks durable and asymmetrical control over functions normally associated with sovereignty. The decisive issue is therefore effective control rather than the formal transfer of territorial title. Doyle defines empire as a relationship of effective political control—whether formal or informal—exercised by a metropolitan power over a peripheral

political society (Doyle 1986, 45). Annexation is one means of establishing such control, but it is not a necessary condition of imperial rule. Gallagher and Robinson similarly demonstrate that imperial power can be maintained through informal mechanisms, with formal annexation becoming necessary only when those mechanisms prove insufficient (Gallagher and Robinson 1953, 13).

In the cases examined here, the objective is not the annexation of an entire coastline but control over strategic ports and the systems connected to them, including terminal operations, customs procedures, data systems, coastal land, labor regimes, security practices, revenue, and access to the hinterland. I therefore use *port imperialism* when three conditions are present: authority is projected by an actor based outside the host polity; the resulting relationship is sufficiently asymmetrical and durable to constrain local alternatives; and control over the port contributes to a wider regional network that directs commercial value and strategic leverage toward the external power. A concession is not inherently imperial. It becomes part of an imperial project when it transfers effective control over public functions to an external actor and incorporates the port into a regional system organized around that actor's interests. This framework also distinguishes an imperial project from an accomplished imperial relationship: Portsudan illustrates an attempted project that encountered resistance, Djibouti demonstrates a contested and partially reversed relationship, and Aqaba shows how such a project can advance through collaboration with a centralized host state.

This dissertation argues that port imperialism does not move across the Red Sea as a single uniform project. It encounters different configurations of sovereignty. In Portsudan, it collided with Beja politics, port labor, protest, and a socially dense coastal field. In Djibouti, it encountered a

gatekeeper state that used its location to bargain with external powers while exposing itself to legal, financial, and military dependence. In Aqaba, it succeeded more fully because the Jordanian state could centralize authority, manage tribal relations, and turn security into a condition for investment. These three sites show that ports are not passive recipients of global logistics. They are political arenas where global ambition must pass through local authority.

The Red Sea matters because it condenses many of the central transformations of contemporary global politics. It links the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean through the Suez Canal and the Bab al-Mandab. It connects the Arabian Peninsula to the Horn of Africa, the Nile Valley, the Levant, and East Africa. It carries oil, containers, pilgrims, livestock, grain, weapons, soldiers, tourists, refugees, and digital projections of future trade. Its ports are therefore never only national infrastructures. They are regional and global interfaces.

The rising importance of the Red Sea also has to be understood alongside the militarization of nearby chokepoints, especially the Strait of Hormuz. Hormuz is the world's most important oil transit chokepoint. In 2024, roughly 20 million barrels per day of crude oil, condensate, and petroleum products moved through the strait, about one-fifth of global petroleum liquids consumption (EIA 2025). Recent conflict around Hormuz has shown how quickly maritime passage can become a matter of military command, insurance risk, shipping calculation, and regional coercion. The same logic has been evident in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb, where attacks on shipping have forced vessels to reroute around the Cape of Good Hope, increasing time, cost, and uncertainty in global trade. These crises show that waterways are no longer background infrastructures of globalization. They have become frontlines in regional competition. States,

militias, shipping firms, insurers, and port operators now treat chokepoints as spaces to be secured, threatened, bypassed, or militarized.

This matters for the dissertation because the UAE's port expansion cannot be separated from this wider securitization of maritime space. Portsudan, Djibouti, and Aqaba are not only development sites. They are positioned within a regional system in which Hormuz, Bab al-Mandab, Suez, and the Red Sea ports form a chain of strategic passages. Control over a port is therefore also control over a possible route, refuge, military platform, commercial alternative, or evacuation corridor. Port imperialism grows out of this convergence: the same infrastructure that promises trade also prepares for crisis.

Yet the Red Sea is frequently divided across disciplinary and regional frameworks rather than examined as a connected social field. Alexis Wick observes that, despite the historical integration of its shores, the Red Sea has rarely been studied as a unified historical space (Wick 2016, 5–6). Within security-policy scholarship, Neil Melvin approaches the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb primarily through naval access, foreign military bases, strategic chokepoints, and the projection of military power (Melvin, n.d., 25). Scholarship on Gulf-Horn relations foregrounds the efforts of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar to project influence across the sea through ports, military facilities, and political alliances (Vertin 2019,2). An influential strand of Africanist scholarship organizes the Horn through questions of state formation, state decay, and regional conflict (Clapham 2017, 2–5).

These approaches are valuable, and none of these fields is internally uniform. Nevertheless, their different geographical and analytical scales can push the port city to the margins: security analysis sees the chokepoint, Gulf-Horn scholarship sees regional rivalry, and Africanist scholarship often

begins from the territorial state. This dissertation instead centers the port city as the place where these processes converge. It builds on Laleh Khalili's treatment of maritime trade and logistics as material systems through which global capitalism operates (Khalili 2020, 3). It extends that approach by examining how maritime security, foreign investment, regional power, state authority, labor, and everyday urban life encounter one another within particular Red Sea port cities.

Ports make the Red Sea visible as a connected region. They show how a decision in Dubai can affect dockworkers in Portsudan, how a contract dispute in Djibouti can reshape Ethiopian trade routes, and how a tourism enclave in Aqaba can connect Jordanian state power to Gulf real estate capital. Ports also show how the Red Sea's global importance depends on local arrangements: who works the docks, who controls land, who guards gates, who mediates tribal claims, who issues permits, who owns trucks, who signs concession agreements, and who can stop movement.

This project therefore treats the Red Sea not as a fixed geopolitical block but as a field of contested power. Routes are not merely lines on a map. They are made through ports, roads, railways, customs systems, shipping companies, military bases, legal agreements, and social relations. Laleh Khalili argues that maritime transport is not simply an enabling adjunct to trade but part of the fabric of global capitalism (Khalili 2020, 3). Ports and shipping infrastructures emerge from histories of labor, empire, war, pilgrimage, capital, and planning (Khalili 2020, 4–6). Deborah Cowen similarly shows that logistics turns supply chains, corridors, borders, and gateways into terrains of security and political authority (Cowen 2014, 79–85). This dissertation builds on these insights by asking how port logistics becomes a regional imperial project in the Red Sea.

1.2 The UAE as a logistical power

The UAE is central to this dissertation because it has turned logistics into a form of regional power. Dubai's rise from a small port city with limited oil resources into a global trade and logistics hub depended on the development of Port Rashid, Jebel Ali, free zones, and state-backed port companies. DP World became the corporate face of this model. It exported not only terminal management but also an idea of port-led development: efficient gates, containerization, customs reform, free zones, logistics corridors, and public-private partnership.

Abu Dhabi's role has grown through AD Ports Group and related companies. While DP World has long been associated with Dubai's global port empire, AD Ports Group reflects Abu Dhabi's own logistical and geopolitical ambitions. In Sudan, the proposed Abu Amama project involved AD Ports Group and Invictus Investment in building and operating a new Red Sea port and economic zone. In Aqaba, AD Ports Group became involved in cruise infrastructure and digital port systems. The distinction matters because UAE port imperialism is not reducible to one company. It is a broader field of Emirati state-backed capital, corporate strategy, elite networks, and regional security interests.

DP World's involvement in Somaliland illustrates how port companies can become actors in sovereignty disputes. In 2018, after Somalia rejected the agreement among DP World, Somaliland, and Ethiopia concerning the Port of Berbera, DP World's then-chairman and CEO, Sultan Ahmed bin Sulayem, defended the deal. He argued that Somalia lacked the authority to reverse it because the concession had been approved by Somaliland's parliament (Garowe Online 2020). The importance of this intervention was not merely diplomatic. A port executive publicly treated the capacity to authorize a concession as evidence of sovereign authority.

This dynamic recalls William Reno's analysis of Charles Taylor's Liberia. Reno shows that Taylor controlled most of Liberia while being denied international recognition of juridical sovereignty (Reno 1998, 93). Although Taylor constructed political authority through commercial networks, his lack of recognized sovereignty limited his ability to defend contracts in foreign courts and establish durable relationships with major international firms (Reno 1998, 100–102). In Reno's account, therefore, international recognition made it possible for a political authority to act as a legitimate contractual counterpart in the global economy.

The Berbera case extends and partly reverses this relationship. DP World could not grant Somaliland formal diplomatic recognition. Nevertheless, by signing and publicly defending a long-term concession with Hargeisa, the company treated Somaliland's institutions as competent to authorize control over strategic infrastructure. The contract did not merely follow a prior determination of sovereignty; it helped enact a functional form of recognition. If Reno demonstrates how recognized sovereignty makes international contracts possible, Berbera shows how an international contract, particularly one involving a state-owned global port company, can make disputed sovereignty materially consequential. The concession produces infrastructure, revenue, external relationships, and administrative practices organized as though Somaliland were sovereign, even while its formal international status remains unresolved.

This is one of the clearest examples of what I mean by port imperialism. A port company does not need to formally declare a state. It can act through contracts, investment, and infrastructure as if certain authorities matter and others do not. It can recognize practical sovereignty through the management of routes, gates, and corridors. Port companies sometimes work through international law, as in Djibouti, while at other times they circumvent it, as DP World's dealings with

Somaliland demonstrate.¹ In doing so, logistics creates its own political facts on the ground, including forms of de facto recognition.

The global reach of DP World also reveals the elite networks through which port power circulates. Sultan Ahmed bin Sulayem, the long-time chairman and chief executive of DP World, left his leadership role in February 2026 when DP World announced the appointment of Essa Kazim as chairman and Yuvraj Narayan as group chief executive officer. Reuters reported that the leadership change followed pressure over alleged ties to Jeffrey Epstein; it also noted that being named in such files does not prove wrongdoing (Choukeir and Maccioni 2026). This is a reminder that port imperialism is not only a matter of infrastructure and contracts. It is also built through networks of elite access, finance, reputation, and personal connection. The same actors who shape ports in Africa, the Gulf, and Europe often move through transnational circuits of wealth and influence that are difficult to see from the waterfront but central to how global capital works. This dissertation therefore studies the UAE's investments as a logistical configuration, one of state power, corporate capital, port expertise, security partnerships, and elite networks that travels across the Red Sea.

1.3 Port imperialism and layered sovereignty

The central argument of this dissertation is that UAE-backed port expansion in the Red Sea is best understood as port imperialism; a mode of power that seeks to reorganize coastal space through infrastructure, concession, security, and logistics. This form of imperialism differs from older forms of territorial empire, but it remains imperial in its effects. It redistributes authority over land,

¹ DP World executives, including CEO Sultan Ahmed bin Sulayem, maintained that operations at Berbera Port would continue despite decrees issued by Somalia's federal government. They argued that the multimillion-dollar concession had been legally concluded and ratified by Somaliland's parliament (Garowe Online 2020)

labor, revenue, movement, and security. It creates new hierarchies between hub ports and feeder ports, between global operators and local workers, between concessionary law and public authority, and between coastal communities and external investors.

Port imperialism operates through the promise of frictionless movement. It promises to reduce delay, improve efficiency, attract investment, modernize customs, and connect national economies to global markets. But this promise always meets friction. Ports are not empty technical systems. They are inhabited by workers, traders, truckers, customs officers, police, engineers, municipal officials, tribal authorities, religious networks, political parties, and families. These actors are not outside logistics. They are part of what makes logistics possible. The attempt to smooth movement therefore often produces new conflicts over who controls access, who benefits from investment, and who has the right to speak for the coast.

To explain these conflicts, I use the concept of layered sovereignty. Sovereignty in port cities is not exercised by the state alone. It is distributed across multiple authorities. Some are formal, like ministries, port corporations, customs agencies, police, courts, concession agreements, and special economic zone authorities. Others are informal or partially recognized, such as labor groups, tribal leaders, religious networks, business families, municipal brokers, armed groups, and protest coalitions. These layers do not simply compete; they overlap. A container moves because many authorities allow it to move. A concession succeeds only when these layers are aligned, disciplined, bypassed, or coerced.

This is why the same UAE port model produced different outcomes across the three cases. In Portsudan, layered sovereignty was dense and difficult to bypass. Beja leaders, port workers, unions, kallat, traders, municipal officials, and protest coalitions all had claims on the port. In

Djibouti, sovereignty was centralized in the state but mediated through foreign military bases, debt, concession contracts, arbitration, and Ethiopia's dependence on Djiboutian routes. In Aqaba, Jordan's state institutions were able to manage tribal relations and securitize coastal development, making external investment more stable. The dissertation's comparative argument is that port imperialism succeeds where local layers of sovereignty can be aligned with external capital, and falters where those layers remain contested or politically explosive.

Layered sovereignty also helps explain why port concessions are never merely economic documents. A concession agreement can shift who controls a berth, but it can also shift who controls labor recruitment, truck movement, customs procedures, data systems, security routines, and land around the port. It can move decision-making away from public institutions and into contractual arrangements that are harder for workers, communities, or local political actors to contest. In this sense, port imperialism does not abolish sovereignty. It redistributes sovereignty across state agencies, foreign operators, security actors, local intermediaries, and corporate systems. Like a kaleidoscope, layered sovereignty is a dynamic configuration of authority whose pattern shifts as port concessions redistribute control among state institutions, private companies, workers, communities, and other local actors.

The concept also allows this dissertation to avoid two common simplifications. The first is the idea that African and Middle Eastern port states are simply weak recipients of external power. The second is the idea that foreign investment is merely commercial and therefore politically neutral. The cases show something more complicated. States can bargain, resist, invite, or redirect external operators. Local actors can block, negotiate, or reinterpret development projects. But these

struggles unfold within unequal regional and global fields of capital, law, security, and military power.

1.4 Logistics, friction, and the politics of infrastructure

This dissertation speaks to four bodies of literature: logistics and maritime capitalism, sovereignty and infrastructure, empire and extraterritoriality, and ethnographies of friction and local authority.

The first conversation is with scholarship on logistics, maritime capitalism, and oceanic governance. Khalili's work on shipping and capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula demonstrates that ports and maritime routes are constitutive of global capitalism rather than secondary to it (Khalili 2020, 3). Her analysis is especially important because it refuses to separate commercial circulation from war, labor, pilgrimage, and state planning. Cowen similarly shows that supply chains have become objects of political calculation, military strategy, and security intervention (Cowen 2014, 79–85). Chua and her coauthors extend this critique by conceptualizing logistics as a calculative logic and spatial practice that reorganizes capitalism, warfare, and territory, rather than as a politically neutral technique for managing supply chains (Chua et al. 2018, 617–29).

Jatin Dua approaches maritime circulation from the western Indian Ocean, showing that the movement of ships and commodities depends on overlapping and sometimes competing regimes of protection. Coastal communities, pirates, shipping companies, insurers, private security firms, and naval forces all make claims over who can protect, capture, or release mobile property at sea (Dua 2019, 3–5). His analysis shifts piracy from the margins of maritime capitalism to the systems of protection, negotiation, and value-making that make circulation possible. Ziadah brings these questions directly into the political economy of Gulf port expansion. Her study of Jebel Ali and

DP World demonstrates how port infrastructure connects state-owned conglomerates, free zones, labor discipline, urban development, and overseas concession agreements, thereby enabling the internationalization of Dubai's capital (Ziadah 2018, 182–83).

Taken together, these works establish that logistics is not simply a system for moving commodities efficiently. It is a field in which space is reorganized, labor is disciplined, risks are distributed, and claims to protection and authority are produced. My dissertation builds on this scholarship by examining port concessions as instruments of regional power. It asks how Gulf state-owned port companies use concession agreements, economic zones, logistics corridors, and security partnerships to project authority beyond their national territories, and how these projects are accepted, renegotiated, or resisted by host states, port institutions, workers, unions, and coastal communities. I describe this process as logistics becoming imperial because organizing circulation redistributes practical control over land, labor, customs, revenue, data, and access without requiring formal annexation. The question, therefore, is not only how goods move, but who acquires the authority to determine the terms of that movement.

The second conversation is with infrastructure and sovereignty. Keller Easterling argues that infrastructure space operates as a kind of hidden operating system for global power, especially through zones, standards, repeatable formulas, and extrastate arrangements (Easterling 2014, 11–16). Anthropologist Brenda Chalfin's work on customs and borders in West Africa shows how sovereignty is made and remade at practical sites of inspection, taxation, and passage (Chalfin 2010, 1–24). These works help me approach ports not as fixed national assets but as sites where authority is performed through gates, paperwork, scanners, contracts, and everyday decisions.

The third conversation is with empire, extraterritoriality, and regional power. Older empires often controlled ports through garrisons, customs posts, protectorates, and naval routes. Pankaj Mishra places these practices within a wider history of Asian subordination, showing how European commercial expansion rested on military and legal asymmetries. Garrisons and gunboats opened markets, secured access to raw materials, and enabled foreign powers to impose the terms of international trade on local societies (Mishra 2012, 15–45). Contemporary port imperialism works through more flexible instruments: concessions, free zones, management contracts, security partnerships, and corporate–state alliances. The continuity lies less in formal occupation than in the creation of unequal spaces in which foreign commerce receives exceptional protection. Quinn Slobodian’s work on globalists and the making of protected markets helps explain how neoliberal projects seek to insulate flows of capital from democratic or popular claims (Slobodian 2018, 2–4). In the Red Sea, this insulation often takes coastal form. Free zones, port authorities, and concession contracts create spaces where global capital can move with fewer local interruptions, but these spaces remain dependent on the state’s ability to manage workers, communities, and security. Mishra’s historical account therefore sharpens the comparison: the garrison and gunboat have not simply disappeared; many of their functions have been redistributed across contracts, corporate operators, security agreements, and legally exceptional port zones.

The fourth conversation is with ethnographic theories of friction and local authority. Anna Tsing’s concept of friction is central because it shows that global connections are made through awkward, unequal, and productive encounters (Tsing 2005, 1–6). Friction is not a failure of globalization. It is how globalization works. In my cases, friction appears in port labor, tribal negotiations, concession disputes, border controls, protest, and war. The dissertation also builds on scholarship on the Horn of Africa that treats trade, taxation, gatekeeping, and circulation as central to state

formation and political authority (Stepputat and Haggmann 2023, 1–34). This allows me to ask how ports make sovereignty not in theory but in practice.

My theoretical contribution is to bring these literatures together by treating the port as a site where multiple forms of power converge and become mutually constitutive. Ports are simultaneously infrastructures of capital, territorial borders, security spaces, labor regimes, and urban institutions. Their importance lies in how they connect these functions within a single spatial and political arrangement. At the port, sovereignty is exercised through the regulation of access, mobility, labor, contracts, and commercial circulation. Logistics is therefore not a neutral system of movement and efficiency. It organizes which goods, people, and forms of capital can move, under what conditions, and for whose benefit. The port thus reveals how sovereignty becomes logistical through the governance of circulation, while logistics becomes political through the inequalities, conflicts, and claims to authority that shape that circulation.

This theoretical approach also changes how we understand development. Port development is often presented as a technical solution to congestion, inefficiency, and underinvestment. But the chapters show that development is also a struggle over authority. A new terminal, cruise facility, free zone, or digital platform can reorganize who may enter, who may work, who may profit, and who may decide. Infrastructure is therefore never only material. It is a political arrangement that distributes power through space.

1.5 Following port power: method and case selection

This dissertation is based on multi-sited ethnographic research in Portsudan, Djibouti, and Aqaba, supplemented by interviews, archival and documentary research, policy analysis, corporate

materials, media sources, and legal documents. I chose these three sites because they show three different encounters between UAE-backed port expansion and local configurations of sovereignty. Portsudan shows interruption and bypass. Djibouti shows bargaining and legal conflict. Aqaba shows managed accommodation.

Table 1: Comparative Design and Case Selection

Case	Strategic position	Form of UAE presence	Sovereign configuration
Portsudan	Sudan's principal maritime gateway	DP World: failed in PCT. AD Ports Group and Invictus Investment: proposed Abu Amama port and economic zone	Sea Ports Corporation, port labor and unions, Beja institutions, and protest coalitions
Djibouti	Bab al-Mandab chokepoint and Ethiopia's principal maritime gateway	DP World and other Dubai entities: Doraleh Container Terminal, Dubai Free Zone, and ENOC oil terminal	Gatekeeper state, port authority, concession contracts, Ethiopian trade dependence, and foreign military bases
Aqaba	Jordan's only seaport, border city, and special economic zone	AD Ports Group, Maqta Gateway, and UAE developers: cruise terminal, port digitalization, Ayla, and Marsa Zayed	Centralized Jordanian state, ASEZA, ADC, security institutions, and managed tribal relations

I use ethnography because port imperialism cannot be understood only from contracts, policy reports, trade statistics, or satellite images. These sources show what projects claim to do, but they do not show how people experience them, contest them, or make them work. Port concessions appear in official documents as technical arrangements over terminals, cargo flows, and investment. In practice, they reorganize access to land, work, revenue, documents, and authority. Ethnography makes those reorganizations visible.

Ports are difficult places to study. They are securitized, bureaucratic, and often closed to outsiders. Access is mediated by permits, personal introductions, institutional affiliations, police, and informal recognition. This difficulty was not only a methodological obstacle. It was part of the object of study. The same barriers that made fieldwork difficult also revealed how ports are governed. Who can enter the terminal? Who can ask for documents? Who is recognized by port police? Who can speak to workers? Who can move between the city and the port? These questions are methodological, but they are also political.

Portsudan is the first case because it is Sudan's main maritime gateway and the most socially dense port in this dissertation. It is located on Beja land and tied to a long history of eastern Sudanese marginalization, labor struggle, and regional protest. For decades, Portsudan connected Sudan's hinterland to global trade, customs revenue, and strategic access. Because the port is both economically vital and politically contested, it reveals how port imperialism meets local sovereignty. UAE-backed interest in Sudanese ports, first through attempts to develop an existing port infrastructure and later through the Abu Amama project, collided with Beja claims, labor institutions, protest coalitions, and the instability of the Sudanese state.

Eastern Sudan complicates simple accounts of Sudan's conflicts as only a struggle between an Arab-Muslim center and non-Arab or non-Muslim peripheries. In the east, the central grievance has been the concentration of wealth, authority, and development resources in Khartoum and the northern Nile Valley. The Beja Congress, the Eastern Front, the 2006 Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement, and later disputes over the Eastern Track of the Juba Peace Agreement all show how representation became a central question. Who could speak for the east? Former rebels? Tribal

nazirs? Transitional officials? Sudan Revolutionary Front-linked negotiators? Port workers? Local communities in Red Sea, Kassala, and Gedaref?

Protest was one way this struggle over representation became visible. In 2005, Beja demonstrators in Portsudan presented demands to the Red Sea State governor after the east was excluded from national peace negotiations over power and resources. Security forces later fired on demonstrators, killing at least twenty people and turning the protest into a marker of eastern Sudan's political marginalization (Amnesty International 2005, 1). After the 2019 revolution, protest took a different but related form. Beja leaders and allied groups used road closures, port blockades, and interruptions to oil and cargo movement to pressure the transitional government over the Eastern Track, representation, and regional development (Reuters 2021). These protests they showed that the port was not only a national infrastructure managed from Khartoum. It was also one of the few instruments through which eastern Sudanese actors could force the state to recognize their claims.



Figure 1 The page sharing a picture from the road blockade in Portsudan

The protests in Portsudan was never only about the port. It grew out of a wider field where tribal authority, sectarian networks, regional parties, unions, traders, and port institutions overlapped. *Khatmiya*, which is a soft religious sect in Sudan, tied families across the east. The Beja Congress carried a longer history of regional political struggle. Dockworkers and traders brought concerns about wages, jobs, and access. When these concerns came together, protest became more than a local complaint. It became a claim about who had the right to speak for the coast and on what terms.

Arguments were managed openly through circles of mediation, respect, and rivalry. The scene showed that authority in eastern Sudan was not simply a residue of the past but a living political form. The slogan *Beja Dawla*, or “the Beja are a state,” condensed a double claim: a demand for representation within the Sudanese state and for recognition of Beja authority beyond its institutions. In Portsudan, this claim carried particular force because control over the port shapes who can move goods, govern labor, collect revenue, and connect the region to the wider world. The story therefore makes visible a central argument of the dissertation: port sovereignty is not monopolized by one actor but negotiated among state institutions, local authorities, workers, communities, and external firms. Portsudan receives greater ethnographic attention because it was my primary field site and the port where I obtained the most sustained access. My access to the ports in Djibouti and Aqaba was more limited because I entered as a foreign researcher and because both ports were treated as highly securitized spaces. Consequently, Djibouti and Aqaba contain less observation from inside the terminals and function primarily as comparative cases, revealing how similar regional ambitions encounter different configurations of state, corporate, and local authority.



Figure 2 Beja Representatives Gathered for Elections

Djibouti is the second case because it represents a different form of port sovereignty. Unlike Sudan, Djibouti is a small state whose political economy is organized around strategic location. It sits near the Bab al-Mandab and functions as Ethiopia's main maritime outlet. It hosts multiple foreign military bases and has been the site of major port concessions, including the Doraleh Container Terminal dispute with DP World. Djibouti shows that small states are not merely passive recipients of port imperialism. They can use geography as leverage. But this leverage comes with risks: debt, arbitration, foreign bases, and dependence on external partners. Djibouti is therefore a case of gatekeeper sovereignty: powerful because of location, vulnerable because of the same location.

Aqaba is the third case because it shows the conditions under which UAE-backed development can succeed. Aqaba is Jordan's only seaport, a border city near Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, and a special economic zone shaped by tourism, security, and state-led planning. UAE-backed projects in Aqaba include tourism infrastructure, cruise facilities, digital port systems, and real estate development. Unlike Portsudan, Aqaba's local politics did not stop UAE-backed

development. Unlike Djibouti, conflict over the port did not become a major legal rupture with DP World. Instead, the Jordanian state managed tribal structures, securitized access, and presented Aqaba as a stable platform for investment. Aqaba therefore shows port imperialism in its most polished form: not the absence of friction, but the state management of friction.

These three cases allow me to compare failure, bargaining, and success. They tell a story about the ways in which sociological, geopolitical, and economic worlds come into alignment or not. The Port Sudan case is a case in which the "social thickness" of tribal and worker organizations complicates and ultimately thwarts the projects of the powerful (though in times of war, that social thickness plays a different role). In Djibouti, the thickness is less social than it is geopolitical. The overlapping military projects of Chinese, French, and American states create a paradoxical dynamic in which a seemingly "weak" state is able to leverage that geopolitical thickness against a rival regional power. It is a kind of jiu-jitsu sovereignty. The Aqaba case is the one where the social, geopolitical, and economic worlds are in tightest alignment, generating a climate that is most suitable for the work of port imperialism, but even here the local is not irrelevant. Rather, it is tamed by the preponderance of outside power. The new UAE-funded mosque is perhaps the image of that power, in which a sacred space for local peoples has been reconstituted in the image of UAE-sponsored modernity.

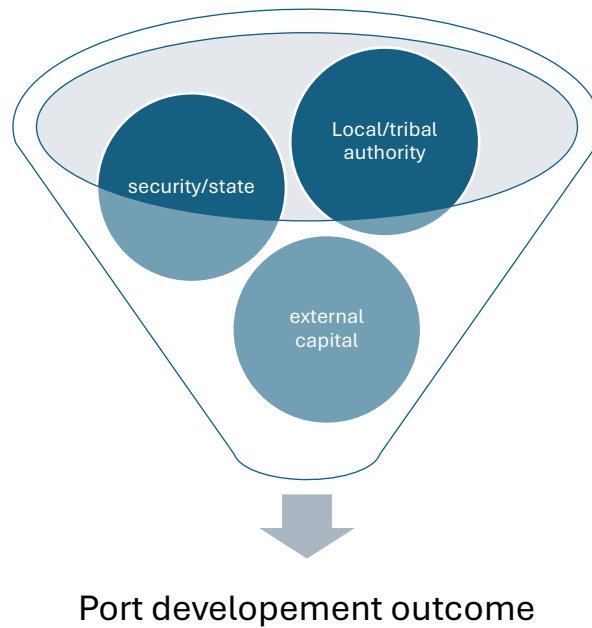


Figure 3 Shifting and Layered Authorities in ports spaces

This research combined multi-sited ethnography with semi-structured interviews, snowball sampling, archival research, and document analysis. I began with a small number of contacts in each field site, who introduced me to other participants with relevant knowledge and experience. Through this process, I interviewed port workers, engineers, customs-clearance agents, union leaders, traders, tribal authorities, government officials, company representatives, and other actors involved in port governance. I supplemented these interviews with archival records, concession agreements, legal documents, government plans, institutional reports, corporate materials, and development publications. Examining these materials alongside interviews and observations allowed me to compare official representations of infrastructure with the ways ports were understood and experienced by the people who inhabited and operated them.

Ethnography allowed me to see the difference between official infrastructure and lived infrastructure. Ferguson and Gupta argue that the state does not exist only as a formal apparatus

above society. Its apparent coherence and authority are produced through mundane bureaucratic practices, representations, records, and everyday encounters (Ferguson and Gupta 2002, 984–86) (Ferguson and Gupta 2002, 984–86). Following this approach, I do not treat official plans as mere fictions or everyday experience as the only reality. Instead, I examine how plans, contracts, and development narratives are enacted, interpreted, contested, and transformed in daily port life. In Portsudan, official documents described concessions, modernization, and port development, while fieldwork revealed suspicions surrounding contracts, anxieties about privatization, and the roles of workers, tribal authorities, and protest coalitions in shaping port politics. In Djibouti, contracts and legal disputes revealed one layer of sovereignty, while interviews and observations showed how the country's strategic location was narrated simultaneously as a source of leverage, a condition of vulnerability, and a means of national survival. In Aqaba, tourism brochures and development plans promoted narratives of modernity and investment, while fieldwork revealed selective access, securitized spaces, and the state's management of tribal relations.

My positionality also shaped this research. I am Sudanese, and my relationship to Portsudan was never exclusively academic. The war in Sudan transformed my research site into an evacuation route and made the stakes of port sovereignty deeply personal. At the same time, being Sudanese did not provide automatic access. In Portsudan, I continued to depend on local introductions, personal relationships, and institutional permissions. In Djibouti and Aqaba, I moved in different moments as a researcher, visitor, Arabic speaker, African, and outsider. These shifting positions allowed me to observe how access itself is structured by nationality, class, language, institutional affiliation, and local recognition.

1.6 Chapter overview

Chapter 2 examines Portsudan. It begins with the city's colonial formation as a replacement for Suakin and follows the port through public ownership, sanctions, containerization, concession politics, Beja protest, and the proposed Abu Amama project. The chapter argues that Portsudan was never simply a national port waiting for modernization. It was a dense social and political field. Port labor, *kallat*, Beja authority, municipal politics, traders, port police, and the Sea Ports Corporation all shaped the movement of goods. UAE-backed port ambitions therefore encountered a coast already inhabited by layered sovereignty. When resistance made direct entry into the existing port difficult, Abu Amama appeared as a bypass: a new port site that promised fewer unions, weaker labor institutions, and a thinner social field.

Chapter 3 turns to Djibouti. It examines the Doraleh Container Terminal dispute, foreign military bases, Ethiopian dependence, Chinese financing, and the state's effort to use location as leverage. The chapter argues that Djibouti is a gatekeeper state. Its sovereignty is not weak in a simple sense. It is powerful because Djibouti controls access to routes that matter to larger powers. But this power is also exposed. Contracts, arbitration, debt, and foreign bases mediate Djibouti's sovereignty. The chapter shows how port imperialism can produce not only domination but also strategic bargaining by small states.

Chapter 4 examines Aqaba. It traces the city's historical position as Ayla, its role in imperial and regional trade, its incorporation into Jordanian state security, and its transformation through tourism, special economic zone governance, and UAE-backed development. The chapter argues that Aqaba represents a relative success for UAE port imperialism because Jordan's centralized state could manage local tribal relations and securitize access to development spaces. Ayla, Marsa

Zayed, the Aqaba Cruise Terminal, and port digitalization projects show how port imperialism extends beyond the container terminal into the urban coast. Aqaba becomes not only a port but a platform for tourism, logistics, real estate, and regional security.

Chapter 5 concludes by turning to war. It argues that ports are not only infrastructures of trade but also infrastructures of conflict, evacuation, and survival. The Sudan war transformed Portsudan from a commercial gateway into a wartime capital and evacuation corridor. Drawing on my own evacuation from Khartoum to Portsudan and then to Jeddah, the conclusion develops the idea of violent friction: the moment when disputes over movement, authority, and infrastructure are reorganized through armed force. The chapter returns to Khalili's insight that shipping and capitalism are inseparable from war and shows how the Red Sea's ports make visible the convergence of trade, security, and coercion.

1.7 Contributions

This dissertation makes three contributions. First, it offers port imperialism as a concept for understanding contemporary Gulf expansion in the Red Sea. Rather than treating port investment as purely commercial or state strategy as purely diplomatic, it shows how infrastructure, capital, security, and sovereignty work together. UAE-backed port expansion is not simply a matter of building terminals or increasing efficiency. It is a project that reorganizes coastal authority.

Second, it contributes to debates on sovereignty by showing that sovereignty in port cities is layered, practical, and infrastructural. It is exercised through contracts and ministries, but also through labor systems, tribal mediation, police discretion, customs routines, and local protest. Ports reveal sovereignty not as an abstract legal status but as a set of practices governing movement.

Third, it contributes methodologically by showing why ethnography matters for the study of logistics. Ports are often studied through maps, trade data, and policy documents. These are necessary, but insufficient. Ethnography shows how infrastructure is lived, contested, feared, and defended. It shows how global projects encounter the people whose labor, land, and authority make circulation possible.

The fourth contribution is that the Red Sea is often described as a corridor. This dissertation argues that it is also a crowded political world. Its ports are not blank spaces waiting for development. They are places where workers, states, companies, tribes, militaries, investors, and communities struggle over the right to move and the right to remain. To study Red Sea ports is therefore to study the making of sovereignty in motion.

Chapter 2: Port Sudan: The Revolving Door of Sovereignty and Port Imperialism

We've fought with many men acrost the seas,
An' some of 'em was brave an' some was not:
The Paythan an' the Zulu an' Burmese;
But the Fuzzy was the finest o' the lot.
We never got a ha'porth's change of 'im:
'E squatted in the scrub an' 'ocked our 'orses,
'E cut our sentries up at Suakim,
An' 'e played the cat an' banjo with our forces.
So 'ere's *to* you, Fuzzy-Wuzzy, at your 'ome in the Soudan;
You're a pore benighted 'eathen but a first-class fightin' man;
We gives you your certificate, an' if you want it signed
We'll come an' 'ave a romp with you whenever you're inclined.

Rudyard Kipling²

² From Fuzzy-Wuzzy poem by Rudyard Kipling. First published in W.E. Henley's weekly *Scots Observer* (later to become the *National Observer*) on 15 March 1890. The poem has four eight-line narrative verses, each followed by a four-line stanza in the form of a toast to the bravery and local success of the Sudanese warriors from the Beja people that the British Army faced in operations against the forces of the Mahdi in 1884-85 in its attempt to relieve General Gordon and his Egyptian garrison in Khartoum.

2.1 Introduction:

I started working on this chapter in the summer of 2025 at Alki Beach in Seattle, observing an MSC container ship go by the city's cranes as the water receded behind it. The sight brought to mind another coastline around the world — the western part of the Red Sea, where Port Sudan is located on Beja land. While writing from the Coast Salish territory, I was impressed by the difference between two port cities whose development has been influenced by Indigenous histories and maritime trade. Although Seattle's economy is now much broader than its maritime port, Port Sudan still remains closely linked to the port as a source of employment, income, and a center of political contention. This chapter is based on that contrast and tries to explore how the promise of seamless containerized trade is disrupted by the social and political relationships that surround ports. Ports do not simply transport goods; they bring together routes, berths, roads, rails, free zones, warehouses, workers, legal categories, and various forms of capital into a single infrastructural field (Khalili 2020b, 4–6). The regimes that keep goods circulating also turn supply chains, borders, gateways, and ports into terrains of security and political authority (Cowen 2014, 79–85). In this sense, sovereignty is not an abstract claim over territory. It is practiced and tested at gates, scanners, berths, and slips, and through the techniques by which passage is priced, delayed, or refused. The argument that follows takes this chokepoint sensibility seriously, not as a metaphor, but as an ethnographic orientation to how power is routed through infrastructure.

Portsudan was not simply a national port connecting the Red Sea to Sudan's hinterland. It was also a center of Beja politics and resistance throughout Sudan's postcolonial history. To understand these politics, it is necessary to distinguish between three related but separate port sites on Sudan's Red Sea coast: Suakin, Portsudan, and the proposed Abu Amama port project. Suakin was the older Red Sea port located south of present-day Portsudan. In the early twentieth century, the

Anglo-Egyptian colonial administration selected Marsa Shaikh Barghuth, north of Suakin, as the site for a new modern port that would become Portsudan (Perkins 1993, 6). Portsudan later became Sudan's principal maritime gateway. Abu Amama, by contrast, refers to the more recent proposed port project north of Portsudan. In 2022, Sudan signed a preliminary agreement with a UAE-linked consortium to develop the Abu Amama port and an associated economic zone (Eltahir 2022). During the war, Sudan's government later announced the cancellation of the UAE port agreement (The Maritime Executive 2024). Although Suakin, Portsudan, and Abu Amama belong to different historical moments, they are all located within the historic lands of the Beja people.

The Beja are the Indigenous people of Sudan's Red Sea region. Their historical lands extend from the Sudanese-Egyptian border in the north to the Sudanese-Ethiopian-Eritrean frontiers in the southeast, and from the Atbara River in the west to the Red Sea coastal plains in the east (Fadlalla 2007, 14). Dirar's history of eastern Sudan similarly places Beja kingdoms, tribes, and territories at the center of the region's political history (25, 2012 محمد صالح ضرار). The Beja confederation includes ten to fourteen groups, among them the Bishariyyin in the north, the Amarar in the Portsudan district, the Hadendowa in Sinkat and south of the Gash Delta, and the Beni Amir near the southeastern borders (Fadlalla 2007, 15). Dirar also situates these groups within a longer history of Beja tribal formations and political authority in eastern Sudan (Dirar 2012, 691). Beja political administration has historically been organized through *nazirs*, *umdas*, and *shaikhs*. The *nazir* heads the tribe, while *umdas* and *shaikhs* mediate matters such as land tenure and tribal conflict. The British colonial administration incorporated this structure into its rule over eastern Sudan, and it continued into the post-independence system of governance as a link between Beja groups and local and central governments (Fadlalla 2007, 17). Dirar's account provides supporting

historical detail on the structure of native administration and its role in Beja political life (محمد صالح ضرار 2012, 691–93).



Figure 4 Beja Tribes in Eastern Sudan³

Eastern Sudan is commonly understood through the three eastern states of Red Sea, Kassala, and Gedaref. The region contains Sudan's principal outlet to the sea at Port Sudan and one of the country's most important commercial farming zones in Gedaref (Gallop et al. 2021, 28). These resources make eastern Sudan central to the national economy, but they have not produced broad-based development. Beja livelihoods have been shaped by a long history of limited public investment, drought, the decline of pastoral economies, and the turn toward wage labor in towns and ports (Pantuliano 2002, 10–13). For many Beja pastoralists, Portsudan became especially

³ Source: Weschenfelder, Petra. (2012). Towards Variability: Cultural Diversity in the Economic Strategies of the Beja Peoples. 10.2307/j.ctvdjrr5t.26.

important as a source of cash income, including through dock work, after the port's establishment in the early twentieth century.

When I arrived in Portsudan, I began working with my contacts there to find a way to spend time inside the Portsudan Container Terminal, which had been the target of DP World's initial management lease proposal. I was fortunate to meet Professor Mohamed El Amin, a professor of medicine at Al-Neelain University and a friend of my father. Professor El Amin belongs to one of the Red Sea tribes, and his hometown is Sinkat. We happened to be on the same flight from Khartoum to Portsudan. He was traveling to attend the elections of the Supreme Council of Independent Nazirs and Umdas of the Beja. A highly respected figure in the region, Professor El Amin serves as an adviser to Nazir Mohamed El Amin Tirik, the Nazir of the Hadandawa and one of the most prominent Beja leaders in eastern Sudan. I asked whether I could accompany him and his group to the elections, and he gladly agreed.

We first visited Sinkat, Professor El Amin's hometown, where I toured the well-known Khatmiyya religious school and mosque. The Khatmiyya is an influential Sufi order in eastern Sudan. From Sinkat, we traveled to Arkaweet, a small mountain town south of Portsudan, where we spent two nights. The British colonial administration had developed Arkaweet as a summer retreat because of its mild climate throughout the year. We spent the first night in a hotel that was almost completely empty.

The following morning, we attended the elections. I witnessed firsthand how Nazir Tirik managed and mobilized his tribal political organization. The elections were conducted publicly, and people voted by standing in support of their preferred candidate, a process very different from

conventional secret-ballot voting. The voters were Umdas and other representatives of the different tribal communities across eastern Sudan.

On our way back from the council meeting in Arkawet to Portsudan, we stopped in Sinkat to attend a large welcoming celebration for Mohamed Tahir Aila, the last prime minister of the Bashir era, who had recently returned from Egypt. Aila had been one of the leading figures of the ousted regime, yet the new authorities had neither arrested nor harassed him, in large part because of his powerful tribal base. Many people in eastern Sudan admired him and regarded him as a son of the region who had risen to the highest levels of political power, despite his connections to the Islamist movement and the Bashir regime. The celebration attracted an extraordinary crowd. I had not seen so many people gathered in one place since the mass sit-in outside the military headquarters during Sudan's 2018–2019 uprising.



Figure 5 A large crowd gathers in Sinkat to welcome Mohamed Tahir Aila following his return from Egypt. The celebration combined a public homecoming with a display of Beja cultural identity and political strength. Photograph by the author.

The celebration was also a powerful display of tribal culture and political strength. Amid growing tensions with the central government, the gathering sent a clear message to the new rulers in Khartoum, who had disregarded the protests in Portsudan and the demands of the Beja communities.

We then left Sinkat for Portsudan. Professor El Amin stopped at the airport to catch a flight back to Khartoum, while I continued into the city. It felt good to return to Portsudan, particularly because this time I would be staying for a longer period. I began searching for an apartment because hotel prices were especially high during October and November. Eventually, I found a comfortable apartment in the Greek neighborhood, near the city's administrative center and the Coral Hotel. The location was ideal because it was close to the corniche, the market, and the port. The neighborhood took its name from the Greek community that had once lived there.

After securing my housing, I contacted my friend Ahmed Mahmoud, a Portsudan native who worked in trade and logistics. Together, we began exploring how I could conduct research inside the port, particularly at the container terminal.

Through Ahmed, I secured a temporary position with a customs-clearance agency owned by his father. The agency helped traders move their containers and cargo onto ships or clear incoming goods out of the port. It took the agency approximately three days to obtain a permit allowing me to enter the port. The permit was issued by the Port Police, a specialized police force responsible for security inside the facility. As part of this arrangement, I shadowed Yusuf during his daily work as he moved around the terminal processing his clients' shipments, which included agricultural products, medical supplies, and electrical machinery.

My first day inside the port was eye-opening. The enormous scale of the terminal was immediately apparent in the massive container vessels, towering cranes, and expansive grounds surrounding me. The terminal was divided into different operational zones, including areas where cranes transferred containers between ships and trucks. Railway tracks also ran through parts of the port, although they appeared abandoned. The international shipping companies had designated areas in which to store their containers. Maersk, MSC, and PIL all maintained their own spaces inside the port.

I returned to Portsudan as a researcher after first knowing it as a child. The port I re-encountered was a city increasingly organized around its terminals. Other industries and livelihoods had thinned, and workers, casual laborers, and job seekers increasingly pinned their hopes on steady employment in and around the port. The South Port Container Terminal (SPCT) handled 470,000 twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) in 2017, against a terminal capacity of one million TEUs (A. Lakshmi 2018). SPCT has a land area of 180 hectares and a 1,200-meter quay wall, with a water depth of up to 16 meters, enabling it to receive large container vessels from global shipping lines. Its equipment includes eight ship-to-shore gantry cranes and more than twenty rubber-tired gantry cranes (A. Lakshmi 2018). ICTSI's 2021 annual filing describes Port Sudan as Sudan's only major modern port and as the international gateway for more than 95 percent of the country's cargo flows (*ICTSI Annual Report 2021*, 5).

But the terminal was not simply a technical machine for moving containers. I worked temporarily with a customs facilitation firm that granted me daily access to the container terminal grounds. There, I followed the steps by which a sealed container became a cleared good: discharge to the yard, release to the agent, lift to truck, exit through the gate, return as an empty container, and

reload for export. From the water, the port appeared as standardized infrastructure. On the ground, however, its operations were dense with social and political relations. Clearances depended on relationships as much as rules. Timing was often coordinated through breakfasts with agents. A single broken reader or an internet outage could create a backlog of days. The terminal was a workplace, a police zone, a union arena, a tribal field, and a state extraction site, where stamps, permits, fees, and permissions governed the movement of people and goods.

Much of our work inside the container terminal took place in the narrow shade cast by one of the containers. This modest working arrangement revealed something important about how the port operated. Unlike the highly automated container terminals of Seattle or Hamburg, the Portsudan terminal depended heavily on people, paper documents, identification cards, and physical stamps. Yet its comparatively limited technology did not isolate it from global trade. Gum arabic, for example, continued to move through the port on its way to the United States. Even when political relations between Sudan and the United States were strained, the flow of this strategically important commodity never stopped.

Movement inside the terminal was also surprisingly open. Once Yusuf Ahmed and I passed through the main gate, we could move almost anywhere across the port grounds. Access depended less on automated security systems than on personal credentials and recognition. Yusuf, my supervisor inside the terminal, carried a customs-clearance identification card that allowed him to move between the containers, customs offices, and other operational areas as he processed his clients' shipments.

The act of stamping and sealing a container appeared routine, but it connected the everyday work of the terminal to an international system. A stamp placed in Portsudan certified that a container

had passed through the required procedures and could continue its journey across ports and borders. This small administrative act made locally processed cargo recognizable and acceptable within global logistics networks.

Obtaining the authority to perform this work required specialized training. As Yusuf explained, the customs administration offered a six-month customs-clearance course that cost 200,000 Sudanese pounds, approximately US\$350 at the time. Without completing the course, a person could not obtain a customs-clearance identification card. Without that card, customs officials would not process their transactions. The identification card therefore did more than grant physical access to the port. It determined who was officially recognized as a broker between traders, customs authorities, shipping companies, and the wider world of international commerce.

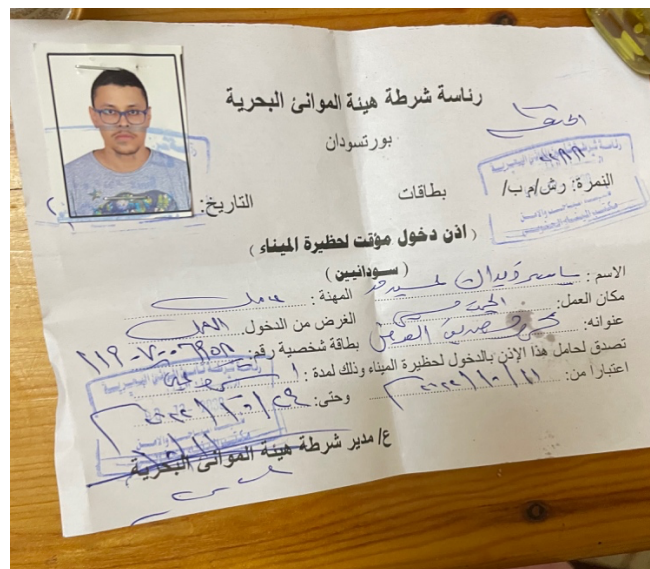


Figure 6: Terminal Work Permit

What my fieldnotes forced me to see was a longer continuity that organizes this chapter's claim. Portsudan was conceived as a colonial port project, and it never fully departed from that template (Perkins 1993, 6). The form of extraction did not end with formal decolonization; its beneficiaries

changed. Under national governments, the port was framed primarily through sovereignty and fiscal necessity rather than urban development. Revenues mattered more than the diversified growth that might have turned a harbor city into a city of trades, services, and industries. Viewed from Seattle, where port functions sit within a more diversified metropolitan economy, Port Sudan appeared as an unfinished port-city project.

The recent turn toward Emirati capital does not break this history so much as globalize it. Extraction is now routed through concession proposals, terminal contracts, logistics zones, and standardized legal instruments that travel across jurisdictions. The Abu Amama proposal made this visible by linking a new Red Sea port to an economic zone, road infrastructure, and agricultural investments through a UAE-led package (Eltahir 2022). This was not a level field. Sudan's Sea Ports Corporation (SPC) faced high costs, compliance requirements, and maintenance constraints imposed by sanctions and financial isolation, which made public modernization expensive, slow, and procedurally difficult (*Sudan Country Economic Memorandum* 2015, 39–49). By contrast, UAE-linked firms and other transnational operators could draw on global finance, vendor networks, and contractual templates designed to move across borders. The result was an asymmetrical openness: private and foreign upgrading appeared feasible, while public upgrading remained constrained.

This pattern belongs to a wider neoliberal order that privileges the mobility of capital, the securitization of corridors, and the circulation of standardized infrastructural formats over the thickening of local public capacities. Slobodian describes this as the effort to “encase” markets from democratic and national political control (Slobodian 2018, 2–4). Although he writes primarily about extraction rather than ports, Ferguson identifies a similar spatial pattern in African

contexts: capital becomes “globe-hopping, not globe-covering,” connecting secured, socially thin enclaves to distant centers of accumulation while bypassing surrounding national economies and publics (Ferguson 2006, 34–41). Infrastructure scholar Keller Easterling describes infrastructure space as an invisible operating system through which zones, standards, and logistical formats organize space and authority by technical routines that sit outside ordinary political debate (Easterling 2014, 11–16). Together, these works explain how infrastructure investment can deepen transnational connectivity without strengthening the public institutions or social capacities surrounding it.

I call this emerging logic “port imperialism”: a modality of global power that operates not through annexation but through concession. Through long-term leases, security partnerships, and infrastructural promises, Gulf states, chief among them the UAE, extend their influence by occupying key nodes in maritime trade. This is not an empire in the old sense. There are no flags planted and no formal colonies. What is captured instead are logistics zones, container terminals, and special economic enclaves: spaces made legible to capital through contracts, standards, and promises of frictionless circulation.

The promise of smoothness is central to how this expansion is justified. DP World’s corporate slogan, “We Make Trade Flow,” and its recurring promise of a “seamless flow of trade” present integrated ports, digital platforms, and logistics corridors as technical solutions to delay, uncertainty, and inefficiency (DP World 2022). Through this language, the transfer of authority over terminals, customs systems, and trade corridors appears not as a political intervention but as the delivery of neutral expertise. Labor claims, local institutions, and public contestation are consequently recast as obstacles to efficient circulation. Yet, as Anna Tsing reminds us, friction is

always present. It is through interruptions, protests, refusals, and breakdowns that the political relations concealed by promises of smooth circulation become visible, and that imperial ambition encounters the social worlds it seeks to reorganize (Tsing 2005, 1–6).

Two propositions follow from this. First, the UAE’s pursuit of concessions and rural port sites on the Red Sea is constrained by the texture of relations between state and society along Sudan’s coast. Legitimacy is negotiated through municipal offices, union committees, port police, tribal authorities, and labor formations that control access to land, labor pools, and the waterfront. I use “layered sovereignty” to describe this configuration of authority across territorial, contractual, administrative, security, and communal domains. The term draws on work in the history of empire that treats sovereignty not as a single, indivisible power, but as shared, overlapping, and distributed across multiple authorities (Burbank and Cooper 2010, 16–17). In Port Sudan, however, I use the term in a more specific infrastructural sense, closer to Stepputat and Haggmann’s account of how trade, logistics, taxation, gatekeeping, and control over circulation make and remake state authority in the Horn of Africa (Haggmann and Stepputat 2023, 1–16).

These layers do not simply sit on top of one another. They are constantly pressed and unsettled by neoliberal norms that arrive through concession contracts, customs reform, performance metrics, and security partnerships. Anthropologist Brenda Chalfin’s work on postcolonial sovereignty at African customs sites is useful here because it shows that borders and ports are not places where neoliberalism simply replaces the state. They are places where official authority, private rule, and local social claims confront one another and are repeatedly recomposed in practice (Chalfin 2010, 1–24). Portsudan makes this visible with particular force. Every attempt to streamline movement

or standardize governance runs into an already existing politics of access, recognition, and territorial belonging.

Second, the social life of the terminal is not a backdrop to policy. It is fundamental to what outside actors can do. Projects that travel under the sign of efficiency arrive as protocols that must pass through local gatekeepers. At Portsudan, this includes not only state officials and customs agents but also labor formations such as the *kalla*, the local term for a hand-loading stevedore crew. A typical *kalla* consists of about ten to fourteen workers who manually load and unload cargo. For each *shawal* handled at the port, Kalla collected a fee of 99 Sudanese pounds, equivalent to approximately US\$0.17 in late 2022. A *shawal* is a large woven sack commonly used in Sudan to package and transport agricultural commodities. These crews are frequently organized along communal lines, including separate Nuba and Beni Amer kallat, and they are usually paid by the day with little or no social or medical insurance. Cooperative bodies affiliated with the port mediate wages and working conditions (2020 فضل). I call this the revolving door of gatekeeping. Efficiency projects are not rejected in the abstract; they are translated, slowed, and sometimes repurposed by the very people who make the port move. This is friction as a condition rather than an exception: the work that connects otherwise incompatible worlds and makes global connection possible precisely because difference does not disappear on contact (Tsing 2005, 3–6).



Figure 7: A *kalla* unloading in the Southern Terminal, Portsudan. Taken by the author.

Seen from the waterfront, templates for governing movement appear with the cranes and yard tractors. Zones, single-window platforms, bonded corridors, lease concessions, and performance dashboards circulate from port to port like an operating system that promises speed while quietly reallocating decision rights. Installed at a distance from parliamentary debate, these formats decide who may set a tariff, sign a lease, police a gate, or claim the rent on a weighbridge. They appear neutral in the language of modernization, yet they increase authorities and bind corporate standards, security partnerships, and fiscal exceptions. This grammar of authority is simple to enforce with a handheld scanner and difficult to contest in a court that sits far from the pier (Easterling 2014, 11–16).

I returned to the Southern Container Terminal early one morning to continue my work with Yusuf. Workers had begun arriving at the port by five o'clock. I watched cleaners, dockworkers, drivers,

technicians, and customs agents pass through the main gate and disperse across the terminal. The guards checked nearly everyone entering, with one noticeable exception. Women, several of whom were veiled, passed without being searched. Veiling was common in Portsudan, and the guards appeared to treat it as sufficient assurance that a physical search was unnecessary or inappropriate. Security cameras were mounted throughout the port grounds. I could not determine whether they were functioning, but their visible presence marked the terminal as a space of surveillance.

Yusuf met me inside the terminal and took me to the Maersk office. On the way, I noticed that every container carried an individual identification number. These numbers belonged to an international system that made each container recognizable as it moved between ports, ships, trucks, and national jurisdictions. Customs authorities could issue permission for an empty container to leave the terminal and be loaded elsewhere. Taking the container outside allowed the trader to avoid the costs associated with keeping and loading it inside the port. Maersk had previously loaded containers within the terminal, which Yusuf regarded as both more efficient and closer to international practice.

The Southern Container Terminal had only four berths and could accommodate no more than two ships at the same time. Yusuf believed that the terminal should be developed into a transshipment hub where cargo could be stored and redistributed to neighboring countries, particularly landlocked states. “The port should be developed for transshipment,” he told me. The temporary closure of Portsudan during protests had already demonstrated how quickly regional trade routes could be reorganized. When the port closed, Egyptian ports opened their facilities to Sudanese traders, redirecting cargo that would ordinarily have passed through Portsudan.

Port workers and managers frequently connected the terminal's limited capacity to the deterioration of professional training. The Sudan Sea Ports Corporation had once operated an advanced training center. My interlocutors remembered the center as particularly effective around 2000, when Hamza Fadlabi served as the corporation's general manager. By 2022, however, they believed that the training system had deteriorated as tribal patronage and personal favors increasingly influenced access to professional opportunities. They linked the decline in training not only to workers' skills but also to the condition and performance of the terminal's machinery and cranes. Equipment could not remain effective, they explained, without people who had been properly trained to operate and maintain it.

At Maersk, I spoke with Ahmed Hassan, who held a bachelor's degree in maritime transport from Red Sea University and a master's degree in maritime logistics. He explained that anyone seeking to work at sea needed to obtain a "sea passport," an internationally recognized document that allowed maritime workers to move between ships and ports. His own education and credentials reflected the international standards through which maritime labor was organized.

Ahmed's assessment of DP World was complicated. He admired the company's technical and managerial capabilities. "As port managers, they are very efficient, and they know how to work," he told me. Yet he also saw that efficiency as part of a larger regional strategy. "They want to control all the ports around the Red Sea and create a monopoly over logistics services," he continued. "People are not aware of this monopoly" (Ahmed Hassan, interview with author, Portsudan, October 2022).

For Ahmed, the opposition to DP World in Portsudan could not be understood solely as resistance to more efficient management. The Sudan Sea Ports Corporation employed approximately 17,000

workers, many more than were required for its daily operations. Workers continued reporting to the port because employment in the corporation had become, in Ahmed's words, "a social responsibility strategy to appease locals." Privatization therefore threatened more than jobs. It threatened an arrangement through which the port distributed income, recognition, and political accommodation among local communities.

The response to port investment also varied among Beja communities. Ahmed noted that the Bishariyin had recently accepted the Abu Amama port project proposed by Abu Dhabi Ports because their areas had experienced prolonged underdevelopment. The promise of infrastructure and employment made the project more attractive there, even as communities and workers in Portsudan had rejected DP World's proposed management agreement during the Bashir regime.

Ahmed measured the consequences of port management through the time required to service a container ship. "In Jeddah, loading and unloading a container ship takes one day. In Sudan, it takes between seven and fifteen days. In Djibouti, it takes eight hours," he explained. "It is a management problem." He added that Maersk had previously loaded containers inside the terminal, which he regarded as more efficient and consistent with international standards (Ahmed Hassan, interview with author, Portsudan, October 2022).

The process of securing access to the Northern Terminal brought me repeatedly to the headquarters of the Sudan Sea Ports Corporation. The headquarters occupied a government complex near the Northern Terminal, close to the pier and just north of the container terminal. Two main buildings dominated the complex. The larger one was an old tower that housed much of the corporation's administration. Beside it stood a newer but smaller tower occupied by the general manager and

other senior officials. Police officers heavily guarded the complex, particularly because protests were expected around the port.

The older tower had a distinctive architectural design, but its age and lack of maintenance were immediately apparent. Inside, I made my way to the Planning Department, where Amna, one of my principal interlocutors, welcomed me and tried to assist with my research. She shared several documents and arranged a meeting with the head of the department. The limits of her assistance, however, quickly became visible. The department head refused to provide copies of the corporation's strategic plans, including studies related to privatization, unless I first obtained authorization from the general manager. When I asked for an interview, she declined, explaining that she was occupied with preparing the corporation's budget. The encounter revealed how access to institutional knowledge depended on hierarchy. Planning documents existed, but their circulation remained closely controlled, particularly when they concerned privatization.

As I moved through the building, I noticed that most of the administrative employees were women. This reflected a gendered division of labor within the corporation. Women were concentrated in offices and administrative departments, while engineering, crane operation, driving, and other technical occupations were dominated by men. The distinction between the terminal and the headquarters was therefore also a distinction between differently gendered spaces of work.

The offices were congested with employees. This was especially visible when I visited the Media Department, which organized my official research visit to the Northern Terminal. So many people worked in the department that the office could not accommodate all employees at the same time. As a result, employees were sometimes asked to stay home several days a week because there was not enough space for everyone. One employee explained that this congestion resulted from years

of overemployment. Social and political pressures led the corporation to hire more workers than its operations required, and the practice gradually became institutionalized.

Eisa Mohamed, head of engineering at the Southern Container Terminal, offered another, more strategic explanation. According to Eisa, after strikes and protests forced the Filipino operating company out of the port, SSPC hired more than 5,000 additional workers as a countermeasure against future privatization proposals. Any incoming operator would consequently have to retain, compensate, or negotiate with this expanded workforce, substantially raising the financial and political cost of taking over the port.⁴ From this perspective, the crowded offices represented more than bureaucratic excess or political patronage. They were also the institutional residue of an earlier labor struggle and a barrier against future privatization.

The headquarters made Ahmed Hassan's description of employment as a form of social responsibility visible in everyday office life. The corporation was not simply an economic institution organized around efficiency. It was also a mechanism for distributing jobs, salaries, and political recognition. At the same time, the contrast between heavy police security, restricted access to planning documents, deteriorating public buildings, and overcrowded offices exposed the uneven character of the corporation's institutional capacity. The SSPC could guard its headquarters and control information about privatization, yet it struggled to maintain its older infrastructure or provide adequate working space for its employees.

On October 18, 2022, I returned to the headquarters of the Sudan Sea Ports Corporation to obtain permission to visit the Northern Terminal, which handled bulk cargo. That day, the minister of

⁴ Eisa Mohamed, head of engineering, Southern Container Terminal, interview by author, Portsudan, Sudan, October 25, 2022.

transportation and the acting manager of the corporation were meeting at the General Intelligence Service's office in Portsudan. I did not learn about the meeting through the port administration but through reports circulating on social media. According to those reports, officials were considering a plan to lease parts of the Southern Container Terminal, a proposal that port workers had rejected. While senior officials discussed the proposed lease inside an intelligence office, I moved between the corporation's headquarters and the Port Police to secure my research permit. The two processes operated at very different scales, but both revealed how access to the port passed through overlapping corporate, administrative, police, and security authorities.

The following day, October 19, the permit allowed me to continue my research at the Northern Terminal. There, I interviewed Salah Abdelbagi, an electrical engineer who served as the terminal's director of engineering. Moving from the Southern Container Terminal to the Northern Terminal made clear that the port was not a single, unified institution. It was a collection of terminals, professional communities, security jurisdictions, and forms of authority that had to be navigated separately.

What happens in the yard among agents, *kallat*, workers, police officers, and corporate representatives is therefore not peripheral to this story. Global infrastructure ambitions do not arrive at empty chokepoints. They encounter workers arriving before sunrise, gendered security practices at the gate, internationally recognized credentials, weakened training systems, local employment arrangements, and communities making competing claims on development. The people who inhabit and operate these chokepoints help determine what can move, how quickly it moves, who benefits from its movement, and at what cost.

Authority does not operate only at the gate. It also extends upward into the financial and compliance systems that determine which actors can modernize infrastructure, sign maintenance contracts, or move money across borders. Alongside the visible politics of cranes, scanners, and permits is a quieter layer of risk management that helps explain why extraction can be globalized while public modernization lags. Decisions migrate from ministries to bank portals and corporate risk desks. In an interview, Ahmed Hassan, a Maersk engineer working on container-handling operations at the South Port Container Terminal, explained that some operational servers and technical systems were routed through Dubai rather than Portsudan. Maintenance contracts could falter when screening software flagged counterparties, and old embargo categories could persist within contemporary platforms even after formal sanctions lists changed (interview with Ahmed Hassan, Maersk engineer, Portsudan, 2022). The effect is not less governance but shadowed governance. This shadow governance is exercised through compliance pipelines, vendor systems, and banking restrictions that are difficult to see from the pier but decisive for what can move through it.

Sanctions and compliance regimes do not simply block trade; they rearrange who can authorize movement and at what price. The World Bank noted that Sudan's sanctions regime complicated foreign exchange transactions, weakened correspondent banking relations, constrained the maintenance of scanners and other technical infrastructure, and raised the cost of obtaining spare parts and support contracts (World Bank 2015, 39–41). The BNP Paribas case intensified these effects. In 2014, the U.S. Department of Justice announced that BNP Paribas would plead guilty and pay almost \$8.9 billion for processing transactions through the U.S. financial system on behalf of Sudanese, Iranian, and Cuban entities subject to U.S. sanctions (Office of Public Affairs 2014). What appears as a technical barrier at the gate is therefore already political upstream, embedded

in compliance decisions made far from Port Sudan. Anthropologist James Ferguson's account of Africa's place in the neoliberal world order helps frame this as a form of global shadowing, in which African economies are treated as peripheral while remaining deeply exposed to procedural power exercised elsewhere (Ferguson 2006, 1–25).

On the Red Sea littoral, this procedural power intersects with a second register of authority; protection. Anthropologist Jatin Dua's work on piracy and protection in the Indian Ocean shows that maritime circulation depends on arrangements that range from promises and contracts to coercive force, and that safe passage has long been tied to local authority, payment, and control over mobility (Dua 2019, 18–23). The pivot from a contested concession within Portsudan to the mega-project vision at Abu Amama drew on this logic of protection. In interviews, local interlocutors described the project as a protected venue where local militias were planned to secure the new port. The Abu Amama project was also seen as the bypass of local contestation by utilizing the grievances of marginalized local tribes.

The movement of my research permit from the Sudan Sea Ports Corporation to the Port Police, while senior officials discussed a proposed lease inside the General Intelligence Service's office and workers mobilized against it, condensed the layered structure of authority I encountered throughout the port. Access to the infrastructure, like the movement of cargo itself, depended on institutions and social actors whose claims overlapped but did not always align. Ahmed's description of the corporation's 17,000 workers made this particularly clear. What appeared from a managerial perspective as overemployment also functioned as a social and political arrangement through which port revenue was distributed, and local communities were accommodated.

This is the thread that ties the chapter together. Portsudan began as an enclave designed to extract resources and connect them outward. Nationalization did not reverse that logic, but repositioned it within the language of national sovereignty, public revenue, and social responsibility. The current cycle of proposed concessions to Emirati operators globalizes extraction through portable instruments that govern through corridors and contracts, while sanctions and compliance regimes restrict the development of public capacity. Yet the workers' rejection of proposed leases in Portsudan, alongside the Bishariyin's acceptance of the Abu Amama project, shows that these instruments do not encounter a socially or politically empty landscape. What happens in the yard among agents, *kallat*, workers, and police is therefore not peripheral to this story. Global infrastructure ambitions advance by reorganizing chokepoints, but these chokepoints are populated. The people who work in and around them make their own claims on what can move, how quickly it moves, who benefits from that movement, and at what cost.

2.1.1 Imperial Foundations and Postcolonial Neglect

Portsudan did not develop out of a preexisting city. It was built as a colonial enclave. At the start of the twentieth century, Suakin had served for centuries as the principal port on Sudan's Red Sea coast. Under Anglo-Egyptian rule, British officials concluded that Suakin's harbor could not accommodate the larger volume of shipping expected from Sudan's commercial development. They also sought to reduce the power of Suakin's merchant networks over Sudan's maritime trade. They therefore turned to Marsa Shaikh Barghuth, a natural roadstead some thirty-five miles to the north, and renamed it Portsudan (Perkins 1993, 5–6). From an imperial perspective, a purpose-built site offered cleaner geometry. The new harbor promised deeper water, straighter streets, and the possibility of installing new friendly authority rather than Suakin's older ties of kinship and

credit. The choice was technical and political at once, since depth and location also became instruments for replacing Suakin's dense social world with a more governable space.

Historian Kenneth J. Perkins shows that colonial administrators treated the new site as an unusually open field for urban planning. Because Portsudan was neither adjacent to nor an outgrowth of an existing city, its planners did not have to accommodate an established urban population with its own institutions, property claims, and built environment (Perkins 1993, 6–7). This allowed them to compose a city that separated the instruments of rule from the people who supplied its labor. Perkins shows how administrators used the new site to create a dual urban landscape: a European quarter with planned blocks, sanitary services, and fenced compounds, and an adjacent *madina* that absorbed Sudanese residents, migrants from the interior, and traders from the Hijaz, Hadramawt, and the Horn (Perkins 1993, 99–122).

This spatial separation also reflected a wider colonial sanitary logic. In his study of Lagos, Matthew Gandy shows how colonial medical authorities used emerging knowledge about malaria to advocate the residential segregation of Europeans, presenting racial separation as a prophylactic and technically necessary response to disease (Gandy 2017, 86–88). Although Portsudan had a distinct disease ecology and administrative history, its division between serviced European compounds and the *madina* invites comparison with this broader colonial tendency to distribute sanitation and protection unequally along racial lines.

The result was a segregated urban landscape, with planned administrative and European spaces on one side and Sudanese residential quarters, migrant communities, and commercial neighborhoods on the other. Portsudan thus fit a broader colonial pattern visible across African and Mediterranean shores, from Bizerte and Skikda to Casablanca and Aden, where European engineering was used

to refit coastal settlements as nodes of imperial trade. Urban planning functioned as a social technology. Segregated grids, graded access to the docks, sanitary boundaries, and policed checkpoints sorted populations and activities, keeping shipping and customs legible to officials while pushing congestion, informality, disease exposure, and labor precarity toward the city's margins.

In Sudan, the port developed in parallel with the railway. Atbara, where the Nile Valley and Red Sea lines met, became a hybrid city of workshops, locomotive sheds, workers' housing, and military encampments. It was selected in 1908 as the technical and administrative headquarters of Sudan Government Railways, transforming what had been a small settlement into one of the major urban centers of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (Perkins 1993, 5). The railway track connected the coast to the river connecting exports from Sudan's interior to imperial circuits running north toward Mediterranean markets and east toward Indian Ocean routes. The same linkage made surrounding Beja lands more peripheral to formal revenue while more dependent on the rhythms of the harbor. Tolls moved into the records of government railways and port administration. Mobility was calibrated to timetables, weighbridges, and yard plans. The Beja hinterland, long a zone of pastoral circulation and caravan exchange, found itself adjacent to a machine that extracted value through schedules, tally sheets, and rail-port coordination. The effect was twofold: the coast became vital to the national economy, while coastal people were disciplined as auxiliaries to that economy.

The railway-port system did more than redirect trade. It also changed how Beja communities gained access to the emerging colonial economy. Colonial officials and commercial contractors relied heavily on Beja men as stevedores and casual dockworkers, organizing their labor through

contractors, temporary work gangs, daily wages, and schedules tied to the arrival of ships. Poverty, livestock loss, and growing pastoral insecurity pushed increasing numbers of Beja households toward wage labor in Portsudan. Yet this was not simply a one-way process through which colonial authorities disciplined a passive population. Beja workers adapted kinship networks and communal authority through the *kella* system, which allocated dock work and provided displaced pastoralists with access to wages. The coast therefore became vital to the national economy while coastal people were incorporated primarily as laborers rather than as owners or decision-makers. At the same time, they developed their own institutions for negotiating access to the port and contesting the terms of their incorporation.⁵

After independence, the Sudanese state brought the port's infrastructure under public ownership and expanded it through national institutions. The Sea Ports Corporation (SPC) was established in 1974 as an independent Sudanese maritime body responsible for constructing, developing, and maintaining the country's ports, harbors, and lighthouses. For a time, Portsudan functioned as a node within a wider public industrial project. Former officials and port workers recalled ship-repair facilities, railway workshops, training programs for crane drivers and signal technicians, and planning offices that connected the harbor to a larger body of public technical expertise. The port was not only a gate. It was a factory of movement supported by workshops, depots, training centers, and skilled maintenance labor.

⁵ Kenneth J. Perkins, *Port Sudan: The Evolution of a Colonial City* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 123–136; B. A. Lewis, *Report of a Social Survey of Deim el Arab and the Beja Stevedores of Port Sudan* (Khartoum: Ministry of the Interior, Lands Department, 1954), 19; Mohamed Salah Abdelrahman and Seraf Sidig, "The Kella Movement and the Contradictions of the Beja Dock Workers' Union in Port Sudan," *Industrielle Beziehungen* 32, no. 1 (2025): 91–115, <https://doi.org/10.5771/0943-2779-2025-1-91>.

This institutional history became more concrete during a Zoom interview I conducted in 2024 with Hashim Ibn Aouf, an architect and transport specialist who served as Sudan's federal minister of infrastructure and transport during the post-2019 transitional government. Among many supporters of the transition, Ibn Aouf was regarded as one of the government's more competent and principled ministers. I had first encountered his views through a podcast in which he discussed Sudan's ports and transportation infrastructure in unusual detail. Interested in his account, I sent a message to his official Facebook page. He responded warmly and agreed to speak with me.

During our conversation, Ibn Aouf described the SPC not simply as an authority that administered berths and collected fees, but as an integrated technical institution. Its workshops, equipment stores, engineers, training centers, railway connections, and ship-repair facilities formed an interconnected system. When machinery failed, technicians could diagnose the problem, obtain parts from the corporation's stores, and undertake repairs through its own workshops. Crane drivers, signal technicians, and other skilled workers were trained within this public system, allowing technical knowledge to accumulate across generations. Ibn Aouf contrasted this earlier capacity with a later arrangement in which spare parts had to be requested from abroad and even minor technical decisions could become entangled in correspondence with ministries in Khartoum. In his account, maintenance had once been a public craft rather than a recurring administrative crisis. The significance of public ownership, therefore, lay not only in who formally controlled the port, but also in the technical knowledge, institutional memory, and capacity for independent decision-making that the SPC maintained (Hashim Ibn Aouf, Zoom interview, 2024).

Over the late twentieth century, that public-industrial model thinned. Debt, adjustment programs, wartime budgets, and the erosion of public industry weakened the linkages that had made the port

more than an import-export machine. Former Minister of Infrastructure and Transport Hisham Ibn Aouf described this decline as a loss of technical autonomy. Workshops that had once repaired equipment and stocked spare parts became increasingly dependent on ministerial approvals, foreign exchange, and external procurement pipelines (interview with Hisham Ibn Aouf, 2024). These pressures were later intensified by sanctions and compliance barriers that complicated cross-border payments, maintenance contracts, technical infrastructure, and access to spare parts (Gabriela 2015, 39–41).

Meanwhile, the city itself reoriented more sharply around the harbor. Textile production, food processing, railway services, and other urban industries diminished. As a result, workers, casual laborers, and job seekers increasingly focused their lives on the terminal economy. The terminal became a magnet for formal jobs, casual labor, and informal services around cargo movement. What grew was not simply mass unemployment but disguised unemployment. It is a condition in which more people were attached to the port economy than there were stable, productive, or secure jobs for them. This was especially visible in a city where pastoral decline, drought, and the erosion of rural livelihoods had already pushed many households toward wage labor in towns and at the docks (Pantuliano 2002, 1–13). Portsudan, therefore, did not follow the Seattle-style port-city trajectory, in which the port becomes one sector within a diversified metropolitan economy. Instead, the city became more dependent on a narrower port economy even as the port itself became more constrained, externally governed, and unevenly accessible.

Many held Port Authority badges that granted entry, but only a fraction did core tasks on the cranes, at the berths, or in the control rooms. I sat in narrow offices near the northern terminal and watched days hinge on a single approval. No one described this as an anomaly. People spoke

instead of how the port had come to stand in for an absent state, absorbing demands that schools, clinics, utilities, and rail had once provided. These were very unstable days in Sudan. The country was going through a rough transition, and the state reached its lowest point in terms of central authority and service delivery.

Neglect did not produce a vacuum. It redistributed authority across overlapping networks that governed different levels of the port. Tribal and communal authorities organized access to labor through *kallat*, while union committees and cooperative bodies mediated wages, shifts, and disputes with shipping lines and port managers. Port police, linked to the national security and policing apparatus, secured the gates, weighbridges, and scanning lanes. The municipal government controlled feeder roads, drainage, and other urban services that connected the terminal to the city. The Sea Ports Corporation and terminal management oversaw yard planning, berth allocation, and the technical routines of cargo movement. The result was a layered field in which different actors controlled different points of passage.

During one of my days inside the Southern Container Terminal, I watched a *kalla*, an organized crew of cargo laborers led by a sheikh, transfer goods from a truck into a container. The truck had entered the terminal only after a port police officer checked its documents and allowed it to pass. Inside the yard, a manager directed the driver toward the space allocated for loading. Yusuf, the customs-clearance agent with whom I was working, then negotiated directly with the *kalla* sheikh. They discussed the job and settled on a specific price for unloading the truck and placing its cargo inside the container. Once they reached an agreement, the sheikh organized the workers and the loading began. After the cargo was secured, the process depended on a crane driver to lift and reposition the container within the yard.

Nothing in this apparently routine operation moved through the authority of a single person. The police officer controlled the truck's passage into the terminal. The yard manager determined where the work could take place. Yusuf possessed the documents and relationships required to move his client's cargo, but he could not command the labor. The sheikh controlled access to the crew and negotiated the value of its work, while the crane driver controlled the machinery needed to move the container. A delay, refusal, or disagreement at any point could bring the process to a halt.

This encounter clarified why a port concession is never merely a technical contract. Changing who manages the terminal can alter who enters the yard, who allocates its space, who recruits workers, who sets the price of labor, and who decides which containers move first. A concession therefore reorganizes not only the movement of cargo but also the relationships and overlapping forms of authority that make such movement possible.

This distribution of authority shaped how people in technical roles talked about reform. Engineers and planners argued for equipment, training, and maintenance with the patience of practitioners who know that a single crane failure can cascade into a week of delay. Many of the same people warned against deals that would externalize decision rights over standards and schedules. Pro-efficiency and anti-privatization were not contradictory positions. They were diagnoses of governance by concession, in which efficiency gains would be priced through the loss of local control over chokepoints. In practice, that meant that a faster crane would also be a new set of software keys and supplier contracts that lived outside the city. In addition to the fear of losing jobs, people worried that the capacity to set the city's life would migrate to an overseas desk.

At this point, James Ferguson's language of the enclave helps, but it needs a turn to match what I saw on the ground. The port began as a classic colonial enclave, tightly linked to global markets

and loosely connected to its hinterland (Ferguson 2006). Over time, it became something stranger. It transformed into an enclave of public employment nested inside a national economy marked by crisis. This meant that the apparatus that guaranteed wages expanded while the apparatus that guaranteed maintenance and training diminished. The enclave thickened socially even as it thinned technically. Cranes stood idle for lack of parts. An X-ray scanner sat dark. A training center accumulated dust. Yet the number of badges at the gate rose. In conversations with planning staff, managers estimated that nearly 5,000 workers could run the core operations at volume, while payroll lists listed more than 16,000 names. The figure circulated as a shorthand for a widely shared perception that the port had been tasked with stabilizing livelihoods as much as with moving cargo.



Figure 8 Post and Telegram Office Built during British Colonial Era

The city's colonial genealogy remains visible in how land and labor are governed. The European quarter and the madina are more porous now, yet the template persists in subtler forms. Colonial census figures reconstructed by Kenneth Perkins show how the enclave was assembled and sorted: by the eve of World War II, 22,309 Sudanese lived in Port Sudan, alongside 1,180 Egyptians, 889 Europeans and Americans, 355 Indians, and 1,122 "others," for a total of 25,855. Most non-

Sudanese clustered in West Town, where roughly three-quarters of the European and American population and nearly four-fifths of the Indian community resided, yet West Town's majority was still Sudanese: 2,657 Sudanese residents accounted for 61 percent of its total. Across the water on the East Side, 588 Sudanese and 108 Egyptians lived alongside 35 Europeans, most employed by Sudan Government Railways, whose lines and sheds sprawled across the peninsula; South Town housed fewer than 150 people, split roughly between Sudanese and Europeans, with a small number of Egyptians and Indians (Perkins, 87). Three-quarters of the city lived not in these gridded quarters but in the *daims*, the "native lodging areas" where ethnicity and occupation typically determined address. In the late 1930s, the railway's workforce dominated Daim Abu Hashish and Daim Tijani on the East Side and Daim Warsha in West Town, nearly 7,000 residents, more than 6,300 of them Sudanese. Daim Tijani and Daim Warsha were exclusively Sudanese, while Daim Abu Hashish counted a single European and a few hundred "others." The largest of these zones, Daim al-Madina, stretched west of West Town's planned streets in rows of wooden bungalows. The map reads like an operating diagram of extraction: a serviced enclave for administrators and technicians, and around it the dormitory quarters of those who kept the cranes, tracks, and godowns moving (Perkins, 1993).

That diagram still organizes movement and care, even as names and employers have changed. Fenced compounds protect the technical heart of the port. Municipal crews patch asphalt along the corridors that matter to cargo. Power is stabilized at the point where cranes draw the heaviest load. The madina continues to receive rural migrants and traders who arrive with family networks rather than formal contracts. On weekends, when few vessels were in and the yard slowed, I rode through the old *daims* in a *raksha*, a three-wheeled taxi common in Sudan. Abdel Rahim, the driver who became a friend, knew which lanes stayed passable when sand swallowed the curb, and which tea

stands could match the glass size to your pocket. Yet the story residents tell is about priority. A road is repaired because a berth must be reached. A transformer is replaced because a crane has tripped the line again. The order of work flips the usual hierarchy of city and workplace. Portsudan's workplace governs the city's timings.



Figure 9 one of the main streets in Daim Arab. Taken by Author

Those weekend journeys made the colonial genealogy legible as a present tense. In Daim Abu Hashish and Daim Warsha, the railway's imprint survives in long blocks oriented toward the earlier pulse of shift whistles, while lanes behind workshop walls have become alleys of parts dealers, welders, and precarious logistics. Men rent a day's access to a loading bay or a forklift and sleep two to a room above a grocer. In Daim al-Madina, I ate *sellat*, the salted, Beja traditional charcoal-cooked barbecue, at a courtyard kitchen where the family's eldest tracked orders in a school notebook. A power cut turned the alley into a low blue dusk. Someone joked that when the cranes go quiet, the city can breathe, and then the joke turned quickly: if the cranes stay quiet too long, there is no money to buy meat.



Figure 10 Sellat barbecue. Take by Author

Seen from this grain, Portsudan never really departed from its colonial purpose. Extraction changed its instruments but not its direction. Under the national corporation, sovereignty replaced imperial colors, yet the city was still read through the lens of the port, a place to secure rather than a place to develop. What looks like a departure in the era of Gulf concessions is instead a widening of the circuit. The same urban machine that once served imperial output now feeds a globalized extraction regime in which foreign operators circulate standardized protocols for zones, gates, and performance metrics, while public authorities, challenged by debt, compliance filters, and sanctions. Inside the fence, cranes and scanners speak the language of efficiency. Outside it, the daims bear the long continuities of an enclave city where the life of neighborhoods is calibrated to the needs of ships and steel (Perkins, 1993).

Rail remains a key to this history even as its material presence has faded from the port grounds. Atbara is still recalled as the melting pot where technical skill, unionism, and a sense of national mission were forged in the heat of shops and sheds. Older workers describe a world in which a

locomotive repair presented prestige and a rail schedule was respected. In Portsudan today, remnants of that world appear in the way people talk about time. A good day is one in which the berth plan holds, and the yard turns over according to the sheet on the wall. A bad day is one in which a promise fails upstream, a server stops, a spare part does not arrive, or an approval is withheld. Portsudan's pulse has shifted from rail timetables to a yard-engineered and bureaucracy-mediated time. Crane uptime, labor mobilization, brief tribal or union shutdowns, and administrative inefficiency govern the ship's clock, adding another layer of delay when they appear.

These shifts in time set the stage for the next phase of the city's story, in which outside proposals arrive wrapped in the language of modernization and efficiency. The templates they carry are recognizable. Keller Easterling describes how zones, single-window platforms, bonded corridors, concessions, and performance dashboards travel from site to site as an operating system for infrastructure that can be installed without constitutional reform (Easterling 2014). In Port Sudan, and later in the development proposal at Abu Amama, these formats promised a fix to visible problems. They also implied new guardians for gates, scanners, and leases. People in the yard understood this quickly. A concession would not only change who maintained a crane. It would change whose handheld authorized entry, whose software defined an exception, and whose contract set the wage ladder for Kallat used to negotiate with local associations.

Brenda Chalfin's account of frontier governance makes the everyday politics of these changes understandable. At the level where a sealed box becomes taxable cargo, sovereignty is performed through fees paid, seals inspected, and permits stamped (Chalfin 2010). In Portsudan, clearance agents translate between rulebooks and relationships. Associations of stevedores bargain wages

with shipping lines and the port authority. Kallat recruits labor along lines of lineage and neighborhood while coordinating with port police and planners. What looks like a delay is often governance by other means, carried out in a setting where formal capacity is thin, and recognition is distributed through shifts and signatures. A new operator who does not understand this network will insist that the system is broken.

A final layer completes the historical arc. The technical decline of workshops and scanners would be serious enough on its own, but sanctions and bank compliance turn those challenges into structural ones. Decisions migrate from ministries to corporate risk desks and correspondent banking corridors. Servers sit in Dubai rather than Portsudan. Maintenance contracts falter when screening software flags counterparties. Ferguson's language of global shadows is useful here because it names a situation in which African polities appear peripheral in dominant imaginaries while being saturated by procedural power exercised elsewhere (Ferguson 2006). Studies of trade finance underline the point. Banks retreat from perceived high-risk jurisdictions, constricting the routes of routine commerce (World Bank 2015; World Bank 2018). A delay that looks technical at the gate often starts earlier in a political compliance system that dockworkers cannot see.

Seen from this angle, Portsudan's emergence and evolution look less like a simple succession from Suakin to a modern harbor and more like a series of experiments in how to govern a chokepoint. The colonial enclave put cranes and rails to work in the service of an imperial economy while keeping the people who made that work possible on the outside. The postcolonial nationalization folded the enclave into a public-sector industrial project. However, the project then thinned under the weight of debt, war, and adjustment. The modern port now combines the remains of both periods. It is socially thick and technically thin.

2.2 The Revolving Gatekeepers

The yard's daily life began before dawn. Workers gathered at the southern terminal's gate as the sun rose. Women passed the gate with less inspection than men. Police checked IDs in a practiced sense. Inside, the ground revealed its own map. Cranes towered over lanes where trucks idled. Shipping lines held reserved plots for stacks. International names were painted on corrugated walls that had faded under salt and heat. Beneath a container, we found shade to review a client's file. The job was often about moving paper among jurisdictions that share a fence.

Loading and unloading were organized through kallat, hand-loading labor groups tied to both communal affiliation and the unions that formalized hiring. Kalla leaders negotiated assignments and wages and kept track of who turned up. The structure functioned as both a social safety net and a system of gatekeeping. Many workers described 1984 as a turning point in the hiring system. This year was a local marker for a double transition. On one side, drought and the decline of pastoral livelihoods pushed more people toward Portsudan in search of wage labor. Development researcher Sara Pantuliano shows that Portsudan had become an important source of cash income for Beja pastoralists, especially through dock work (Pantuliano 2002, 1). On the other side, workers described the arrival of container shipping as reducing the port's dependence on bulk cargo and on stevedores who had loaded and unloaded goods by hand (interviews with dockworkers, Port Sudan, 2022). Containers did not eliminate the kallat, but they changed the value of their labor. Work that had once depended on backs, ropes, hooks, and local groups increasingly depended on cranes, chassis, and yard equipment. Access to the terminal, therefore, became more competitive at the same time that the amount of hand-loading work declined.

While formal union power waxed and waned, the practical authority of the kallat remained. Union offices were physical places. One association headquarters occupied a five-story building in Deim Arab and rented out floors to finance services for members. Another sat in more modest rooms near the docks. Both recorded injuries, deaths, and payments on whiteboards. They offered stipends for health care and schooling. They also described machines as the main threat to work unless modernization was accompanied by training, compensation, and alternative employment (interviews with the two main Kallat unions, Port Sudan, 2022).

Time in the terminal had distinct costs. A container paid rent to the yard for each day it stayed. Agents hustled to obtain delivery orders, customs stamps, and health and standards approvals that would start the clock toward exit. Traders sometimes offloaded goods outside the gate to stop the meter. The X-ray scanner existed, but staff said it had not worked for years. These facts shaped strategies. In the absence of on-dock rail, boxes were moved to trucks. Big ships made rare calls. Feeders from Jeddah came more frequently. A large call could clog a week. Two ships could turn the yard into a waiting room. Thousands of small decisions kept the system moving.



Figure 11 Inside the MAERSK Ship docked in PCT

Sanctions shadowed these routines in ways that were both technical and intimate. Ahmed Hassan, a Maersk engineer working on container-handling operations at the South Port Container Terminal, explained that the local office ran on tablets connected to servers outside Sudan. The tablets made the terminal appear integrated into a global logistics system, but that integration was partial. Not all features were available in Sudan, and staff kept paper copies nearby in case the system cut out or a digital function failed. The point was not simply that the internet was unreliable. It was that the port's everyday operations depended on systems whose permissions were written elsewhere. Compliance risk after major sanctions penalties on international banks taught companies to over-comply. The U.S. Department of Justice's 2014 case against BNP Paribas, for example, showed firms the scale of possible punishment for processing transactions linked to sanctioned states. In Portsudan, this fear traveled downward into ordinary work: a worker waiting for a release, an agent trying to clear a container, or an engineer trying to make a system function with only partial access.

This was also visible in maintenance. Port workers and engineers described crane repairs and equipment upgrades that stalled not only because money was scarce, but because financing, procurement, and technical support carried legal exposure. A spare part was not just a spare part. It had to pass through banks, vendors, screening software, and compliance offices that might decide that the safest answer was delay or refusal. The World Bank similarly noted that sanctions complicated cross-border payments, correspondent banking, technical infrastructure, scanner maintenance, support contracts, and access to spare parts (World Bank 2015, 39–41). In this sense, sanctions did not simply block trade from outside the port. They were affecting the yard in non-traditional ways, such as waiting time, duplicate paperwork, interrupted maintenance, and equipment that could not be easily repaired.

These stories did not stand apart from national politics. They showed how national politics entered the terminal through ordinary routines of security, documentation, and suspicion. During one visit to the terminal, a port police officer stopped Yusuf Ahmed, the custom clearance agent I worked with him, and asked him to identify me. Yusuf replied that I worked with him and reassured the officer. The officer then invited us to a cup of tea at his metal-shaped mobile office near the exit gate of the terminal. On one level, the encounter was routine: we were inside a secure port area, and checking identification was part of the officer's work. Yet the question mattered because the officer knew the regular workers on the terminal grounds. My presence was unfamiliar, and the notebook in my hand appeared to raise further suspicion. Rather than addressing me first as a researcher with permission to be there, the officer turned to my colleague, who was locally known, and asked him to explain who I was and why I was moving through the yard. Access, then, did not depend only on a permit or institutional affiliation. It also depended on being recognized by someone already embedded in the port's social world. It was also clear that Yusuf had built a strong informal network inside the terminal grounds that was very critical for his daily job. Having breakfast with Maersk employees, getting tea with the custom police, and giving a ride to the health quality controller were the unseen process of getting the work done inside the terminal. The encounter revealed how security in the terminal worked through familiarity as much as documentation.



Figure 12 MAERSK Ship Loading PCT

2.2.1 Protest and Sovereignty in Port Sudan

Protest in Portsudan was not continuous, but it was recurrent enough to become part of the city's political repertoire. It appeared at moments when eastern Sudanese actors sought to force Khartoum to recognize grievances that ordinary administrative channels had failed to address. In 2005, Beja demonstrators in Portsudan presented demands to the Red Sea State governor after the eastern region was excluded from national peace negotiations over power and resources. Three days later, security forces fired on demonstrators, killing at least twenty people and turning the protest into a marker of the region's political marginalization (Amnesty International 2005, 1). After the 2019 revolution, port protests took a different but related form. Beja leaders and allied groups used road closures, port blockades, and interruptions to oil and cargo movement to pressure the transitional government over the Eastern Sudan Track of the Juba Peace Agreement, representation, and regional development. These protests varied in scale, from gatherings and sit-ins near gates and offices to blockades that stopped trucks, closed roads, and forced Red Sea ports to suspend operations for weeks (Reuters 2021).

One protest in 2021 made the politics of stoppage especially visible. Protesters blocked roads linking Portsudan to the rest of the country and forced the closure of Red Sea ports. Within weeks, the blockade affected fuel, wheat, medicine, and South Sudanese oil exports moving through Sudan's Red Sea terminals (Reuters 2021). Trucks waited, containers remained in the yard, and shipping schedules became uncertain. In Khartoum, the stoppage appeared as a supply crisis. In Portsudan, it appeared as proof that the eastern region still possessed leverage. The protest simply interrupted logistics and exposed the dependence of the national economy on a coastal region that had long been treated as peripheral except when the state needed customs revenue, strategic access, or land for outside projects.

In Portsudan, protests did not just stop goods from moving. It showed who could shape life on the coast. When the gates were blocked, trucks stopped, containers stayed in the yard, and ships had to wait or change course. Workers lost wages. Traders lost money. Shipping companies changed their plans. But the deeper meaning of the stoppage was political. By closing the port, protesters showed that the east still had power over a state that had often ignored the region except when it needed customs money, strategic access, or land for outside projects.

People in Portsudan spoke about these protests in the language of land, work, dignity, and recognition. They said the port was the last real source of pressure the region still had. Closing the gate was not only about labor. It was about refusing to be treated only as workers in a national asset managed from elsewhere. Protesters and port workers wanted to be part of decisions about whose project would be built on their land, who would benefit from port work, and who would control access to the yard. This is why privatization carried such force in local talk. People did not hear it as a neutral plan to improve efficiency. They heard it as a possible loss of political voice.

This fear has deep roots. Protest and labor action in Portsudan have long been shaped by race, region, and hierarchy. In the colonial period, access to work in the port was sorted through ideas about who was reliable, disciplined, and fit for certain jobs (Perkins 1993, 99–122). Beja workers were often pushed into the hardest and least secure labor, while others received more stable positions. Independence changed the language, but not the deeper pattern. What had once been explained through colonial categories was later explained in terms of efficiency, security, and development. But the result remained familiar. Eastern Sudan stayed politically marginal even though the port remained vital to the country. The region mattered as a site of extraction, but its people remained outside the main decisions that shaped it.

In Portsudan, this broader politics entered the terminal through labor, documents, and access to movement. The question was not only who could close a road or block a gate, but who could make cargo move again, who could speak for workers, and who could authorize the future of the port. This became clearest in two fieldwork moments: my visit to the dockworkers' association, where protest appeared as both economic pain and political leverage, and my visit to the Sea Ports Corporation headquarters, where concession documents became difficult to access precisely because they carried political risk.

By the time I began following concession debates in Portsudan, protest had already become part of how the coast negotiated with the state. The point was not simply that protesters could close roads or block gates. It was that stoppage revealed the port's political density. Workers, unions, traders, tribal authorities, municipal officials, and port managers all occupied different positions in the movement of goods. When the port stopped, these positions became visible. Protest showed that those who made cargo move could also interrupt it, and therefore had a claim on how movement should be governed.

This overlap became clear when I visited the dockworkers' association. The discussion there did not follow a neat division between labor demands and regional politics. Association members spoke first about the immediate costs of closure: daily wages lost, crews left waiting, families dependent on irregular work, and the fear that shipping companies could reroute cargo elsewhere if the stoppages continued. But the same conversation quickly turned to control over the port's future. Workers described protest as risky because it interrupted their own livelihoods, yet they also described it as one of the few instruments through which the east could force Khartoum to listen. The port closure, in their account, was both a burden and a form of leverage. It hurt workers in the short term, but it also demonstrated that the people who made cargo move could also stop it.

People working at the port knew that blockades had effects beyond Portsudan. They knew that cargo could move to Jeddah or Djibouti. They knew that shipping companies and insurers were watching. They argued about whether closing the port created useful pressure or only helped those who wanted to bypass Portsudan altogether. Workers worried about lost wages. Union leaders worried about who would control the port in the future. Traders worried about damaged goods and penalties. But these concerns did not remove the political value of the protest. In fact, the regional effects of the closure made the protest more powerful. It showed that those who could stop movement also had a claim on how movement should be governed.

This is why officials became careful. Plans that had seemed fixed suddenly became uncertain, and ordinary documents began to require additional layers of approval. When I visited the Sea Ports Corporation headquarters, I asked about earlier concession documents and bidding files related to terminal development. Staff directed me to the corporation's library. The library contained older studies on developing the terminal and improving port capacity, but it did not contain recent

concession agreements or bidding files. The absence was itself revealing. Documents that might show who negotiated, approved, or contested concessions were not treated as ordinary public records. They were politically sensitive files.

I was able to obtain some documents only through a worker who agreed to share them anonymously. That exchange clarified the atmosphere around paperwork. The issue was not simply that records were disorganized or difficult to locate. It was that documents carried risk. A concession file, a bidding document, or a memorandum about terminal development could expose who had been consulted, who had been bypassed, and who had authority to speak for the port. People inside the port authority would talk in private, but they became careful around documents, names, signatures, and written evidence.

The atmosphere of caution was therefore not only bureaucratic. It was political. The state tried to describe the closures as local trouble, but that only made the issue sharper. The port had become a place where state authority itself was being tested. The question was no longer only whether a concession made economic sense. The question was who had the right to decide the future of the coast.

Abu Amama enters this story as the proposed alternative to the crowded politics of Portsudan. In 2022, Sudan signed a preliminary agreement with a UAE-linked consortium to develop a new port and economic zone at Abu Amama, north of Portsudan (Reuters 2022). The project was presented in the language of investment, deeper water, logistics, and regional development. But in the political context of the eastern protests, it also had another meaning. It suggested that port expansion could be moved away from the existing terminal city, where unions, Beja leaders,

traders, municipal authorities, and port workers had already shown their ability to interrupt movement.

From this angle, the move toward Abu Amama was not only about investment or deeper water. It was also a political bypass. If Portsudan had become too full of unions, Beja claims, municipal politics, and memories of protest, then a new site farther north offered a way to avoid those pressures. Abu Amama promised a different setting, where infrastructure could be tied more directly to concession, security, and corridor plans without passing through the same social and political struggles that shaped Portsudan. In addition, Abu Amama is the land of the Bishariyyin, a Beja subtribe. The Bishariyyin were blocked from working in Portsudan or Suakin, which lie on the lands of another Beja subtribe: the Amarar and the Hadendowa. The Bishariyyin mainly worked as fishermen and were relatively poorer than other Beja subtribes, and that why they were very welcoming to the new Abu Amam port project. Capitalist port investment understood these dynamics. At one occasion, I saw this reported in the local newspaper in Khartoum that the DAL group, the local conglomerate and also the local partner of Abu Dhabi Ports, organized and funded a group wedding for the Bishariyyin. Another way to solidify the subtribe support for the Abu Amama project. But that is exactly why Abu Amama matters. The move north showed that protest in Portsudan had already set limits on what outside investors and national officials could do inside the existing port. It also threatened to bypass the claim at the heart of Beja Dawla: that the Beja should have a real say in how coastal land, port infrastructure, and regional authority are organized. In trying to avoid the social life of sovereignty in Portsudan, the Abu Amama strategy revealed how powerful that social life still was.

2.3 UAE Port Imperialism:

Dubai offers the most important contemporary comparison for this chapter because its rise as a port city combined large-scale modernization with the rerouting of regional maritime power.

With limited oil resources, Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum pursued a strategy that would make Dubai a commercial and logistical hub rather than an oil-dependent state. Advised by the Scottish economist Bill Duff, he invested in port infrastructure as the foundation of Dubai's future economy. Port Rashid opened in the early 1970s, and Jebel Ali followed at the end of that decade. The new port was not simply an expansion of capacity. It was a claim to regional centrality at a moment when older maritime centers, especially Aden, were weakened by revolution, war, and postcolonial uncertainty. Laleh Khalili shows how Dubai's port expansion was tied to the making of a new Gulf logistics order, one in which Jebel Ali, the free zone, and later DP World became instruments for projecting Dubai's authority across maritime routes (Khalili 2020, 64).

For Sudan, this matters because Red Sea ports are never only about cargo. They are also about influence, route control, and the power to shape which coasts become hubs and which become feeders. Dubai's rise showed that port modernization could be used not only to move goods more efficiently, but also to reorganize regional hierarchies. A port that controls routes, services, free zones, and terminal management can shape the options available to other ports. From Portsudan, this history was not distant. It appeared as a warning about how investment could arrive as dependence.

People in Portsudan understood this before it appeared in formal analysis. Abdelgadir Abu Ali Magzob, a former adviser in the Sea Ports Corporation, told me that DP World had been interested

in Sudan since at least 2008. He did not see that interest as simply commercial. In his view, the company wanted control not only over Sudan's trade but also over a wider route connecting the Red Sea to landlocked Africa. Portsudan, in this reading, was attractive not because it was already efficient, but because it was open to capture. It had a long coast, a weakened state, and a strategic location. That made it vulnerable to outside operators who could arrive with money, legal templates, and the language of modernization.

By the mid-2010s, those ambitions had moved from rumor to formal proposals. During my field research in 2018, I obtained a copy of the concession agreement papers from a local businessman in Portsudan. The file states that, on 23 April 2016, a ministerial decree established a committee to study DP World's proposal from technical and operational perspectives. The committee then recommended an open tender with external consultancy support from Hamburg Port Consulting. According to the same file, thirteen firms were contacted, six qualified, and four submitted bids. When the results were announced on 7 January 2018, ICTSI ranked first and DP World second. Magzob told me that he was part of that process and that the committee did not accept the original DP World proposal because it did not protect Sudan's interests. This matters because, in local understanding, what followed did not feel like a clean shift from one bidder to another. It felt like the same strategic push returning through another door..

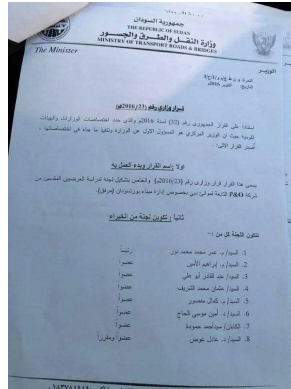


Figure 13 Ministerial Decree establishing a committee to study DP World offer

The official document itself helps explain why the deal alarmed so many people in Port Sudan. It says ICTSI demanded full exclusivity in container handling until throughput reached 1,250,000 TEUs and wanted that exclusivity to extend across the entire Sudanese coastline. It also says ICTSI demanded strong protections on tariffs, compensation for lost profits if the authority defaulted, compensation if laws changed, and repayment terms at contract end. The committee rejected these demands and considered them unfair to the Sudan. The same document describes a substantial financial package: a contract advance of 530 million euros, including a 410 million euro first installment, fixed monthly fees, a 14 percent revenue share rising to 16 percent, and over 400 million euros in planned investment. The agreement also gave the company control over terminal operations, maintenance, safety, and implementation of its business plan, while the authority remained responsible for roads, channel dredging, pilotage, port security, and fire services. Put simply, this was not just a management contract. It was a long attempt to reorganize authority at the terminal while leaving major public burdens with the Sudanese side.

This is where secrecy became part of politics. The agreement document says negotiations with ICTSI reached a deadlock. On 30 October 2018, the minister ordered an end to negotiations with

the Philippine company and a shift to negotiations with DP World. Yet ICTSI publicly announced in January 2019 that it had signed a twenty-year concession to operate and develop the Port Sudan container terminal (Manila Standard 2019). That gap between the official document and the public deal is one reason many people in Port Sudan believed the process was being handled above them. In their talk, the issue was not simply that the deal was bad. It was that it was done without real public debate, without serious consultation with workers and communities. It seems it was a lifesaver for the Bashir's regime, which was going through an acute financial crisis and was under pressure from protests spreading through Sudan's major cities (Reuters 2018). Reuters later reported that Sudan's military rulers suspended the ICTSI contract in 2019, after workers had already gone on strike against the twenty-year concession (Reuters 2019). Shortly afterward, ethnic violence broke out in Port Sudan between Nuba groups and the Beni Amer. The Nuba comprise diverse communities originating in the Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan, a state in south-central Sudan bordering South Sudan, while the Beni Amer are a distinct transborder community concentrated in eastern Sudan and western Eritrea. The unrest led the authorities to impose a curfew and deploy the Rapid Support Forces, or RSF, to contain the situation. This was not the first time such clashes had taken place. The Beni Amer and the Nuba had a longer history of violent confrontations in the city. Yet many activists in Port Sudan insisted that the fighting could not be explained by ethnic grievances alone. They argued that larger political and economic interests were at work and that outside actors were trying to destabilize the region to shape the future of Port Sudan and strengthen their hold over the port. In this atmosphere, some activists accused DP World, along with figures in the Transitional Military Council and remnants of the former regime, of profiting from regional tensions and obstructing the democratic transition and the establishment of a civilian government (Ahmed 2021).

This broader suspicion also shaped how many people understood the ICTSI deal. Many in Port Sudan believed that ICTSI was acting as a front for DP World. I heard this most clearly from Magzob, and I present it as his view and as a widely shared local interpretation, not as something I can independently verify. Still, the belief mattered because it framed how the agreement was received on the ground. In that reading, the committee had blocked DP World's first route into Port Sudan, so the same strategic goal returned through a different company. The Philippine firm was therefore seen by many not as an independent operator, but as another vehicle through which Gulf-centered logistical power could enter Sudan's coast under a different name.

DP World, however, did not abandon its efforts. After the formation of the transitional government, the company continued seeking approval for its project (Al Jazeera 2020). The company even hired Ari Ben-Menashe, a former Israeli intelligence officer, to lobby on its behalf for support from the United States government in its bid to operate Sudan's container terminal. This happened at a time when the UAE had become an important supporter of the Transitional Military Council and, later, of parts of the transitional civilian government. The UAE's anti-Islamist language was politically useful in this setting, especially after the fall of Bashir, whose regime was widely identified with political Islam. That message may have appealed to Western audiences and to some new elites in Sudan, but many young revolutionaries were not persuaded. They remembered that the UAE had also supported Bashir when it suited its interests. For them, the issue was never ideology alone, but power and influence.

Even so, DP World struggled to secure its deal under the transitional government due to resistance within the ruling coalition (Africabusinessplus.Com 2020). At the same time, the company was pursuing a wider regional strategy. After losing the Doraleh Container Terminal in Djibouti, DP

World continued to expand elsewhere along the Red Sea corridor, including in Somaliland and Jeddah. From this perspective, Port Sudan was part of a larger contest over trade routes and port influence in the Red Sea. In response to growing criticism of Emirati influence, Prime Minister Hamdok approved a proposal by Hamburg Port Consulting to improve the flow of exports and imports through the southern port (Dabanga 2021). The transitional transport minister, Mergani Musa, explained that the southern container terminal was congested and faced operational obstacles that slowed the movement of goods. He added that the Hamburg study identified four main problems: safety, regular maintenance of the machines, the operational structure, and working methods. In other words, the port's crisis could be addressed through technical reform, without surrendering control to an outside operator.

The workers' opposition also came from multiple places, which is important (Amin 2019). Inside the Sudan Sea Ports Corporation, engineers, technicians, drivers, and operators feared that foreign management would first discipline them and later replace them. Many said they had not been properly consulted. The stevedore organizations saw the issue differently. Their fear was that modernization meant removing labor-intensive cargo handling and replacing it with machines, systems, and a new labor order that would erase their place in the port. When I visited the two main workers' associations, both described port life as marked by bodily strain, injuries, poor conditions, and the absence of basic services. But both also made clear that they were not against development itself. What they opposed was a version of development that treated the port's existing social life as disposable.

This distinction became especially clear in my interview with Eisa Mohamed,⁶ head of engineering at the Southern Container Terminal. Eisa did not present workers as opposed to either port development or private investment. Instead, he emphasized the conditions under which each should occur:

“Sudan has a long coastline, so there can be government ports and private ports. But there must be protections for the national interest. Look at the Egyptian model with DP World: Egypt holds 55 percent, DP World holds 45 percent, the workers are Egyptian, and the agreement is limited to twenty years. In Sudan, we have no such protections. I was among those who resisted the Filipino company in Portsudan. Its job was simply to operate the port. It brought no new equipment, and it damaged existing equipment because it operated for profit without regular maintenance. Workers began striking even without a labor union directing them. They acted out of a sense that the port was a national institution that had to be protected.”

Eisa believed that the Filipino operator was serving as a front for DP World and that allowing SSPC's equipment to deteriorate would make a much longer foreign concession appear necessary. Whether or not this interpretation captured the company's intentions, it reveals how workers understood the proposed arrangement: not as neutral technical assistance, but as a process that could weaken public capacity and prepare the port for foreign control. Yet Eisa was equally critical of the existing public system. He explained that SSPC remained financially subordinate to the Ministry of Finance and therefore could not invest its revenues according to the port's technical needs. His account complicates any simple opposition between development and resistance. Workers were defending public control while also demanding investment, maintenance, financial autonomy, and enforceable protections for Sudanese labor and national interests.

The Shipboard Cargo Loading and Unloading Workers Association told me that it represented approximately 6,000 workers who labored inside ships. Its five-story building in Dem Arab was

⁶ Interview with Eisa Mohamed, head of engineering, Southern Container Terminal, Portsudan, October 25, 2022.

noticeably more substantial than the building used by the Dockside Association. The association occupied the fourth floor and rented out the remaining floors. Its leaders spoke first about injuries, the lack of drinking water and protective equipment, and the absence of restrooms, ambulances, and medical support. They also worried that the planned Abu Amama port would shift work northward, potentially leaving them without access to employment. The Dockside Association, founded earlier as a cooperative service organization, told me that its members worked along the coast from Halaib to south of Tokar and that its approximately 6,000 workers supported some 12,000 family members. Mobarak Mohamed Ali, a representative of the Dockside Association, described their predicament in direct terms: “New equipment threatens our work. Look at wheat: suction machines now do work that laborers used to do. There is no agriculture here; this is the only work we have. If the work moves to Abu Amama, the people there will not allow us to work. It has a tribal dimension.”⁷ Machines had already reduced the demand for labor in the Southern Container Terminal. Further mechanization would shrink the workers’ place in the port unless they were retrained, compensated, and provided with other economic opportunities. They made clear that they did not reject modernization. They rejected being removed from the coast in its name.

⁷ Mobarak Mohamed Ali, representative of the Association of Dockside Cargo Loading and Unloading Workers, interview by author, Portsudan, Sudan, October 27, 2022.



Figure 14: The Shipboard Cargo Loading and Unloading Workers Association Building in Portsudan

This helps explain why the first wave of UAE-linked port expansion in Sudan failed in Port Sudan itself. The problem was not only that the lease was unpopular. The deeper problem was that the port was already too socially thick. Too many workers. Too many unions. Too many memories. Too many claims. Port Sudan was not an empty asset waiting for a manager. It was the city's social reservoir. It carried wages, patronage, technical skill, and one of the last remaining forms of leverage the East held over the Center. That thickness made the terminal hard to discipline through concession.

After Portsudan itself became politically difficult, the strategy shifted. This time it was Abu Dhabi Ports, not DP World, and the project was larger. Instead of trying to take over the contested container terminal inside the city, the UAE backed a new port and economic package at Abu Amama on the northern coast. In an interview, Hashim Ibn Ouf, the Minister of Urban Planning and Transportation during Hamdok's transitional civilian government, revealed that the UAE always wanted to influence the government. He mentioned that the Minister's office had ties with the UAE and organized a visit to the UAE for a few ministers in the Sudanese government. He mentioned that the Emirati government was unaware of the visit and did not provide a formal

welcome. Later, Hashim mentioned that it seemed the visit was organized by DP World and AD Ports. On October 25, 2021, the military faction within the transitional government orchestrated a coup, removing the civilian coalition from power (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2021). But that move did not stop the UAE from seeking a node in the Red Sea. Reuters reported in 2022 that Sudan signed a preliminary agreement with a UAE-led group to build and operate Abu Amama port along with an economic zone, airport, road link, and agricultural project, at a site about 200 kilometers north of Port Sudan (Eltahir 2022). It was presented as a clean beginning, a better place for logistics and investment.

I traveled north to see that cleaner site for myself. The road took me through Bisharyin land. I first visited Mohamed Gol, a fishing village on the Red Sea, then continued to Marsa Dalawot, known as Abu Amama, a natural berth with a coastline that felt open and quiet compared with the crowded politics of Portsudan. Local people welcomed us with coffee. In Mohamed Gol, I ate al-sayadiya, fish, and rice cooked together.



Figure 15 Al-sayadiya meal in Mohamed Gol

A fisherman told me that the name Abu Amama came from the shape of a nearby mountain that resembled a turban (Amama means turban in Arabic). Another man said Abu Dhabi Ports had sent agents to the area, but they did not return. People spoke about development in direct terms. They wanted investment and work.



Figure 16 Local fisherman in Abu Amama



Figure 17 Abu Amama Mountain appears from a fishing quay, taken by the author

That difference was exactly the point. The Bishariyyin had long been more marginal to the labor and gatekeeping systems of Portsudan, where other Beja groupings held stronger positions in the kallat and in access to port work. In Abu Amama, some Bishariyyin leaders saw the project as a

chance to enter the logistics economy on better terms. That made the site attractive to the UAE. It offered what Portsudan could not: a thinner social field, weaker labor institutions, and a local community more receptive to the language of development. Yet this did not mean that Abu Amama stood outside politics. It meant that politics moved to a different terrain, where the terms appeared more favorable to outside capital.

Local ties connected the project to powerful figures in Khartoum and to Sudan's private-sector elite. Merghani Musa, who came from the area, had worked as an engineer at DAL Group before becoming Minister of Transport in the transitional government. His association with the project made Abu Amama appear not only as an infrastructure proposal, but also as a project embedded in personal, regional, and business networks. Acts of social generosity, including support for group marriages, were read by some local observers as part of the effort to prepare the ground socially and politically for the port (عبدالقادر باكاش 2022).

The project also connected Abu Amama to the wider Daoud and DAL business network. DAL Group, founded by Osama Daoud Abdellatif in the 1960s, became Sudan's largest private conglomerate, with an estimated annual revenue of \$500 million. The group's regional reach was also visible through Invictus Investment, which listed on the Abu Dhabi Securities Exchange at a valuation of AED 3 billion (Maussion 2025). Invictus Investment later joined AD Ports Group in a consortium to build and operate the Abu Amama port and economic zone on the Red Sea.

The composition of the official committee further shows how the Abu Amama project involved high-level political and commercial actors. A presidential decree from the Transitional Council dated October 11, 2022, named Osama Daoud as a member of the committee to operate and develop Abu Amama port, alongside Gibril Ibrahim, the Minister of Finance; Mohamed Jumaa al-

Shamsi, the managing director and group CEO of AD Ports Group; Ibrahim Jabir, a member of the Transitional Sovereignty Council; and Hisham Abu Zeid, the Minister of Transport. In an interview, Gibril Ibrahim explained that AD Ports and DAL Group formally proposed the project and that the proposal went through consultations with technical and local stakeholders. He also argued that Sudan needed a new port because the existing port in Portsudan was difficult to manage amid local and tribal politics. This framing is central to my argument. Abu Amama was presented as a technical solution to congestion and management problems, but it was also a political solution to the density of Portsudan's unions, tribal claims, labor structures, and histories of protest. The port networks I encountered in Portsudan were therefore broadly united in their opposition to the Abu Amama project. Across my interviews with SSPC engineers, dockside and shipboard stevedores, and customs-clearance agents, respondents consistently rejected the promises surrounding AD Ports' proposed development.



Figure 18 Presidential Decree Establishing Abu Amama Port Committee

This is what I mean by UAE port imperialism in Sudan. It is not only an attempt to own or operate a port. It is an effort to reorganize the coast through routes, contracts, security arrangements, and

selective local alliances. In the first phase, the goal was to enter the existing terminal in Portsudan and bring it under concessionary rule. In the second phase, after resistance made that difficult, the goal shifted toward Abu Amama, a rural site where the same model could be built with fewer obstacles.

Both strategies tried to fold Sudan into a wider Gulf logistics order. By this I mean the extension of Gulf-based arrangements of capital, infrastructure, sovereignty, and security across the Red Sea to the African coast. In this order, ports are not treated only as national development assets. They are linked to free zones, inland corridors, agricultural concessions, customs reforms, and protection arrangements that make movement profitable and governable for external operators. The coast becomes valuable less as a place to be developed for its people than as a corridor to be managed for circulation and strategic advantage.

Both strategies also ran into the same problem in different forms. Sudan's coast was already politically inhabited. Workers, unions, tribal leaders, local communities, and regional histories all set limits on what outside power could do. In that sense, the move from Portsudan to Abu Amama was not a new idea. It was the same imperial logic looking for a less crowded gate.

2.4 Conclusion

Portsudan shows that port imperialism does not arrive on an empty shore. It did not resist the UAE's concession ambitions because its workers were unusually organized, or because its tribal leaders were unusually powerful, or because its unions were unusually militant. It resisted because all of these things were true at once, and because they were layered on top of one another in ways that no single concession contract could dissolve. UAE's port imperialism entered a coast already shaped by older forms of rule, labor, and exclusion. That is the revolving door logic this chapter

has traced. The kallat leader, the port customs officer, the union representative, the Nazir's *umda*, the clearance agent who knew which stamp unlocked which corridor; all of these were not obstacles to governance. They were governance it self, distributed across a social field. The same fields that colonial infrastructure organized and postcolonial neglect strengthened.

This chapter began from a simple observation: Portsudan was built as a colonial project and never fully left that form behind. Extraction did not end with independence. It changed hands, changed language, and changed instruments. Under the national state, the port was still treated mainly as a source of revenue and sovereign rather than as the basis for a broader development future. In the more recent period, Emirati capital did not break with this history. It expanded it. What had once been managed through colonial administration and then national corporation came to be reorganized through leases, tenders, corridor plans, and the legal tools of global logistics.

This is why the chapter has argued that UAE port imperialism in Sudan worked through a revolving door of gatekeeping. It is a structure of governance where each phase, colonial, national, and Gulf-led, wrestled with who stands at the gate, who authorizes movement, and who can turn access into power. Under colonial rule, the gate was organized through the port, the railway, and the native administration. Under the national corporation, it was organized through public employment, customs authority, planners, municipal repair, and the social weight of the terminal itself. In the latest phase, outside operators tried to rework the same gate through concessions, exclusive rights, software systems, security partnerships, and rural bypass projects. Yet no actor could ever hold that gate alone. Customs, kallat, unions, agents, municipal offices, tribal leaders, and Beja political formations all remained inside the life of the chokepoint. That is why outside power could propose new forms of rule, but never simply install them without friction.

Seen this way, the terminal was never just a logistical site. It was always a political field. The chapter has shown that the social life of Portsudan is not the background to policy. It is the place where policy becomes real and where policy limits are set. A container does not move only because a tariff is posted or a scanner exists. It moves because papers pass between hands, a customs officer allows entry, a union accepts a rate, a planner signs a form, and a worker judges the risk worth taking. This is why what looks like inefficiency from the outside can also be understood as local governance in practice. The port survives through negotiation, improvisation, and the small acts by which recognition is distributed. That is also why the promise of a frictionless concession was always misleading. The concession model envisioned the terminal as a tool to be improved. The port community knew it better. It was a socially thick place where every new project would be judged by what it did to jobs, wages, land, access, and dignity.

The protests in Portsudan made this plain. When people blocked the gates, they were not simply interrupting trade. They were demonstrating that coastal sovereignty, which remained unsettled. The closure of the port carried immediate costs, but it also exposed a deeper truth: the state could not govern the chokepoint without the people of the region. The people whose labor, land, and politics made the checkpoint operate. The language of *Beja Dawla* Icarifeid that truth. It turned a protest from a complaint into a claim. It said that the Beja were not only labor at the port, nor a population to be managed through agreements drafted elsewhere, but a people entitled to authority over their regional future. This was visible in the tribal elections in Arkaweet, in the welcome crowds in Sinkat, and in the broader refusal to accept that the coast could be leased to a foreign entity for efficiency and without local consultations. Protest, then, did not sit outside the story of logistics. It was in the very center of it by insisting that the gate is also a political limit.

Moreover, the sanctions regime added a structural dimension that the revolving door alone cannot explain. The asymmetrical openness described throughout this chapter where Emirati private capital was enabled, and Sudanese public modernization constrained. This was not simply a product of Gulf financial power. It was also a product of the global neoliberal compliance infrastructure, which treated Sudan as a high-risk jurisdiction while allowing UAE-linked operators to operate with relative ease. The BNP Paribas fine of \$8.9 billion hindered local agents from dealing directly with the MAERSK global business. Banks withdrew their offers from Sudanese companies. Crane maintenance contracts were canceled. A scanner sat dark not only because a part was unavailable but because clearing payment for that part through a correspondent bank had become a legal risk no compliance officer was willing to authorize. This is shadowed governance at its most concrete: the port's public authority was constrained not by any decision made in Port Sudan or Khartoum, but by risk calculations made in New York, Paris, and Frankfurt. They were made by policy decision originating from Washington, DC. The result was that the Sudan Sea Ports Corporation could not modernize at the same pace, while DP World and Abu Dhabi Ports could tap global finance with relative ease. The field was not level. It had been tilted by sanctions.

The ICTSI episode clarified the same point from another side. The concession promised modernization, investment, and growth where national initiative struggled. Yet the contract structure itself revealed a deeper imbalance. The operator would control key parts of terminal life while major public burdens remained with the Sudanese side. Local workers and engineers did not read this as neutral reform. They read it as a shift in authority. When many in Port Sudan came to believe that ICTSI was functioning as a front for DP World, the company name became politically toxic, and another was deployed. The deal appeared not as an isolated business arrangement but

as one more route by which Gulf-centered port-imperial power could enter the coast. The resistance it generated was therefore not only a labor reaction. It was a struggle over who had the right to define the terminal's future. The failure of that first phase did not show that port imperialism had ended. It showed that Portsudan itself was too socially dense, too politically inhabited, and too burdened with memory to be easily disciplined through concession alone.

Abu Amama was the answer to that failure. It was not simply a new port proposal. It was a bypass. If the urban gate at Portsudan was crowded with unions, Beja claims, workers' associations, and histories of protest, then the rural coast farther north seemed to offer a thinner social field. Sudan needed a new port, Gebril Ibrahim explained, because the existing one was very complicated in local politics and tribal politics. There, the same imperial logic could reemerge in another form. This time through a mega-project rather than an urban concession.

But even this move revealed the limits of outside power. Abu Amama was attractive precisely because Portsudan had already shown that the old gate could not be fully mastered. The bypass was therefore not a sign that the social life of sovereignty had disappeared. It was proof that it remained strong enough to redirect the strategy of the empire itself. The move north also underscored the broader point: port imperialism does not merely capture places. It searches for spaces where social resistance is weaker, labor institutions thinner, and political claims easier to manage. In Sudan, that search ran into the same problem again. The coast was already inhabited, already claimed, and already political.

What emerges from all this is a different way of reading Portsudan. It is not best understood as a failed port city waiting for proper modernization. Nor is it only a story of corruption, mismanagement, or missed opportunity. It is better understood as a contested experiment in

governing a chokepoint. The colonial enclave built the port to extract outward. Nationalization did not overturn that logic but translated it into sovereignty and public revenue. The Emirati cycle globalized it further through contracts, corridors, and transnational operators, while sanctions and compliance systems made it even harder for public authorities to modernize on their own terms. What looks from afar like dysfunction is actually a deeper struggle over who has the right to organize movement, set priorities, and claim the benefits of circulation. Portsudan is therefore not peripheral to the study of empire. It is one of the places where the empire's current form becomes most visible, not through flags and annexation, but through terminals, exclusivities, risk systems, and the politics of access.

The final lesson of the chapter is that chokepoints are never just routes. They are social worlds. They are worked, argued over, and inhabited. Global infrastructure projects may arrive with their own legal forms and technical promises, but they still must pass through local gatekeepers who can slow them, translate them, bargain with them, or reject them. That is the revolving door this chapter has traced. The door turns, new actors enter, old actors are pushed aside, and fresh contracts appear, but the gate never becomes neutral. It remains a place where sovereignty is priced, delayed, stamped, leased, and fought over. In Portsudan, that struggle has not ended. It has simply taken a new form. And that is why the port still matters, not only for Sudan, but for any account of how contemporary empire moves through infrastructure and meets the people who refuse to let the coast become frictionless. Any future for the port that takes its social life seriously will look very different from the concession model that Gulf operators have repeatedly proposed. It will require investment in the public capacity that sanctions have constrained, and debt has eroded. It will require political arrangements that recognize the layered sovereignty of the eastern region rather than bypassing it through distant enclaves. And it will require a reckoning with the colonial

genealogy that made Portsudan what it is: a place built to extract, whose people have spent more than a century insisting that extraction is not the same as development, and that a port city is not only a port.

Chapter 3: Navigating Port Imperialism in Djibouti: Local Agency and Sovereignty

Supply chain security crosses over land and sea, encountering and recasting the government of national borders, but it also collides with the rights and livelihoods of groups, reconstituting those groups in the process.

Deborah Cowen

3.1 Introduction

At Jano House Hotel, where I stayed after arriving in Djibouti, the sound of fighter jets operating from the nearby Western military bases repeatedly cut through the ordinary rhythms of the city. From my room, I could hear military aircraft passing overhead. Their roar made Djibouti's geopolitical position audible. The same narrow territory through which ships, trucks, and Ethiopian cargo moved was also occupied by an extensive foreign military presence. Before I visited its ports or approached its military bases, Djibouti announced itself through sound as both a logistical corridor and a garrison.

I had reached Djibouti through Addis Ababa. Even from the sky, the geography seemed to make a particular argument: Djibouti's most vital connection to the African interior ran westward toward Ethiopia. My itinerary followed the same corridor through which grain, fuel, and manufactured goods travel daily between a landlocked regional power and its maritime lifeline. The journey appeared unremarkable on a booking app, but it mapped a deeper relationship of political and economic dependence that anchors much of this chapter.

My arrival marked the second stop in a broader ethnographic journey along the Red Sea, a coastline where imperial debris, logistical ambitions, and state fragilities collect in harbors. Like Portsudan, Djibouti shares the same coastal climate and a built landscape shaped by the need to endure salt-heavy winds. The human geographies were familiar too. Communities inhabited liminal spaces and navigated transit zones, checkpoints, and the shifting thresholds of sovereignty. Yet Djibouti stood apart. It was not merely another port city. It was a critical node of regional trade, a staging ground for global militaries, and a testing site for new forms of imperialism enacted through ports, corridors, and security infrastructure. The fighter jets above Jano House were the first audible sign of how closely these systems had become intertwined.

I use the term *port imperialism* to describe the contemporary project of power projection through maritime logistics: a form of influence pursued by Gulf states and other global actors through long-term port concessions, special economic zones, and trade corridor investments. Unlike classical colonialism, port imperialism does not seek full territorial control; it operates instead by capturing chokepoints, inserting managerial regimes, and rendering logistical landscapes frictionless and governable. Yet, as anthropologist Anna Tsing reminds us, “friction” is inevitable. It is through these sticky, uneven encounters between global ambitions and local realities that the contours of power become visible (Tsing 2005).



Figure 19 : The Horn of Africa Map. Source: United Nations, Department of Peacekeeping Operations,

In Djibouti, the UAE's attempt to govern the Doraleh Container Terminal through DP World collided with an assemblage of state practices that resist easy categorization. Here, sovereignty is not institutional but situational. It is enacted through a mix of ethnic dominance, patronage networks, and the careful calibration of foreign dependency. Djibouti's expulsion of DP World, despite legal threats and diplomatic pressure, was not just a reaction—it was a performance of sovereignty shaped by the frictions of everyday governance.

From port workers and customs agents to political analysts and international NGO staff, those I spoke with offered versions of the same idea: Djibouti survives by being indispensable. Its monopoly over Ethiopian trade, its centrality in global military logistics, and its nimble political leadership have created a form of gatekeeper sovereignty. Frederick Cooper's concept of the *gatekeeper state* - where postcolonial regimes extract external rents by controlling access to territory- applies here with acute relevance (Cooper 2018). Djibouti, despite its small size, plays

host to American, Chinese, French, and Japanese military bases. It charges tolls on global security and logistics, using its strategic location as both leverage and shield.

This gatekeeping is embedded in ethnicity. The ruling Issa clan, part of the larger Somali ethnic constellation, exercises control over key economic and political levers, including the port infrastructure. Infrastructure here is not only steel and concrete, it is kinship, allegiance, and selective visibility. DP World's technocratic logic, with its emphasis on efficiency and control, clashed with this clientelist model. The result was rupture.

James Scott's notion of the *fiction of the state* helps explain this tension (Scott 1998). In his view, state power is often partial and theatrical, especially in places where formal institutions are weak. Djibouti's government did not oppose DP World through centralized bureaucracy but through tactics: reasserting legal sovereignty in courtrooms, while using informal networks to seize back the terminal. This was not dysfunction; it was strategy.

William Reno's idea of *warlord politics*, the manipulation of external actors for internal consolidation, also resonates (Reno 1998). President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh's regime operates not through warfare, but through the logic of territorial control over trade. I describe this as *trade-lord politics*, in which the flow of goods and capital is governed like spoils, redistributed through loyalty rather than law. The port, in this sense, is both economic infrastructure and political stronghold.

The irony of port imperialism is that it seeks frictionless movement through highly frictional places. In Djibouti, logistical dreams meet their political limits. Power is not projected here; it is bargained for, withheld, and released only under conditions set by local actors. Port imperialism

fails not because it is resisted with overwhelming strength, but because it cannot bypass the people, the histories, and the entanglements that live in the shadows of the cranes.



Figure 20 : Djibouti's airport- taken by the author

3.1.1 Background of Djibouti

I arrived in Djibouti in late February 2023—my second field site, and one that, while reminiscent of Port Sudan, revealed itself almost immediately as something distinct. Djibouti, often described as a city-port state, functions less as a traditional nation-state and more as a compact sovereign node along global shipping arteries. Its geography alone announces its strategic significance: poised at the mouth of the Red Sea where it meets the Gulf of Aden, it commands one of the world's busiest maritime corridors. But geography is only the beginning. Djibouti's population, nearing 1.1 million, sharply contrasts with Ethiopia's vast 127 million, highlighting the demographic imbalance between the port city-state and its large, landlocked neighbor. The country's 314-kilometer coastline underscores its enduring role as a maritime service provider, a historical role shaped as much by empire and commerce as by geography.

Djibouti's past stretches deep into antiquity. Although the precise names of ancient littoral settlements remain elusive, the area likely fell under the cultural and commercial influence of the Aksumite empire. Some scholars have proposed that Djibouti formed part of the fabled Land of Punt, an Afro-Arabian trading region referenced in Egyptian records. By the ninth and tenth centuries, Arab geographers documented the region in more concrete terms, noting longstanding trade networks that connected the Horn to the Arabian Peninsula across the narrow waters of the Bab el-Mandeb.

In the early modern period, the Horn of Africa was shaped by the rise and fall of Muslim sultanates. The Arab geographer Ibn Fadl Allah al-'Omari listed several in the region, Ifat (Awfat), Dawaru, Arabani, Hadya, Sharha, Dara, and Bali, with Ifat emerging as the most powerful, at one point encompassing the territory of present-day Djibouti (Bezabeh 2023). By 1734, new political orders had emerged: the Sultanate of Tadjoura established dominance over central Djibouti, while the Sultanate of Rahaito governed the north. Meanwhile, Ottoman expansion along the Red Sea, from Egypt through Suakin to Massawa, extended intermittent imperial influence over littoral settlements, including the port of Zayla, for brief periods.

Djibouti as a modern state is a colonial fabrication. In an interview at the University of Djibouti's geography department, Professor Moustapha Nour Ayeh referred to the country as "une construction coloniale," a label rooted in the geopolitical contestations of the 19th century. Britain, France, and Italy scrambled for territory and strategic access points in the Horn, signing treaties with local sultanates and tribal leaders. France, keen to counter British dominance in Aden, entrenched itself first in Obock and then in Djibouti by negotiating with Issa and Gadaboursi chiefs (Saint V ran 1981). The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 escalated these rivalries, transforming the Red Sea into a global artery of trade and colonial ambition. By the early 20th century, Djibouti

had been officially claimed by France, while Britain and Italy divided neighboring territories, leaving Ethiopia as the only independent nation in the region.

French rule in Djibouti bore the hallmarks of a classic colonial regime. As Mahmood Mamdani has shown in other African contexts, colonial powers often established "decentralized despotisms" by manipulating local authority structures (Mamdani 2018). In Djibouti, the French institutionalized ethnic difference, dividing the territory between the Somali-speaking Issa in the south and the Afar in the north. These divisions were enforced through governance and infrastructure: colonial officials co-opted traditional chiefs, created segregated urban quarters, and installed differential access to employment, particularly in the port economy. Yemeni Arabs, viewed as more "civilized" by French administrators, were given preferential treatment, including monopolies over positions at Messageries Maritimes, France's premier maritime company. The port, therefore, not only underpinned colonial commerce but also became a site where ethnic politics and labor hierarchies were deeply entangled.

By 1945, the colonial regime had formalized the concept of the "Djiboutian subject" through the Conseil d'administration, which integrated representatives from Arab, Somali, and Afar communities. Djibouti's official name under French rule, Territoire Français des Afars et des Issas (TFAI), cemented the ethnic framing of the colonial state (Saint Véran 1981). Today, Djibouti's population remains primarily Somali (about 60%) and Afar (35%), with the remainder comprising Yemeni Arabs, French, Ethiopians, and Italians. The Issa, particularly the Memassan subclan tied to the current ruling elite, dominate the political and economic life of the capital. Schraeder's work notes this Issa hegemony, concentrated in southeastern Djibouti, while the Afar remain politically marginalized, despite their demographic and territorial presence in the north and west (Schraeder 1993).

Colonial tactics of divide-and-rule laid the foundation for the postcolonial state's ethnicized political order. When Djibouti achieved independence in 1977, its leaders were euphoric, imagining a supra-ethnic nation rooted in legal equality and modern institutions. In a speech before the transitional parliament, Abdallah Mohamed Kamil, an Afar technocrat and the first prime minister of independent Djibouti, articulated a vision of a republic free from tribalism: "This state will hold supra-ethnic power, transcending tribal authorities... a modern nation with modern institutions (Farah 1982)." But the structures of colonial rule proved more enduring than the rhetoric of national unity.

President Hassan Gouled Aptidon, an Issa politician aligned with Somalia, quickly consolidated power by manipulating ethnic rivalries. His regime marginalized Afar elites and centralized authority within the Rassemblement Populaire pour le Progrès (RPP), transforming the fledgling republic into a de facto one-party state. Ethnic tensions escalated, particularly as Djibouti became entangled in broader Horn politics. The Afar, with sympathies toward Ethiopia, found themselves squeezed in a triangulation of Somali nationalism, French patronage, and internal repression (Bezabeh 2023).

In 1991, the country descended into civil war. The collapse of the Barre regime in Somalia and the fall of Ethiopia's Derg flooded the region with weapons, and Afar fighters formed the Front pour la Restauration de l'Unité et de la Démocratie (FRUD). They seized significant territory in the north, prompting a brutal government crackdown, including the massacre of over 200 civilians in Arhiba. The state framed the war as a foreign plot, but international condemnation, particularly from France, forced Aptidon to implement multiparty reforms. These reforms, however, were superficial. Elections were stage-managed, opposition parties harassed, and the RPP retained control through patronage and coercion (Saint Véran 1981).

France's role during the civil war was ambivalent. Initially reluctant to intervene, Paris eventually deployed troops to stabilize the regime under the pretext of safeguarding regional security. With French support, Djibouti's military grew from 8,000 to 20,000 troops. The government recruited Issa fighters from across the Somali region and allegedly received backing from Eritrean and Eastern European actors. By 1994, FRUD had split into radical and moderate factions. The moderates entered government under a peace accord; the radicals continued resistance in the margins. Yet the democratic promise of the conflict never materialized. Instead, the political elite, figures like Ahmed Dini and Aden Robleh Awaleh, simply recycled colonial-era power structures under new nationalist guises (Bezabeh 2023).

By 1999, Aptidon resigned, citing health reasons. But his departure ushered in no real rupture. His nephew and long-time advisor, Ismaïl Omar Guelleh, assumed power and promised a “new breath of life.” Yet his ascent symbolized continuity, not transformation. Guelleh preserved the political architecture of his uncle's regime, centralizing authority around the presidency, co-opting opposition movements, and sustaining ethnic patronage networks. What emerged was what Levitsky and Way term “competitive authoritarianism”—a regime with the trappings of democracy but little of its substance.

Thus, Djibouti's postcolonial state has remained entangled in a colonial skeleton: ethnic fragmentation, foreign dependency, and elite entrenchment. The port, both as infrastructure and imaginary, continues to anchor these dynamics. It is a site where remnants of imperialism intersect with neoliberal aspirations, where the authority of the state is exercised through contracts, concessions, and exclusive claims to modernity. In this space, one finds not a break from empire, but its transformation.

3.2 The Port of Djibouti and the Politics of Space: Two Prices: Dollars and Favors on the Port

As I stood on the edge of the bustling Port of Djibouti, the rhythmic clatter of containers being loaded and unloaded echoed the complex interplay of power, ethnicity, and economic necessity that defines this city-port state. The railway tracks gleamed under the February sun, iron veins stretching from the Doraleh Terminal toward the Ethiopian highlands. From a distance, the port complex hummed, a mechanical heartbeat punctuated by container cranes dipping like metallic herons. “See those tracks?” as Mokhtar, our driver asked, stirring sweetened tea in a dented tin cup. “Everything that moves here carries two prices: one in dollars, another in political favors.” This statement encapsulates the intricate web of relationships and negotiations that underpin Djibouti's political economy, where the local elite navigate the currents of global trade with a keen awareness of their ethnic identities and the historical legacies that shape their governance. The port, a microcosm of Djibouti's broader socio-political landscape, reflects not only the economic transactions occurring at its docks but also the deeper currents of ethnic politics and statecraft that influence how power is brokered and maintained in this strategically vital region.

During the colonial time, the French did not merely view Djibouti as a strategic checkpoint on their Indian Ocean trade route. Rather, they imagined it as a gateway into central Africa—an extractive project that coupled maritime access with overland infrastructure. Central to this vision was the Chemin de Fer Franco-Éthiopien (CFE), a railway linking Djibouti to the Ethiopian hinterland. This was not simply a transportation project, but a monopolistic enterprise, financed and controlled through French state-backed capital (Killion 1992). Jatin Dua has extended this framing by arguing that port-making in Djibouti is simultaneously a project of state-making,

linking infrastructural ambition to the assertion of sovereignty. In this framing, the port becomes more than a node of commerce; it is a site where the state is assembled, projected, and contested (Dua 2018, 35–38). My project builds on Dua’s insight but asks a different question. Whereas Dua foregrounds how port-making and chokepoint-making participate in the production of Djiboutian state authority, I examine how port concessions redistribute that authority among the host state, foreign state-owned companies, international legal institutions, military powers, and other actors involved in governing circulation. The analytical problem is therefore not only how the port makes the state, but also how control over a port enables an external power to exercise state-like authority over infrastructure, customs, revenue, land, security, and regional corridors without formally annexing territory. In this comparative project, I show that this redistribution of authority is neither uniform nor inevitable. It depends on the particular configuration of state institutions, contractual arrangements, foreign influence, labor politics, and local resistance found at each port. This comparative focus allows me to conceptualize port imperialism as distinct from state-making, even as the two processes remain closely connected..

Yet the notion of sovereignty in Djibouti, as elsewhere, is far from stable. It is negotiated through informal power structures, particularly those rooted in the Issa-dominated elite. In this sense, Djibouti’s statehood mirrors James Scott’s description of the state as a kind of “fiction”, a constructed coherence that masks internal contradictions and uneven power. Sovereignty is not a settled fact, but a negotiated performance enacted through clan-based authority, elite mediation, and infrastructural visibility. Brenda Chalfin similarly observes that in Africa, ports are more than logistical zones; they are revealing sites of political contestation, shaped by shifting alignments of ruling groups and international capital (Chalfin 2010b).

When I visited Djibouti, the physical and symbolic divide between old and new port spaces was immediately evident. The old port, located in the city center, is aging, relatively accessible, and embedded in the everyday rhythms of downtown life. You can spot it easily while walking through the city or swimming near the luxurious Kempinski Palace Hotel, a luxury development that emerged alongside Emirati investment in the Doraleh Container Terminal, the new free trade zone, and Djibouti's oil terminal. The Kempinski stands as a monument to global capital, but also as a marker of a city reoriented toward external economies.



Figure 21 Kempinski Hotel- Taken by the author

In contrast, the Doraleh Container Terminal sits on the city's outskirts, encircled by fencing and state security. Gaining access proved difficult, requiring permits and navigating opaque layers of bureaucracy, especially after the fallout from Djibouti's high-profile dispute with Dubai Ports World. The securitization of trade has translated into a securitization of space. This new port zone is not simply a logistics hub; it is a highly regulated enclave where sovereignty is both projected and policed.

Within this context, the port is not governed merely by economic logic. The head of the Port Authority is often said to wield more influence than the finance minister, and key leadership positions—especially port manager—are typically reserved for members of the Issa Mamassan sub-clan, the president’s own kin. The departure of DP World from Djibouti was, in this light, as much about ethnic and political calculus as about contractual dispute. The port, then, is not only infrastructure; it is a site where global flows intersect with the intimate politics of clan power, patronage, and the performative contours of statehood.

When Ismaïl Omar Guelleh came to power in 1999, Djibouti’s ports were no longer just infrastructure, they became the spine of the regime. Port revenues, once peripheral, were now vital to sustaining the regime’s promises of employment and modernity, and more importantly, to maintaining the patronage system that undergirded Guelleh’s authority. The port, in this sense, was not only a gateway to the sea but a lifeline to political stability (Styan 2020).



Figure 22 PDD Gate- Taken by the author

Economic growth followed. In 2019, Djibouti reached an impressive 5.5% annual GDP growth, maintained because of the growth in logistics, banking, telecoms, and, crucially, its entanglement

with Ethiopia's economic boom (World Bank Open Data 2025). Yet this story of growth is inseparable from regional tragedy. The Ethiopia-Eritrea war transformed Djibouti's geopolitical fortunes. Cut off from the Eritrean port of Assab, Ethiopia rerouted nearly all maritime activity through Djibouti. Cargo surged. Port traffic nearly doubled within a year. Trucks spilled into the fishing harbor. Oil imports spiked by a million tons. Even food aid, driven by famine in Ethiopia, funneled through Djibouti, turning humanitarian logistics into a national windfall.

Ports, in this context, are not just nodes of exchange but crucibles of crisis and opportunity. Their transformation reveals the blurry line between misfortune and economic strategy. The war and the recurrent famines in Ethiopia not only reoriented regional trade routes but also demanded an expansion of Djibouti's port infrastructure. The Port Autonome International de Djibouti (PAID), overwhelmed by traffic, was forced to modernize to remain competitive amid the growing presence of regional rivals such as Aden and Salalah.

The state's infrastructural leap forward was enabled by strategic alliances with Gulf capital. After offering the port development project to the French and the failure to get their investment, Djibouti turned east towards the Gulf states (Prof. Moustapha Nour, "Author Interview," February 2023). At the center of this transformation was Abdourahman Boreh, a well-connected businessman from the Issa/Mamassan clan. Acting as broker, he opened the door for Dubai Ports Authority (DPA)-soon to become DP World-to sign a 20-year management contract in 2000. What followed was a wave of Emirati investments: the modernization of the port, a free trade zone, a partnership with Emirates National Oil Company (ENOC) to build an oil terminal, and even the takeover of Djibouti's international airport.

Djibouti's transformation was not merely infrastructural but existential. The state became a facilitator, a seemingly frictionless zone where capital moved unimpeded, its elites the gatekeepers of its flow. To disrupt them was to choke the lifelines of trade, an unthinkable proposition for the foreign powers and firms now enmeshed in its circuits. The Dubai-funded Djibouti Free Zone (DFZ) crystallized this logic: tax-free enclaves, unfettered repatriation of profits, and warehouses leased to Emirati, Ethiopian, and Djiboutian capital. By 2004, 58% of its storage space was already occupied, while ENOC's oil depot secured contracts with the U.S. Navy, reserving tanks before construction even finished. The port's capacity swelled by 36%, handling millions of tons of cargo, binding Ethiopia, the UAE, and Western militaries ever tighter to Djibouti's stability (Barton 2023).

This was sovereignty reimagined, not as territorial autonomy but as a chokepoint, a necessary passage where capital demanded both infrastructure and guarantors. The state, in turn, became a vessel for its regulation, its elites less rulers than custodians of global accumulation. The rents extracted, direct and diffuse, did not fortify institutions but flowed upward, consolidating power among those who controlled the valves. Critics might insist on the primacy of institutions, yet Djibouti's reality was one of personalized rule, where logistics corridors and security apparatuses sustained authority more reliably than any bureaucracy.

By 2007, the cracks in Djibouti's carefully managed order began to show. Guelleh, who had once promised to step down, was now maneuvering for a third term, and his longtime ally, Abdourahman Boreh, the businessman once seen as his heir, found himself on the wrong side of power. What began as a dispute over an unpaid invoice—Boreh's construction firm versus the First Lady, soon spiraled into something far darker. In Djibouti, loyalty was currency, and Boreh had suddenly defaulted.

The state's retaliation was methodical. First, the money: Boreh's companies were hit with sudden, staggering tax bills—\$10 million demanded from his cement firm, which had barely invested beyond a single mixer (Bezabeh 2023). Then, the seizures: his construction equipment at the Doraleh terminal was confiscated by armed police, his marble stockpile hauled away by the Republican Guard. By late 2008, he had been stripped of his position as head of the Port Authority and replaced by a loyalist. The message was clear; Boreh was no longer a partner, but a target.

But the real cost was human. In February 2009, his younger brother was arrested after a land dispute with a Moroccan diplomat. Days later, his 23-year-old nephew was found dead in his room. Officially, it was suicide. But whispers spread, some in the family claimed he had been threatened by security forces, told they would "finish off the Boreh family." Then came the arrests: his cousin, accused of a grenade attack, died in custody under murky circumstances (Bezabeh 2023).

The net widened. Bank managers who had handled Boreh's accounts were interrogated; one was demoted to a meaningless bureaucratic post. Employees at the port, deemed too close to him, were purged, especially if they were Afar, a reminder of the regime's old fears of Issa-Afar alliances. Even foreign firms were strong-armed. When a Brazilian contractor refused to hand over Boreh's equipment without paperwork, the gendarmerie took it anyway. By mid-2009, the state had revoked licenses, shuttered his projects, and even televised the seizure of his cigarette imports, framing him as a smuggler (Bezabeh 2023).

The most damning accusation came in London, where Djibouti's lawyers presented a phone call intercept allegedly proving Boreh ordered the 2009 grenade attack. The court froze \$111 million of his wealth until a fatal flaw emerged. The call hadn't happened after the attack, as claimed, but before. There was no "job accomplished", just scrap metal, Boreh insisted, meaning opposition

pamphlets, not explosives. The case collapsed. The judge excoriated Djibouti's government for "cynical and untruthful behavior." By 2016, Boreh was fully vindicated, and the regime was ordered to pay millions in legal fees (Barton 2023).

Yet the real revelation came from an unexpected witness, Dileita Mohamed Dileita, Djibouti's former prime minister. Under oath, he admitted that Boreh's downfall began the moment he expressed presidential ambitions. But this was never just about ambition (Bezabeh 2023). At its core, it was about ethnic monopoly. Guelleh's power depended on a fragile balance: the Issa Mamassan clan's control over Djibouti's ports and politics, a colonial-era hierarchy that persisted after independence. Boreh, an Issa Ogagodan, wasn't just a rival; he posed a serious threat to that monopoly. His wealth and connections had the potential to shift loyalties, disrupting the established system that kept Guelleh in a position of power. The lawsuits, the frozen assets, the Interpol alerts, none of these actions were about justice. They were aimed at preserving a regime built on ethnic control.

In the end, Boreh won in court but remained in exile. Djibouti's regime lost legally but succeeded politically, Boreh's influence was neutered, his fortune tied up in years of litigation. The lesson was clear: in a state where power is monopolized along ethnic lines, even the wealthiest insurgent can be ground down. But the backlash also exposed the regime's limits. Its reach was global, but so were its vulnerabilities. For the first time, its tactics had been turned against it—not with bullets, but with briefs.

The battle left scars. Djibouti's reputation in international arbitration suffered; its legal defeats became cautionary tales. Yet for Boreh, victory was bittersweet. He had beaten the system, but the system remained. And in Djibouti, that system still held the keys (Bezabeh 2023).

When I visited Djibouti in the winter of 2023, no one mentioned Boreh's case. His name had faded from public discourse, and his legal battles were reduced to a footnote in the regime's narrative. Instead, officials and businessmen spoke of Djibouti's future, its need to expand port capacity, and to attract more investment. But beneath the optimism, there was tension. As Prof. Nour explained, DP World, once a key partner, was now seen as a reluctant player, unwilling to commit further while legal disputes festered. However, he further added that "when foreigners managed the port, there was no tribal problem; when the Djiboutians managed the port, tribal problems resurfaced." More than one interlocutor hinted at dissatisfaction with the original concession terms, arguing that DP World's agreement had weakened Djibouti's sovereignty, leaving too much control in foreign hands. The irony was palpable. The same state that had ruthlessly dismantled Boreh for threatening Guelleh's ethnic monopoly now chafed under the constraints of its own deals with global capital. The complexities of Djibouti's political landscape thus reveal a precarious balance, where local agency and ethnic politics intertwine with the demands of global capital, shaping the future of its port and the nation itself.



Figure 23 Chinese Company Replacing DP World- Taken by the Author

3.2.1 Djibouti's Rent-Seeking and Trade-Lord Politics

It was my second night at Jano House Apartments, a mid-range guesthouse on the outskirts of Djibouti City, tucked between a crumbling ministry annex and a freshly painted mobile money kiosk. At just past 2:00 a.m., I was jarred awake by the low, violent tremble of an aircraft overhead—a mechanical roar so forceful it rattled the metal window frames and shook the walls. Disoriented, I stumbled downstairs to the reception, where a young man in a collared t-shirt and sandals was hunched over his phone behind the counter. To my relief, he was awake.

“Fighter jet,” he said casually, without looking up. “From Camp Lemonier. American.” Then, with a slight grin, “Happens all the time.”

Camp Lemonier—the sprawling American base just a few kilometers away—is the largest U.S. military installation on the African continent. From that dusty patch of tarmac, drones and fighter jets launch missions into Yemen, Somalia, and beyond, making Djibouti not just a place on the map, but a staging ground in an expansive geography of counterterrorism. That jet wasn't merely flying; it was traversing the seams of multiple sovereignties—American, Djiboutian, Yemeni, perhaps even Emirati.

Moments like these—where the everyday intersects with the global—lay bare the mechanics of what scholars of African politics have long called the gatekeeper state. Originally coined to describe the postcolonial African condition, the gatekeeper model captures states that do not primarily derive power from deep penetration into rural economies or welfare provision, but from their control over external access to ports, borders, aid, military infrastructure, and investment contracts. They are not so much stewards of society as they are brokers of thresholds.

Djibouti is exemplary in this regard. Positioned at the mouth of the Red Sea, just across from Yemen, it straddles the maritime arteries of global commerce. But its real asset is not just location—it's the state's ability to monetize that location by hosting foreign military bases and port concessions, turning geography into rent. The country earns an outsized share of its revenue from leasing land and access to the United States, France, China, Japan, and others, each paying not just for military footprint, but for predictable access under conditions of political quiet.

As one IGAD official told me over tea in the Authority's cafeteria, "Everyone wants a piece of Djibouti. But not everyone gets to dock. You need the right deal, and the right politics." His tone was measured, but the message was clear: access is selectively managed, not open. This curation has led to tensions, most notably with DP World, the Emirati logistics giant whose 30-year contract to operate the Doraleh Container Terminal was abruptly terminated by the Djiboutian government in 2018. The dispute escalated into international arbitration, with London-based courts ruling against Djibouti and awarding hundreds of millions in damages to DP World. However, the government refused to comply, framing the decision not as a legal matter but as a defense of sovereign control. Allowing a foreign entity to manage the nation's primary logistics gateway was seen as compromising the very foundation of its gatekeeper status.

Frederick Cooper's (2019) work offers insight into how states maintain internal control through the mechanism of gatekeeping. While he does not explicitly link this internal control to the external advantages derived from geopolitical significance, his analysis opens a space for such a connection to be made. One could argue that effective gatekeeping enhances a state's value in international military and economic negotiations, thereby tying internal governance to broader geopolitical dynamics and the monetization of strategic position. However, this monetization is a double-edged sword. In the case of Djibouti, economic stability depends precariously on the continuation of such

external rents. Each foreign military base, concession, and bilateral agreement adds to a delicate web of dependence. With too much external influence, the gatekeeper risks becoming merely a doorman; with too little, the flow of rent may vanish entirely.

I was reminded of this delicate balance during a simple grocery run to a store called Casino, not far from the city center. Stepping inside felt like entering a different country entirely. Everything gleamed under white LED lights, polished floors reflected neatly stacked shelves, and a smell of freshly baked French baguette lingered near the entrance. For a moment, I could have been in Marseille. Later, I learned that this was the preferred market for American and European personnel stationed at the surrounding military bases. The layout, the imports, even the signage were calibrated to meet the expectations of foreign tenants. This, too, was part of the architecture of gatekeeping: a sovereign territory that hosts not only foreign militaries but also microcosms of their consumer comfort. The base was not just in Djibouti, it remade parts of Djibouti in its own (Euro-American) image.

Inside the coffee shops near Place Lagarde, where port workers sip spiced tea under flickering fluorescent lights, the politics of these arrangements are well understood. “The Americans bring money, but also noise,” one young man joked, motioning toward the sky. “The Chinese bring roads. The French- well, they bring memories.” There was laughter, but also a sense of quiet calculation. Djibouti’s sovereignty, as practiced, is a form of brokered coexistence, a carefully managed plurality of foreign interests that are allowed to operate but not dominate.

The jet that woke me that night was not just the noise of a war machine; it was a signal. A signal of presence, of alliance, of embedded interests flying over "low-sovereign" air space! Ironically, it was in allowing some many outsiders into Djibouti, that it has made this seeming "surrender" of

sovereignty to be a very strategy for sometimes exercising a kind of leverage that can enhance sovereignty. In that moment, the airbase, the port, the legal battle with DP World, and the tired smile of the night receptionist all collapsed into a single reality: this is what sovereignty looks like when it is leased, litigated, and leveraged.

Trade-Lord Politics:

Beyond the standard critiques of rent-seeking that often dominate political economy assessments of the Horn of Africa, the rule of Djibouti's president, Ismaïl Omar Guelleh, demands a more complex conceptual vocabulary, one attuned to the ways sovereignty is enacted not just through state institutions but through the choreography of global flows. What emerges in Djibouti is not a neoliberal developmental regime nor a classic authoritarian rentier state, but something more hybrid and situational: a form of governance that might be best described as trade-lord politics.

The term draws genealogical inspiration from Charles Taylor's warlord governance in Liberia, where sovereignty was less an institutional condition than a mode of controlling the circulation of timber, diamonds, goods, and bodies (Reno 1998). Taylor's regime mapped power onto resource corridors and checkpoints, converting mobility itself into a site of extraction and domination. But while Taylor operated in the forested margins of a post-conflict state, Guelleh governs from the nodes of global maritime capitalism. His checkpoints are not jungle paths but container terminals, his war chest not fueled by plunder but by concession fees, military rents, and sovereign deals brokered in the language of logistics.

At the core of Guelleh's political longevity is his regime's monopolization of infrastructure and access. Djibouti's geography, strategically poised on the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and bordering Ethiopia, renders it indispensable to the global movement of goods and the geopolitics of

counterterrorism. But geography alone is not destiny. Guelleh has translated spatial advantage into political leverage by tightly controlling who gets access to ports, railways, and airspace, and under what terms. The 2018 expulsion of Dubai-based DP World from the Doraleh Container Terminal was not merely a contractual dispute. It was a sovereign assertion that foreign capital must conform to the regime's logic of political survival. The message was clear: commercial rights do not supersede executive authority.

In the salons of Djibouti's elite and the quiet corridors of international diplomacy, the Guelleh regime mastered the art of deterrence not through force, but by leveraging geography into an asset marketable to competing military patrons. Port deals, such as those once offered to DP World, were not evaluated on profit margins alone. They were measured against a larger calculus: Which actors would safeguard regime continuity, and which might, intentionally or unintentionally, introduce threats to sovereign control?

This calculus came to maturity in the post-9/11 landscape. In September 2002, Guelleh's visit to Paris was publicly framed as a reaffirmation of Franco-Djiboutian fraternity. But behind closed doors, the talks revolved around military rent. France, balancing colonial nostalgia with strategic realism, nearly doubled its lease payments, jumping from €18 million to €30 million annually, with an additional €25 million in development aid (Bezabeh 2023). These weren't just transactions—they were preemptive bids for position in a rapidly militarizing geopolitical theatre.

Then came the Americans. The War on Terror's global repositioning turned Djibouti from a backwater to a chokepoint. Camp Lemonnier, a dusty remnant of French colonial military infrastructure, was quietly transferred to U.S. control. By the end of 2002, over 2,000 U.S. military and intelligence personnel operated from its perimeter. Drones launched from its tarmac patrolled

Yemen and Somalia; kill missions were coordinated from within its concrete bunkers. Meanwhile, the French, now relegated to shared quarters, watched as their former colony morphed into a node of American power projection.

Yet they stayed. So did the Japanese. Then the Chinese arrived, establishing their first overseas military base just miles away. The reason was not just Djibouti's location—it was the regime's remarkable ability to offer access without interference, to guarantee operational freedom while carefully managing the risks of internal political spillover. Each new base brought not just revenue, but insurance. Multilateral militarization created stalemate, and in the space of that stalemate, the regime thrived.

This is the deeper logic of trade-lord politics: not just extracting rents, but cultivating dependency, turning global actors into stakeholders in regime survival. Military presence became both deterrent and dividend. No single actor could dominate; each was bound by the presence of the others. Foreign military bases were no longer merely strategic assets—they were political insurance policies. Each bilateral agreement was a brick in the wall of impunity.

By 2003, the United States had formalized its position, offering \$30 million annually in rent and \$8 million in civilian aid. In Washington, Guelleh projected democratic legitimacy, despite fierce opposition at home and credible accusations of electoral manipulation. U.S. State Department human rights reports were politely ignored. Security imperatives took precedence over political accountability (Bezabeh 2023).

Back in Djibouti City, this foreign policy of entanglement had become local common sense. In the coffee houses near the Port Authority and in the dusty waiting rooms of ministry offices, bureaucrats and businessmen alike recognized the regime's strategy: survive by being

indispensable. The expulsion of DP World, challenged in international courts, was framed by the regime not as a legal dispute but as a test of sovereignty. Arbitration penalties were a price worth paying to uphold the principle that no external actor could override the executive. In a country where the executive is the state, this was non-negotiable.

Sovereignty, under Guelleh, is not inherited—it is performed through the management of flows: cargo, capital, and conflict. Foreign investment is welcomed only when it serves the consolidation of domestic power; when it threatens to introduce competing forms of authority, it is neutralized. The state operates not as a facilitator of neutral economic growth, but as a platform—one that selectively grants docking rights to global powers, playing them off one another in a calibrated game of geopolitical brokerage.

In this configuration, military and economic infrastructures are not distinct sectors—they are co-constitutive arms of a sovereign system engineered to survive in a postcolonial, post-9/11 order. Guelleh does not merely rule a country; he manages a *strategic bottleneck*, and in doing so, rewrites the script of small-state agency in a world of big-power rivalries (Radoman 2018).

3.2.2 Chokepoint Leverage: Geopolitical Survival on the Edge of the Horn

It was early morning when I arrived at the outskirts of the Doraleh Terminal, the rising sun casting long shadows over a landscape of freshly paved asphalt and gleaming steel. The highway, surprisingly pristine and wide, curved out of the port area like a polished futuristic highway artery. This was RN1 (Shown in Figure 5), Djibouti's most vital land link, stretching westward across the desert into the highlands of Ethiopia. I had seen other roads in and around Djibouti City, many worn and fractured by time and traffic. But RN1 stood apart, new and unblemished, a clear

testament to the country's infrastructural priorities. A kind of ceremonial corridor, it marked the economic lifeline between Djibouti and Addis Ababa.



Figure 24 Highway RN1-taken by the author

Port officials and long-haul drivers I spoke with later that day referred to the road in tones usually reserved for something sacred. It was, one of them said, “the country’s spine.” Alongside it ran the parallel tracks of the Addis Ababa–Djibouti railway, once built by the French in the early 20th century to stitch the colony to the hinterland, now revitalized with Chinese capital and engineering. Watching a train rumble eastward, containers stacked high and dust trailing behind like a veil, I was struck by the sheer volume of goods moving in both directions. This was not simply infrastructure; it was sovereignty, laid in concrete and steel.

Djibouti’s deterrence against DP World’s retaliatory threats following their expulsion from the Doraleh terminal contract was not merely legal or rhetorical. It was geographic and infrastructural. Djibouti had embedded itself so deeply into the regional logistics matrix that any punitive measures would be self-defeating for others, particularly Ethiopia, whose maritime access had

narrowed to a single conduit. That conduit was Djibouti. It had become not just a port, but a geopolitical chokepoint.

This transformation was catalyzed by regional rupture. When the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea closed off the port of Assab in the late 1990s, Addis Ababa's trade routes reoriented, suddenly and entirely, toward Djibouti (Bereketeab 2016). Within months, traffic through the port doubled. Cargo overflowed onto secondary roads. Fishing vessels were squeezed out of their own harbor by UN-chartered relief ships and oil tankers. Even famine relief, once dispersed through multiple entry points, was funneled through Djibouti, turning the humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia into a logistics boom for its neighbor.

A professor at the University of Djibouti, Nour, explained it to me plainly: “Without Ethiopian trade, there is no port. And without the port, there is no Djibouti.” He leaned back in his chair, letting the phrase settle in the space between us. What he was articulating was more than economic interdependence; it was existential. Djibouti's *raison d'être*—its fundamental reason for being—is entangled in Ethiopia's need for the sea. Statehood here is docked at the terminal.



Figure 25 Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, Djibouti Limited- Taken by the author

This strategic centrality also took physical shape in Doraleh's oil terminal, some 18 kilometers from the capital. Built in the early 2000s with investment from the Emirates National Oil Company (ENOC), the facility was intended to be a critical node in global energy flows, managed via ENOC's Horizon subsidiary. The scale was ambitious: a 2,000-meter-long container quay, an oil depot, and a burgeoning free trade zone, all coming online within months (Bezabeh 2023). While DP World's name was initially attached to this grand project, Djibouti's later assertiveness in severing ties did not stem from recklessness, it stemmed from leverage.

Today, Doraleh does more than pump oil or offload cargo. It supports a global military ensemble. The nearby terminals service U.S., French, Chinese, and Japanese naval operations, each with its own designated docking zones and logistical requirements. Security and commerce here are indivisible. Fuel lines that feed warships also grease diplomatic gears. Djibouti's sovereignty, therefore, is not just protected by its geography, it is performed through it.

But retaliation, too, took geographic form. Following the fallout with Djibouti, DP World shifted its ambitions up the Red Sea coast to the contested shores of Berbera in Somaliland—a breakaway republic unrecognized by any state but increasingly treated as sovereign by corporate actors. There, DP World signed a long-term concession to redevelop and expand the Berbera Port (Barton 2023). On the surface, this was framed as an economic opportunity. But on the ground, and in conversation with local analysts and Djiboutian officials, the move was widely read as an act of geopolitical signaling. By injecting capital into Berbera and upgrading its facilities, DP World was effectively opening a back door to Ethiopia, threatening to fracture Djibouti's near-total control over Ethiopian trade. In Berbera, cranes rose not only against the horizon, but against Djibouti's monopoly.

The port, half-complete and shrouded in dust, thus stood as a monument to fractured sovereignties, and Djibouti's geopolitical maneuvering exemplifies how local agency can redefine power dynamics in the Horn of Africa, particularly through its strategic port developments and military partnerships (Cannon and Rossiter 2017). This unique positioning allows Djibouti to maintain a delicate balance between external influences and internal governance challenges, shaping its role in regional politics and trade. of retaliation.

The failure of UAE attempts to reassert control over the terminal underscores this reality. DP World, for all its global clout, collided with a sovereignty rooted not only in international law but in a networked terrain of roads, rails, bases, and dependencies. Djibouti had turned its vulnerability, its small size, its lack of resources into strategic density. The state had choreographed its own indispensability.

Seen from this vantage, the Doraleh Port is more than infrastructure. It is a stage where global powers rehearse their presence, where national survival is calibrated daily against the ticking clock of geopolitics. Here, sovereignty is less a fixed principle than a moving target, hauled by trucks, tracked by satellites, and always rerouted through the geography of necessity.

3.3 Conclusion: Sovereignty at the Edge of the Dock

What unfolded in Djibouti is a story of global capital clashing with a small state's sovereignty, but it is also a strategy. This is a strategy that must be rehearsed daily at the port gates, in the corridors of customs, and across diplomatic tables. Sovereignty here does not come draped in flags or announced by treaties. Sovereignty is also enacted through control over logistics, through the ability to pause a truck, reroute a ship, or withhold access to a warehouse. In this strategy,

Djibouti's ruling elite, deeply enmeshed in ethnic hierarchies and patronage webs, to play the role of both conductor and gatekeeper.

This chapter has traced how Djibouti, despite its size and the fragility of its institutions, was able to fend off a powerful player in the global port empire: DP World. The term *port imperialism*, as used here, describes more than just foreign investment in infrastructure; it refers to a broader strategy of influence in which ports become both the medium and the message of political control. Gulf states, notably the UAE, have sought to govern regions not through conquest but through cranes, terminals, and container flows. Yet, as Anna Tsing reminds us, even the most seemingly frictionless global projects snag on the rough ground of local life. In Djibouti, friction is not just an obstacle to be smoothed out; it is a source of leverage.

The state's annulment of the DP World concession revealed the fragile and contingent nature of imperial aspiration when confronted by regimes that, though weak in formal terms, remain deeply skilled at negotiating power. Here, sovereignty is not a fixed architecture; it is a living performance, improvised through shifting coalitions and infrastructural choke points. Djibouti's leaders wielded military basing rights, the country's oil terminal, and its monopolistic control over Ethiopian trade not just as resources, but as bargaining chips in a high-stakes game of economic self-preservation.

These politics are best understood not through the clean lines of institutional analysis but through the textures of what I have called *trade-lord governance*, a mode in which access to logistics is tightly controlled by a ruling elite who use the language of development and the tools of patronage to consolidate rule. In this sense, Djibouti resembles Frederick Cooper's gatekeeper state, but with a distinctly post-Cold War taste. Rents are no longer only from foreign aid but also from logistics

companies' contracts and military camp leases. Control over the flow of goods, fuel, aid, and people is what constitutes authority.

That DP World turned its attention to Berbera Port in Somaliland after its fallout with Djibouti speaks volumes. By choosing a territory unrecognized by the international system, the UAE engaged in a form of retaliatory logistics, seeking to bypass Djibouti's strategic hold over Ethiopian trade. Yet even this maneuver exposes the fragility of port imperialism. Infrastructure may be global, but it is always locally embedded. Terminals don't move. They have to be built in place. They are built on contested land, beside lived communities, beneath layers of colonial structures and clan politics. And in that embeddedness, there is always room for resistance.

Djibouti's story offers more than a case study; it offers a method for understanding how power operates at the intersection of global investment and state fragility. It is almost a kind of geopolitical jiu-jitsu when the strength of global forces can be redirected even by a seemingly weak actor. Djibouti's case teaches us that sovereignty, particularly in strategic peripheries, is not lost or won in sweeping declarations, but slowly accumulated in the mundane routines of permitting, pausing, rerouting, and refusing. In a world increasingly reliant on uninterrupted flow, Djibouti reminds us that all flows can be interrupted, and that even the smallest state can draw a line at the dock's edge.

Chapter 4: Aqaba: The Paradox of Globalist Development and Local Sovereignty

On my first day in Aqaba, I left my hotel and walked down toward the city's main street. Restaurants and small shops lined the road, giving the area the appearance of an open market. As I walked, a man wearing a thobe and a traditional ghutra stopped me. "I am a proud Jordanian," he said. "This land is my ancestors' land. I am a Huwaitat, the tribe from the Lawrence of Arabia movie."

4.1 Introduction:

The above encounter occurred only a few hours after I stepped off a bus following the three-hour journey from Amman. Aqaba immediately appeared both Levantine and maritime. Its architecture, food stalls, and conversations carried the familiar character of al-Sham, while the breeze from the sea marked the city as a gateway to wider maritime networks. I checked into a modest hotel near the main beach run by a Yemeni man, whose presence offered another indication of Aqaba's connections across the Red Sea and the Arabian Peninsula. After leaving my belongings in the room, I returned to the street and walked toward the market and restaurant district, where the Huwaytati man stopped me.

The coexistence of ancestral claims, regional migration, and maritime connection reflects Aqaba's longer history as a port city. Historically known as Ayla, the city has been shaped by Byzantine and Islamic rule, Jewish histories, Ottoman administration, and British imperial intervention. Its location at the northern edge of the Red Sea connected the Levant with the Arabian Peninsula, eastern Africa, and maritime routes extending farther into the Indian Ocean. These connections repeatedly attracted strategic and commercial interests from beyond the city. Today, the United Arab Emirates has entered this historically layered space through a different set of instruments, including port agreements, tourism projects, trade infrastructure, and real estate investment.

This chapter explores how the UAE's investments in Aqaba (ranging from tourism and trade infrastructure to real estate development) represent a modern iteration of imperial influence. The success of these ventures is attributed to the high degree of control exerted by Jordan's national government over the port city and its ability to manage local tribal institutions. Thus, Aqaba's development is not merely a commercial endeavor but one deeply intertwined with state authority and regional power dynamics.

This chapter also posits that the combination of robust centralized control and the presence of traditional tribal structures has created an environment conducive to the UAE's investment strategies and regional ambitions. The resulting transformation of Aqaba reflects a new phase in its long history of imperial influences, now manifesting through economic means rather than direct political control. As Aqaba evolves under this new paradigm, it raises crucial questions about the nature of modern imperialism, the role of economic power in shaping geopolitical landscapes, and the future of traditional port cities in an increasingly globalized world.

Aqaba represents a unique success story for the United Arab Emirates' port expansion strategy in the region, contrasting sharply with their experiences in Portsudan and Djibouti. Unlike these other locations, where the UAE faced significant setbacks, Aqaba has proven to be a more receptive environment for Emirati investments and influence. In Portsudan, political instability and shifting alliances led to the cancellation of a significant port deal with the UAE in 2019 and 2023, while in Djibouti, legal disputes resulted in the termination of DP World's contract to operate the Doraleh Container Terminal in 2018. Aqaba, however, has allowed the UAE to establish a strong foothold, mainly due to the Jordanian government's centralized control over the city and its ability to navigate local tribal structures effectively.

As I stepped off the bus after a three-hour journey from Amman, the essence of Aqaba immediately enveloped me, revealing its dual nature in a striking and subtle way. On one hand, the city carried the echoes of Al-Sham—its deep-rooted Levantine character apparent in the architecture, food stalls, and the warm chatter of locals. On the other hand, it possessed the breezy charm of the Red Sea, a palpable reminder of Aqaba's role as a gateway to wider maritime networks. This blend of influences filled the air with unique sounds and scents that seemed to blur the boundaries between land and sea. My lodging, a modest hotel just steps from the main beach, was run by a friendly Yemeni man. His presence hinted at Aqaba's far-reaching connections across the Red Sea and the Arabian Peninsula. Eager to immerse myself in the city's life, I wasted no time before stepping out into the sun-soaked streets.

During one of my first walks through central Aqaba in August 2023, near the main beach and market area, I met Sheikh Ahmed, a Huwaitat tribal figure. The encounter was informal rather than a scheduled interview, but it became important because of how quickly he connected Aqaba's present to its imperial memory. He stood out from the modern cityscape in his flowing white jalabya and neatly wrapped shumakh. He greeted me warmly and, to my surprise, made a reference to "Lawrence of Arabia." I told him that I never watched that movie, but I will watch it today. He was surprised because most of the tourists that visit Aqaba usually know of Aqaba from the movie. I think this is Aqaba's unique character in the current Red Sea moment of port imperialism. It was a moment of tourism terminal, not the container terminal. My conversation with Sheik Ahmed struck me as an unusual intersection between Hollywood's orientalism and the lived experiences of a man whose lineage traced back through the history of this land. Yet, it was precisely this juxtaposition that encapsulated Aqaba's unique position as a city where local identity and global

narratives continually intersect. The more I observed, the more it became clear that Aqaba is not just a port city but a crossroads of empires, cultures, and modern geopolitical forces.

This realization deepened as I delved into the historical layers of the city. Aqaba's story is one of successive empires—Byzantine, Jewish, Muslim, and British—all of which left their imprint on its character. However, what sets Aqaba apart from other Red Sea ports, such as Port Sudan or Djibouti, is its accommodation of the United Arab Emirates' regional expansion strategy. The UAE's significant investments in Aqaba's tourism infrastructure, trade facilities, and real estate developments have transformed its horizon and economic prospects, turning it into a rising star in the region. The key question, then, is why the UAE has succeeded here while its ventures in other regions have faced difficulties.

As my fieldwork suggested, the answer lies in the complex interplay between centralized governmental control and traditional tribal structures. The Jordanian government's strong oversight of Aqaba, coupled with its ability to navigate local tribal dynamics, has created an environment conducive to foreign investment. This unique combination of factors has made the city a nexus of global interactions, where international tourism, regional trade relationships, and geopolitical considerations converge. Aqaba's proximity to Israel and Saudi Arabia further amplifies its strategic importance, creating a landscape of intersecting frictions that transcend local boundaries and stretch across the region.

This interplay reminded me of Anna Tsing's concepts of "awkward engagements" and "cultural friction." As she explains, friction consists of the "awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" that continually coproduce culture (Tsing 2005, 4). This formulation moves beyond treating tradition and modernity as separate or opposing forces.

In Aqaba, their lack of fit has been generative, producing new livelihoods, relationships, and forms of economic life. Members of Huwaytat communities who assert ancestral claims to the land also work in the tourism industry, the new Ayla development, and the real estate projects initiated by Emirati investors. Other workers pass through security checkpoints and cross the border to reach jobs in the Israeli city of Eilat. The tribal sheikh invoking *Lawrence of Arabia*, the Yemeni hotelier managing a Jordanian establishment, the Huwaytati tourism worker, and the laborer crossing into Eilat are therefore not representatives of separate traditional and modern worlds. They participate in producing the same evolving port economy. This friction remains unequal because access to land, employment, and mobility is structured by corporate investment, state authority, and border security. Yet it is also creative because these encounters generate the social and economic arrangements through which contemporary Aqaba operates..

The UAE's involvement in Aqaba is not just limited to superficial changes in the city's appearance; it represents a more profound reshaping of the region's geopolitical and economic landscape. The recent \$2.3 billion agreement between the UAE and Jordan to develop railways, linking the Port of Aqaba with mining areas in southern Jordan, is just one example of how these investments influence the city's future. This railway, part of a larger \$5.5 billion investment package, will enhance Jordan's export capabilities and position Aqaba as a central hub in the Red Sea. Such projects, while beneficial to Jordan's economy, also raise critical questions about the nature of power and control in the region. How do economic investments shape geopolitical landscapes? And what are the long-term implications for local communities amid rapid globalization and economic imperialism?

4.2 Arriving in Aqaba:

Arriving in Aqaba was a long-held aspiration, deeply connected to both my intellectual curiosity and my research interests in the Red Sea region. My fieldwork in Aqaba took place in August 2023, after I arrived in Jordan from Riyadh on July 31. During this period, I traveled overland from Amman to Aqaba, stayed near the city's main beach, visited the old city, Ayla, Marsa Zayed, the Sheikh Zayed Mosque, and the port area, and conducted formal and informal conversations with port officials, transport-sector employees, hotel staff, taxi drivers, local residents, and members of tribal communities. The observations in this chapter draw on those site visits and conversations unless otherwise noted.

Although I had visited Jordan as a child, I never ventured as far south as Aqaba. The thought of standing on the shores of the Red Sea while also being linked to the heart of the Levant intrigued me for years. More than just a personal goal, Aqaba was also the final piece in my comparative study of Red Sea ports—a region rich in history, commerce, and geopolitical significance. With Djibouti and Port Sudan already part of my fieldwork, Aqaba represented a unique opportunity to study the intersection of state governance and regional trade dynamics. However, the outbreak of war in Sudan on April 15, 2024, upended all my plans. Forced to seek refuge in Saudi Arabia with my family, I had to put my Aqaba fieldwork on hold, as visa restrictions for Sudanese nationals made access to Jordan nearly impossible. In an upcoming chapter, I will delve into how the war in Sudan is tied to these broader geopolitical dynamics, as different local contexts in the region have led to varied outcomes.

Despite the challenges, I remained hopeful about visiting Aqaba. After securing my family's resettlement in Egypt, I revisited the idea of traveling to Jordan. Eventually, I flew from Riyadh to

Amman on July 31, 2023. My arrival at Amman's passport control was tense; the Jordanian authorities, cautious about accepting nationals from war-torn countries, hesitated to approve my entry. Fortunately, my U.S. permanent residency allowed me to continue my journey. With its busy markets and cooler climate, Amman provided a temporary reprieve before I embarked on the final leg of my trip—an overland journey to Aqaba.

The three-hour bus ride southward from Amman to Aqaba felt like a transition between two worlds. As we passed through small villages and the rugged Jordanian desert, I felt both excitement and a sense of anticipation building. Upon entering Aqaba, the city unveiled itself like a pearl hidden amidst towering rocky mountains. Aqaba's coastal architecture, a blend of history and modernity, resembled other Red Sea port cities I had visited but with its own unique charm. The proximity of the sea was undeniable; it shaped the city's very identity. Every road seemed to lead to the water, and the Gulf of Aqaba was not merely a scenic backdrop but the lifeblood of the community. The port city's strategic location and long history were immediately visible—not just in its built environment but in the interactions of its people, from the Yemeni hotelier who greeted me to the sight of Eilat's distant lights across the water.

Aqaba's story, however, is not just one of local significance. It has become an emblem of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) broader port imperialism in the region. While many other Red Sea ports, like Port Sudan or Djibouti, have experienced challenges attracting and sustaining foreign investments, Aqaba stands out as a success story. The key to this success lies in the Jordanian state's centralized control, combined with its adept navigation of local tribal dynamics, which has created an environment conducive to large-scale foreign investments. The Jordanian government's ability to maintain strong oversight while respecting traditional tribal structures allowed the UAE

to successfully implement its economic agenda here—something it struggled to achieve elsewhere. The answers are written on the streets, shores, and skyline in Aqaba.

4.3 Aqaba's Friction and Security through Time:

4.3.1 Pre-Colonial Aqaba/Ayla:

Historically, the city of Ayla, now Aqaba, was built to serve the geostrategic interests of several empires and states. King David conquered the Gulf of Aqaba because he recognized its strategic value as a vital location (Shamir 1990, 33). On the northeastern bank of the Gulf, his son, King Solomon, established a settlement: “and King Solomon made a navy of ships in Etzion Geber which is beside Eloth on the shore of the Red Sea...” (1 Kings 9, 26). Following King Solomon, the Kingdom disintegrated and grew feeble. The region remained contested as Kings and Empires sought to control the strategic Gulf of Aqaba. The port of Ayla, which is now known as “Aqaba,” was used as a freight transfer hub by ships traveling the Red Sea and by caravans connecting it to the roads leading northward to Palestine and Jordan during the Nabataean, Roman, and Byzantine eras (Parker 1999).

Ayla's *raison d'être* seems clear - it lies on one of the shortest land bridges connecting Africa and Asia and separating the Mediterranean and Red Seas. Although situated in an arid environment, Ayla was a coastal oasis because of its access to groundwater via shallow wells. But beyond water and ready access to rich marine resources, there were few other environmental disadvantages to the site, which lay in an active tectonic zone and was thus subject to frequent earthquakes. Even access by sea was hindered by the prevailing northerly solid winds and constricted nature of the Gulf of Aqaba, narrowed even further by treacherous reefs along the coast and the rock-strewn opening into the Gulf of Suez.

One must consider Ayla's historical circumstances and broader regional developments during this period—the late 3rd century witnessed dramatic changes in the Levant, including plague, rampant inflation, and major warfare with Persia. As well as the Palmyrene invasion and ephemeral occupation of most of the region. There is much archaeological evidence from the Negev for a significant disruption in the Petra - Gaza trade route, including the destruction and abandonment of a number of sites (Erickson-Gini 2010, 51–64). There also seems to have been a sharp temporary contraction in Red Sea commerce (Tomber 2008, 64) . All this, it appears that Ayla's economy was rich and varied. It was far more than a mere transshipment point between ships and caravans. It also boasted several industries, some of significant size. It was a consumer of many products, mostly imported. It was a major military base, at least from the turn of the 4th century. It was also an ecclesiastical center, with its own bishop from the early 4th century onwards. Documentary sources mention its role in the pilgrim traffic to Mount Sinai in the Byzantine period, although this is naturally difficult to evaluate in economic terms (Parker 1997, 20–21). After a seemingly smooth transition to Islamic rule, Ayla flourished well into the early Islamic period.

Since antiquity, the Gulf of Aqaba has been a nexus of vital trade and transport routes connecting the Mediterranean world to Arabia. Yet this natural connectivity acquired particular impetus and esteem following the success of Islam and the sanctification of Mecca and Medina. The city capitulated to a Muslim force led by the Prophet himself in 630. The putative text of the pact drawn up between the Prophet and the people of Ayla has been preserved in a number of variants (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh and 2005 ابن عطاء الله).

"In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful: This is a security guarantee from God and from Muhammad, the Prophet and Messenger of God, to Yuhanna bin Ru’ba and the people of Ayla, for their ships and vehicles on land and sea. They have the protection of God and the

protection of Muhammad, the Prophet, and of those who are with them from the people of Syria, Yemen, and the sea. Whoever among them commits an offense, their wealth will not protect them from their own actions. It is lawful for anyone to take it from them. It is not permissible to prevent them from accessing water they need or a path they seek, whether on land or sea."

The city appeared as a stopping place and strategic position for the Muslim armies throughout the conquests, and the Rightly- Guided Caliphs reigned between the first/seventh to the third/ninth centuries. Before the profound social and political changes of the eleventh century that resulted in the demise of early Islamic Ayla and the shift of its population elsewhere, Ayla was a burgeoning commercial center and the port of Palestine and storehouse of the Hijaz (Goeje 1877).

Understanding Aqaba's early history is essential for analyzing contemporary UAE efforts to gain influence in the port. The same geographic factors that made Aqaba attractive to ancient powers continue to drive modern interest, with the UAE likely seeing similar strategic and economic potential. The historical pattern of external control over Aqaba establishes a precedent for outside powers vying for influence in this critical region. By examining these historical precedents of external powers seeking control over Aqaba for strategic and economic gain, we can better contextualize and critically analyze the UAE's contemporary efforts to expand its influence in this historically significant port city. Furthermore, Aqaba's cultural and religious significance adds another layer to its importance. Its historical connections to early Islam and proximity to holy sites may factor into UAE motivations beyond mere economics. By examining these historical precedents of external powers seeking control over Aqaba for strategic and economic gain, we can better contextualize and critically analyze the UAE's contemporary efforts to expand its influence in this historically rich port city.

4.3.2 Aqaba and Colonial Friction

Aqaba's strategic location between three regional trade routes continued to attract geopolitical interests after the rise of the Ottoman and British Empires. The Ottomans controlled the Levant, the Hejaz, Egypt, and much of North Africa. On the other hand, the British were seeking to solidify their trade routes to their Indian colonies. The British colonial ambitions were focused on securing the Suez Canal, established by the French in the mid-19th century, which handled their trade and military routes. Egypt had a significant degree of autonomy under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, which brought Western influence as a result of debt accumulation by the Khedive. Debt and an internal nationalist takeover accelerated the British arrival in Egypt.

Egypt became the jewel of the British colonial project in the region, and that guided their strategy for Aqaba and the rest of the Red Sea. At the same time, there was some degree of coordination between the Ottomans and the Brits; the Hejaz railway project that Germany financed further aggravated British fears of a Turkish-German plan to capture the Suez Canal (Spender 1924, 267–268). A secret report from a British official in Istanbul stated: "...After the Turks complete their railway network, it will be easy to transfer an army to Aqaba to attack Egypt and the Suez Canal" (Heyd, 1963:203).

Upon assuming his position, Lord Cromer, the British governor in Egypt, took immediate steps to solidify British presence and delineate a clear border between Egypt and Ottoman-controlled Palestine. On January 10, 1906, his officer Bramly and a small contingent of Egyptian soldiers established a presence on the west side of the Gulf at Um Rashrash, which provoked strong objections from Istanbul. Colonel Roshdi, the local Turkish commander, asserted Ottoman authority over the area, leading to Bramly's withdrawal. In response, Roshdi set up a small Turkish

police station. On January 22, 1906, Britain dispatched a ship with fifty soldiers to the region, and Bramly returned, intending to build a British post in Taba. Roshdi opposed this plan, prompting Britain to land on Isle de Graye and leading to an increased Turkish military presence in Aqaba and a British battleship deployment (Burman 2009).

The boundary line on the map ran from Suez to the Mediterranean, reducing Egypt's presence in Sinai to the northwest sector and authorizing Egypt to act in Sinai to protect Muslim pilgrims traveling to Mecca. Following Britain's control of Egypt and the Suez Canal, it became clear that the 1841 border placed part of the southern Suez Canal entrance within Turkish Sinai territory. This, along with international developments, led Lord Cromer to establish a new Sinai border to distance Turkish forces from the canal. The first two Ottoman proposals for Sinai's administrative borders, presented in 1892, suggested various divisions of control between Egypt and the Ottoman Empire but were ultimately rejected by the British government, leading to continued tensions and negotiations over the region (Kliot 1995).

In 1892, Sultan Abdulhamid II, advised by the German ambassador to Turkey, sought to reassert Ottoman control over Sinai. This move was part of the broader Anglo-German competition for dominance in the Middle East. The Ottomans, allied with Germany, aimed to retain Sinai to support their strategic interests, mainly the Hejaz railway, which was inaugurated in 1904 and ran from Damascus to Ma'an. This railway, only 120 km from Aqaba, allowed rapid troop movements from Ma'an to Aqaba and then to Yemen. If the Ottomans could connect Ma'an to Aqaba by rail, they would reduce their reliance on the British-controlled Suez Canal, enhancing their regional military logistics.

The British, alarmed by the potential Ottoman railway extension, feared it would bring Ottoman forces dangerously close to the Suez Canal, threatening the crucial sea route to India. To counter this, Lord Cromer and the British Administration in Egypt proposed a border from Rafah to Aqaba, distancing Ottoman troops from the canal and using the Sinai desert as a natural defense barrier. This control allowed the British to monitor any military forces in Eastern Sinai or the Western Negev, ensuring their supremacy in the region. The British prioritized a short, easily demarcated, and defensible boundary, unconcerned with tribal divisions or natural features, emphasizing strategic military considerations (Burman 2009). The Turkish-Egyptian negotiation led, under British influence, to Egypt's control over the western coast of the Gulf.

The British approach to drawing boundaries in the region, particularly in Sinai and the area around Aqaba, was characterized by a focus on strategic military and economic interests rather than local tribal divisions or geographical features. This pattern of boundary-making had significant implications for the region and set a precedent that would influence future border delineations. In contrast, other powers involved in the region, such as the Ottomans, Germans, and Egyptians, showed varying degrees of consideration for local factors.

The Ottoman approach, given their long-standing control over the region, demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of local tribal dynamics. Their proposals for Sinai's administrative borders in 1892 suggested various divisions of control, indicating some consideration of existing power structures and tribal territories. The German influence, while primarily focused on strategic interests, indirectly supported an approach more aligned with existing regional power structures through their alliance with the Ottomans. The Hejaz Railway project, for instance, followed traditional trade and pilgrimage routes. As a local power, the Egyptian perspective likely had a

better grasp of the region's tribal and geographical complexities. However, under British control, their influence on border decisions was limited.

The British approach to mapping boundaries in this region set a pattern that would have lasting effects. Firstly, it prioritized strategic interests, focusing on securing the Suez Canal and creating defensible borders, often overriding considerations of local realities. Secondly, it preferred easily demarcated, straight-line borders, as seen in the Rafah-Aqaba line, which became a common feature in later colonial border-drawing exercises across the Middle East and Africa. Lastly, it demonstrated a disregard for tribal territories, setting a precedent for borders that cut across traditional tribal lands, leading to long-term conflicts and instability.

4.3.3 A British Project:

The Turkish-Egyptian negotiation led, under British influence, to Egypt's control over the western coast of the Gulf. However, The Ottomans' entry into World War I on the side of the Central Powers set the stage for the eventual loss of their territories in the Middle East. The Arab Revolt, initiated in 1916 by Sharif Hussein bin Ali of Mecca, was crucial in undermining Ottoman control. Sharif Hussein sought independence from Ottoman rule and was supported by his sons, including Faisal and Abdullah. The British, keen to weaken the Ottoman Empire, supported the revolt with promises of recognizing Arab independence. T.E. Lawrence, famously known as Lawrence of Arabia, was instrumental in coordinating British support for the Arab forces.

Simultaneously, with Russian permission, the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 between Britain and France outlined the division of Ottoman territories in the Middle East between the two European powers after the war. According to this agreement, the modern-day Jordan area was allocated to British influence. This agreement laid the groundwork for future British control in the

region. The military campaign led by General Edmund Allenby, notably the Battle of Megiddo in 1918, was a decisive moment in the war. British forces broke through Ottoman lines in Palestine and conducted operations in Transjordan (now Jordan), leading to the collapse of Ottoman control in the region. This military success paved the way for the post-war restructuring of Middle Eastern territories (Osborne 2023). Following the Armistice of Mudros in 1918, which ended hostilities between the Allies and the Ottoman Empire, Allied forces occupied key Ottoman territories. The San Remo Conference of 1920 formalized the mandate system, placing former Ottoman territories under the administration of the Allied powers. The League of Nations granted Britain the mandate for Palestine and Transjordan, effectively separating Transjordan from Palestine in 1921 (Fathi et al. 2022).

In 1921, Abdullah, the son of Sharif Hussein, established the Emirate of Transjordan with British support. Although Transjordan was nominally autonomous under Abdullah, it was effectively under British control, with British advisors and military presence guiding the administration and defense of the territory. This arrangement ensured British influence in the region while granting a degree of self-governance to Abdullah (Satloff 1994). The transition of Jordan from Ottoman to British control was a multifaceted process involving military campaigns, diplomatic agreements, and post-war mandates. British support for the Arab Revolt, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and subsequent post-war arrangements played pivotal roles in this transition.

The British colonial administration played a crucial role in shaping the modern state of Jordan, distinguishing it from neighboring Palestine and Syria. This separation was part of a broader colonial project aimed at restructuring the Middle East following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The Brits intended to create a buffer state to protect British interests in the region and to manage the complex dynamics between the various Arab populations and the emerging Zionist

movement in Palestine (Wagner 2019). The creation of Jordan as a separate entity laid the groundwork for its current national identity and political boundaries, which have had lasting implications for its security and stability.

The establishment of Israel in 1948, a manifestation of colonial ambitions, profoundly reshaped Jordan's security landscape. The Nakba, or Palestinian exodus, precipitated a significant influx of Palestinian refugees into Jordan, fundamentally altering the country's demographic composition and political dynamics (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007). While the majority of these refugees settled in Amman and other urban centers, Aqaba, Jordan's southern port city, experienced a notable increase in its strategic significance during this period.

Aqaba's elevated importance stemmed primarily from its geographical proximity to the newly formed Israeli state rather than from hosting a large population of displaced Palestinians. The city's position as Jordan's only seaport, coupled with its closeness to Israel, transformed it into a focal point of national security concerns. This shift reflects the complex interplay of regional geopolitics and Jordan's evolving security priorities in the aftermath of the Nakba.

Israel's perception of Aqaba as a potential security risk is multifaceted. While the presence of Palestinian refugees in Jordan broadly influences Israeli security considerations, Aqaba's status as a security concern is primarily due to its strategic location as a port city on Israel's border. The city's potential to serve as a conduit for goods, people, and possibly weapons in close proximity to Israeli territory underscores its significance in the regional security calculus.

Jordan faced a challenging situation, sharing a long border with the "Arab enemy" and struggling to develop an economy for its growing population due to limited natural resources. While Gulf countries and international financial institutions provided temporary support, sustained economic

cooperation was necessary. Jordanian policymakers aimed to create strong economic ties with their Arab “brothers.” Consequently, on 6 February 1989, the heads of state of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and North Yemen met in Baghdad to announce the formation of the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC) (Ryan 1998).

The ACC, established in 1989 by Iraq, Jordan, North Yemen, and Egypt, aimed to achieve “the highest degree of cooperation, coordination, integration, and solidarity among the member states.” Unlike earlier pan-Arab efforts, the ACC Charter emphasized economic cooperation over ideological-political unification. It facilitated labor flows, particularly by sending Jordanian and Egyptian labor to Iraq for postwar reconstruction. The four states agreed to eliminate entry visa requirements and prioritize recruiting ACC nationals. Additionally, the ACC functioned as a common market to boost inter-Arab trade and approached donor countries and institutions as a bloc to restructure debts (Wahby 1989). During the Iran-Iraq war, Iraq's major supporters within the ACC were Egypt, Jordan, and North Yemen, with Jordan providing the most extensive support (Terrill 1985). Jordan's port at Aqaba and overland transport routes were Iraq's major economic lifeline during the war, effectively institutionalizing bilateral linkages into a multilateral alliance.

Jordan institutionalized its bilateral links with Iraq, Egypt, and North Yemen into a multilateral alliance via the ACC. However, in the late 1980s, Jordan's primary regional concerns were Gulf security and its involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict. In 1988, King Husayn renounced Jordan's claims to the West Bank, altering the strategic landscape and shifting the conflict resolution burden to Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). This renunciation rendered Jordan's strategic role ambiguous, making the ACC a tool for maintaining relevance and influence in regional politics beyond the Arab-Israeli peace process (Ryan 1998). But more importantly, these

institutionalized economic linkages would later become critical in solidifying Jordan's control over Aqaba, as the country leveraged these relationships to maintain economic relevance and stability.

Furthermore, Jordan's peace treaty with Israel in 1994 brought additional security and economic benefits to the Aqaba region, laying the groundwork for future developments. The treaty formalized cooperation on border security and joint economic projects, ensuring stability in the area surrounding Aqaba. This environment of security and state-led development provided the perfect conditions for external actors like the UAE to invest and expand their influence. The strong central government, capable of negotiating complex state-tribe relations and ensuring security, facilitated the UAE's growing imperial ambitions in Aqaba, enabling the emirate to successfully integrate the port into its regional port network.

Aqaba remains a heavily securitized area. During my bus journey from Amman to Aqaba in August 2023, security officers removed a Palestinian couple from the bus at a checkpoint. I later learned from passengers and local interlocutors that Palestinian nationals often require additional permission to enter Aqaba. The incident stayed with me because it made visible how entry into the city is governed not only by national borders, but also by internal security permissions. The region is marked by numerous checkpoints, both along the highway leading into Aqaba and at the border crossings with Israel. A similar logic appeared in Ayla, a newly developed area near the border with Eilat, the Israeli city bordering Aqaba. I was able to enter as a tourist, but local interlocutors later told me that access for some local young men was restricted. I treat this not as a formal legal rule that I independently verified, but as an ethnographic indication of how residents understood Ayla as a selective and securitized space. The removal of the Palestinian couple from the bus highlights the deep-seated layers of control over mobility in Aqaba, which reflect broader regional power dynamics. Palestinians, even those who might reside in or travel through Jordan, often face

additional scrutiny and restrictions that are emblematic of the securitized borders between Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian territories. Aqaba, as a critical economic and geopolitical space, is tightly controlled, and the requirement for specific permits to enter the region underscores how Jordanian policy intersects with broader regional tensions. The selective exclusion of certain groups, like Palestinians, signals not only security concerns but also Jordan's careful management of its relationship with neighboring Israel and the delicate balance it maintains in the broader Arab-Israeli conflict.



Figure 26 Ayla New Development taken by Author

The restricted access for local males to newly developed areas like Ayla reflects a different facet of securitization: the management of economic spaces for the benefit of external actors, often at the expense of local communities. Ayla, positioned near the border with Israel, is a key zone for tourism and foreign investment, much of which involves the UAE's growing influence. By limiting access to local males—presumably under the guise of maintaining order or security—the state

effectively segregates its own population from areas that are developed to attract international tourism and business. This exclusion creates a stark contrast between the promise of economic development and the reality of who actually benefits from these transformations. The securitization of such spaces not only serves external interests but also reinforces internal hierarchies, where certain populations are privileged over others.

Both of these experiences illustrate how Aqaba's securitization is intricately linked to the UAE's port imperialism. The tight control over movement and access allows Jordan to maintain a delicate equilibrium in its regional relations while simultaneously accommodating the interests of powerful external investors like the UAE. For the UAE, Aqaba represents a strategic foothold in its expanding regional port empire, but this expansion comes with the imposition of new forms of exclusion and control. Securitization, in this case, is not merely about preventing threats but about managing the flow of people and capital in ways that benefit regional powers, while local populations often bear the brunt of these restrictions. These dynamics reveal the complex layers of power that shape Aqaba's transformation and the lived experiences of those who navigate its securitized spaces.

Life in the littoral spaces of Aqaba and its Israeli counterpart, Eilat, is heavily shaped by these security arrangements, which serve not only to prevent potential threats but also to regulate interaction between the two populations. The checkpoints, while maintaining security, also act as controlled points of contact, facilitating trade and tourism between the two cities. However, this controlled interaction reflects deeper dynamics of exclusion and power. For example, while some are allowed to move freely for economic purposes, others—like the Palestinian couple removed from the bus—are selectively restricted, showing how security regimes are used to manage both inclusion and exclusion.

The peace agreement between Jordan and Israel has certainly contributed to a degree of normalization in daily life for residents of both cities, who benefit from increased economic opportunities and the relative stability that comes with securitization. Yet, the restrictions on local Jordanians in spaces like Ayla and the limited access for Palestinian nationals reveal the selective nature of this so-called “normalization.” Economic development in these border spaces often prioritizes external investment and tourism over the interests of local populations, and security measures are used to protect these economic ventures rather than to foster equal access for all.

Beneath the surface, the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the region’s colonial legacies continue to shape the security and stability of Aqaba and Eilat. While the peace agreement may have reduced open hostilities, the highly controlled environments maintained by checkpoints and restrictions reflect the complex interplay of regional politics, where security is not only about safety but also about maintaining specific power dynamics. In this way, the security arrangements that structure life in Aqaba and Eilat are less about ensuring peace and more about managing which groups are granted access to the economic benefits of these littoral spaces.



Figure 27 Eilat Seen from Aqaba

4.3.4 Aqaba State-Tribal Relations:

State-tribe relations in Aqaba are deeply rooted in the broader history of the Hashemite monarchy's relationship with Jordan's tribal communities. Since the early 20th century, the Hashemite regime has cultivated a close alliance with Bedouin tribes, particularly those in southern Jordan, including the Aqaba region. This relationship is often described as a patron-client system, where the monarchy provides tribes with land, economic resources, and political positions in exchange for loyalty and support. As Curtis Ryan notes in *"Jordan in Transition,"* this strategic integration of tribes into the state's governance and security structures has been essential for the monarchy's survival, especially in regions like Aqaba, where tribal support is key to maintaining stability in a geopolitically sensitive area (Ryan 2002).

The *Huwaitat* tribe has historically played a significant role in the socio-political landscape of southern Jordan, particularly in Aqaba. The tribe's origins trace back to the Arabian Peninsula, with parts of the Huwaitat spread across Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. In Jordan, the Huwaitat became key allies of the Hashemite monarchy, particularly during the Great Arab Revolt of 1916, when they supported Sharif Hussein's efforts against the Ottoman Empire. As T.E. Lawrence's writings in *"Seven Pillars of Wisdom"* detail, the Huwaitat, led by figures such as Auda abu Tayi, were instrumental in the revolt, contributing to the eventual capture of Aqaba (Lawrence 1976). This alliance with the Hashemites strengthened the tribe's political and economic influence in the region.

Aqaba's strategic importance as Jordan's sole access to the sea and its proximity to Israel has made it a focal point of the state's efforts to maintain control over the region. To secure tribal loyalty, the state has historically involved local tribes in the governance and security of the region, allowing

them to benefit economically through land redistribution and employment in state institutions. As Joseph Massad discusses, this arrangement has created a system in which local tribes are politically and economically vested in Aqaba's stability ((Massad 2001, 45-48). However, the modernization and internationalization of Aqaba, especially with the influx of foreign investment, have complicated these dynamics. The development of Aqaba as a global trade and tourism hub, largely driven by external actors like the UAE, has introduced new tensions between the state and tribal communities.

The establishment of the Aqaba Special Economic Zone (ASEZA) in 2001 amplified these tensions. While some tribes have benefited from new economic opportunities, such as land deals and employment, others feel marginalized by the rapid changes. According to Tariq Tell in *"The Politics of Tribes in Jordan: Ethnicity and Politics in the Hashemite Kingdom,"* the economic liberalization and privatization accompanying ASEZA's creation have altered traditional power dynamics, leading some tribal groups to perceive themselves as being sidelined in favor of external investors. The state's ability to maintain stability in Aqaba now hinges on managing the complex relationships between the state and tribal communities. This involves addressing tribal grievances over access to economic resources while balancing the need to attract foreign investment and secure the region for both national and regional interests. In an interview conducted at the Arab Bridge Maritime Company's (ABMC) office in Aqaba in August 2023, Baha El-Mibidein, Sales Manager at the Arab Bridge Maritime Company, described how local authorities had invested in training and educating members of tribal communities in order to integrate them into the city's modern transport and logistics workforce. The conversation focused on ABMC's ferry routes, Aqaba's regional role, and the relationship between port development and local employment. The

government's response to local dissatisfaction over job access has been to provide education, a strategy that has proven successful so far.

While these state-tribe norms in Aqaba have been challenged by recent UAE investments and the rapid economic transformation of the region, they remain largely controlled and managed through existing state institutions, ensuring a relatively stable balance between modernization and tribal interests. The Jordanian state, through mechanisms like the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA), continues to involve tribal elites in decision-making processes and integrates them into local governance and security frameworks. This careful management contrasts sharply with other port cities in the Red Sea region, such as in Yemen or Somaliland, where external investments and state fragility have led to greater instability and conflict over resources. In Aqaba, the state's strong institutional capacity and historical reliance on tribes as pillars of support have helped prevent these investments from undermining the local social fabric, allowing Jordan to maintain a level of stability even as external actors like the UAE assert influence. This controlled integration of external capital, while not without its tensions, ensures that Jordan's tribal communities are still part of the evolving economic landscape, unlike in more fragile Red Sea contexts where local power struggles have erupted into conflict.

4.4 Aqaba's Friction: A Tourism Enclave

The journey from Amman to Aqaba, where buses are filled with tourists drawn to Jordan's rich historical and natural attractions, reflects the country's transformation into a global tourism destination. Aqaba has leveraged its strategic location, blending its ancient heritage and modern appeal to cater to international visitors, offering a seamless transition from exploring Roman ruins to experiencing the Red Sea's vibrant coral reefs. This chapter argues that this transformation is

deeply tied to the Jordanian state's dual strategy: a combination of centralized governance and the maintenance of traditional tribal networks. Therefore, allowing Aqaba to turn its social and security impasse to serve the global imagination of tourists. Furthermore, this approach has allowed Aqaba to create a stable environment that supports both local interests and external investment, notably aligning with the regional ambitions of the UAE.

The development of Jordan's tourism industry has paralleled the state's efforts to integrate tribal structures into its governance model. In the post-independence era, investments in infrastructure and heritage sites like Petra positioned Jordan as a cultural and historical hub. During the 1970s and 1980s, the state's focus on highlighting Jordan's rich archaeological sites solidified its reputation among global travelers. The active involvement of local tribes in managing and securing these areas has helped maintain stability, which in turn has made the region more attractive for foreign investments.

Aqaba's allure as a romantic and adventurous destination was amplified by the global reach of films like *Lawrence of Arabia*, which depicted its landscapes and historical significance. This cinematic portrayal has been instrumental in attracting tourists seeking the adventure and cultural depth that the film captured. At the same time, the Jordanian state has harnessed these global perceptions, working with local tribes to ensure that the tourism sector benefits from a secure and stable environment. This synergy between centralized authority and tribal involvement has been crucial in accommodating external investment interests.

In more recent years, the Jordanian government's strategic planning, such as the National Tourism Strategy 2021-2025, has focused on bolstering the sector's contribution to the national economy. Efforts to attract low-cost airlines, improve infrastructure, and diversify tourist demographics have

been successful, even in the face of challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic (Shahateet and Partale 2019). The integration of traditional tribal structures within this broader strategy has facilitated a smooth interface between local needs and external investments, particularly in Aqaba's special economic zone.

Aqaba's tourism industry has also benefited from its strategic location at the crossroads of several major travel routes. Its position as Jordan's only coastal city provides it with unique advantages in attracting tourists from neighboring countries and beyond. The city's infrastructure has been developed to support tourism, with investments in hotels, resorts, and recreational facilities. Additionally, Aqaba's status as a special economic zone has facilitated the growth of its tourism sector by offering incentives for investment and development. These elements, combined with the city's rich cultural heritage and natural attractions, have made Aqaba a prominent tourist destination in the region.

The UAE's interest in Jordan, especially in regions like Aqaba, aligns with this structure. The stable governance arrangement—centralized yet responsive to local tribal networks—creates a conducive environment for investment. This balance has allowed the UAE and other external actors to pursue their economic interests while benefiting from a secure, cooperative environment. The arrangement has not only enabled Jordan to maintain control over its tourism industry but has also allowed external actors to align their regional ambitions with Jordan's development trajectory.

The peace agreement between Jordan and Israel, signed in 1994, further enhanced this environment by establishing formal diplomatic relations and security arrangements. These measures, such as joint patrols and coordinated management of the flow of people and goods between Aqaba and its Israeli counterpart, Eilat, have contributed to regional stability. This stability has supported the

growth of cross-border tourism and facilitated economic interactions, making Aqaba a focal point in Jordan's broader economic strategy.

The centrality of Aqaba's port is crucial to understanding its regional economic role. In the same interview, El-Mibidein emphasized Aqaba's importance as a logistical hub for neighboring Arab countries. He described ABMC's two main shipping routes: one linking Aqaba with Nuweiba Port in Sinai, which facilitates passenger movement and the transport of goods, and another tourist-oriented route connecting Aqaba with Taba. The ABMC, established through a tripartite agreement between Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq, has grown from an initial capital of \$6 million in 1985 to \$100.5 million by 2014. This growth reflects Aqaba's strategic positioning within the regional trade network. Mr. Baha highlighted the significance of two main shipping routes: one linking Aqaba with Nuweiba Port in Sinai, facilitating both passenger movement and the transport of goods, and another tourist-oriented route connecting Aqaba with Taba. These routes illustrate Aqaba's dual function as both a commercial and tourist gateway, serving regional travel and trade needs.

The economic liberalization efforts and the establishment of agreements like the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC) have also played a role in shaping Aqaba's role as a logistical and trade hub. Liberalization allowed various interest groups to influence policy through informal coalitions, shifting the balance of economic power within the country. This period of liberalization provided opportunities for engaging with the economic elite, including Jordanians of Palestinian origin who had significant control over export sectors. As Aqaba has developed as a strategic port city, it has become central to Jordan's efforts to expand intra-Arab trade, particularly with countries like Iraq and Egypt. This broader strategy aligns with the state's efforts to attract foreign investment while maintaining stability through the involvement of traditional tribal structures.

Aqaba's evolution as a tourist and economic center thus reflects the interplay between strategic state planning, regional diplomacy, and local economic dynamics. The Jordanian state's ability to navigate these relationships—balancing centralized control with the support of local tribes—has been critical in creating an environment conducive to both regional cooperation and external investments, including those from the UAE. By securing tribal loyalty and fostering stability through agreements like the 1994 peace treaty, Jordan has positioned Aqaba not only as a tourist destination but also as a vital node in regional logistics and trade networks.

4.5 UAE's Scramble for Aqaba:

As we have discussed Aqaba's special entanglements that facilitated foreign investment, particularly from the UAE, this section explores the UAE's investment interests in Aqaba, focusing on the development of its tourist and maritime infrastructure. Through initiatives such as the opening of the Aqaba Cruise Terminal in January 2023 and a collaboration between the AD Ports Group and the Aqaba Development Corporation (ADC), the UAE aims to bolster its presence in the Red Sea region (AD Ports 2023). These investments are not isolated projects but part of a broader strategy to enhance the UAE's economic footprint and diversify beyond oil dependency by tapping into Aqaba's potential as a critical node in regional tourism and trade.

During site visits in Aqaba and conversations with transport-sector employees, hotel workers, and residents in August 2023, the cruise terminal appeared as one of the most visible signs of the UAE's effort to insert itself into Aqaba's tourism economy. The project was discussed locally not only as a tourism facility, but also as part of a wider attempt to connect Aqaba to Red Sea cruise circuits, hospitality investment, and Gulf-backed urban development. This move not only fosters tourism but also opens avenues for UAE-based enterprises in the hospitality and retail sectors,

which are poised to benefit from the influx of tourists (Kontos 2024a). Local industry players have noted the visible impact of these investments on Aqaba's tourism landscape, from improved infrastructure to a heightened interest in the region's hospitality offerings.

However, the UAE's ambition extends beyond tourism. In January 2024, the AD Ports' digital branch, Maqta Gateway, established a joint venture named Maqta Ayla with ADC to digitalize Aqaba's port operations. This initiative, which includes a Port Community System (PCS), seeks to modernize the port and reduce bottlenecks and emissions through enhanced digital coordination (Kontos 2024b). In conversations with port-sector employees and traders in Aqaba in August 2023, several interlocutors described the expected digitalization of port operations as a way to reduce delays and strengthen Aqaba's role as a logistics hub for the Levant and Iraq.

The UAE's investment strategy in Aqaba is ultimately multifaceted and aims to solidify its role as a central player in regional trade. Economically, Aqaba's location offers a strategic entry point into the Levant and Iraq, where trade volumes have been on the rise (Meed 2011). By modernizing Jordan's maritime facilities and aligning with Jordan's goal of becoming a regional transport hub, the UAE is actively shaping a key trade corridor and enhancing its regional economic influence.

Strategically, these efforts strengthen the UAE's influence over critical trade routes and foster deeper economic ties with Jordan. Digitalizing port operations through Maqta Ayla positions the UAE as a port efficiency and modernization leader, setting a regional standard for maritime practices. As expressed by local port authorities, this approach is pivotal in making Aqaba an attractive and competitive option for regional logistics, effectively cementing the UAE's role in shaping the Red Sea trade dynamics. The UAE's investments, therefore, not only reshaped

Aqaba's physical and economic landscape but also reflected a calculated effort to expand its influence and redefine regional trade and maritime operations.

The development of the Aqaba Terminal is poised to deepen the UAE's trade relations with Iraq and Saudi Arabia, reshaping the regional trade landscape through multiple interconnected strategies. Interviews and informal conversations with logistics-sector workers in Aqaba in August 2023 highlighted the growing role of Aqaba as a gateway to Iraq. Positioned at the northern edge of the Red Sea, Aqaba's proximity to Iraq allowed it to act as a critical transit point for goods.. This strategic positioning becomes more prominent as trade volumes between Aqaba and Iraq increase. Discussions with traders and port authorities often refer to a 367% rise in containers destined for Iraq at the Aqaba Container Terminal (ACT), illustrating the terminal's evolving importance as a corridor for Iraqi-bound trade (APM Terminals 2020). For many in the logistics sector, this expansion represents not only economic growth but also a reimagining of Aqaba's role within regional trade dynamics.

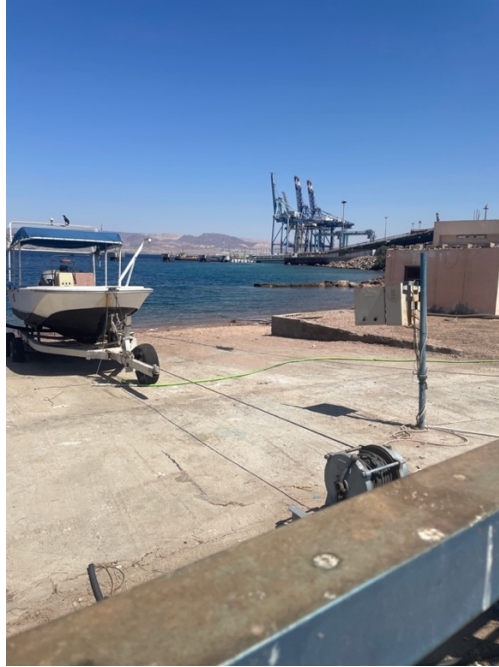


Figure 28 Aqaba's Container Terminal, taken by author.

Logistics-sector interlocutors also described Aqaba's emerging role as an alternative trade route amid regional geopolitical shifts. Several described the reopening of Iraq's borders and the possibility of moving Iraqi exports through Aqaba as a potential "game changer" for the port.. The reopening of Iraq's borders and its aspiration to export 4 million barrels of oil daily, with a significant portion destined to pass through Aqaba, have been described as game changers. By facilitating the movement of Iraqi oil, Aqaba provided an alternative to more traditional routes, positioning the UAE as a critical facilitator of this trade flow. Stakeholders see this as a mutually beneficial arrangement, with Aqaba's infrastructure enabling efficient transit and the UAE leveraging its investments to benefit from increased trade traffic (Daughters 2018).

The UAE's influence on Aqaba is also evident in the port's transformation into a regional logistics hub. Conversations with Aqaba's community reveal how the UAE's role in modernizing the terminal has reinforced Aqaba's status as a connector between the Gulf and the Levant. For port-

sector workers and logistics professionals, Aqaba's value lay not only in its Jordanian location, but in its ability to connect Gulf capital, Iraqi markets, Saudi routes, and Red Sea shipping. This strategic positioning allows the UAE to improve trade efficiency not only with Iraq but also with Saudi Arabia, making Aqaba a critical node in the Gulf's broader logistics network (Daughters 2018). This shift, observed firsthand, is reshaping regional trade routes, with Aqaba serving as a key entry point for goods moving through the region.

Furthermore, the UAE's experience in economic zone development is leveraged to foster new business opportunities in Aqaba. Several interlocutors familiar with Aqaba's development strategy pointed to the UAE's experience with free zones as a model for the Aqaba Special Economic Zone. In their view, UAE-backed investment revived an older Jordanian ambition to make Aqaba a regional business and logistics platform. This expertise is a vital resource for creating an environment where UAE businesses can thrive and expand, facilitating regional trade connections (Kumar 2024).

However, economic zones are not merely mechanisms to facilitate trade and business expansion; they are also strategic tools for managing local "frictions," such as tribal workers, through legal and economic measures. These zones often feature a combination of legal exemptions and domestic regulations (Easterling 2014). The UAE is a global leader in developing such special zones, using them to manage foreign influence, elevate the status of privileged nationals, and leverage the region's oil and gas resources to build diversified industries.

Jordan, for its part, is eager to transform Aqaba into a "Red Sea Dubai," as one local interlocutor put it. Some Jordanians believe the country once aspired to become the "Singapore of the region." Still, this vision faltered due to the rise of the UAE's model, which surpassed Jordan's underfunded

ambitions. As a result, the UAE's involvement in Aqaba represents a revival of the special economic zone dream—but this time, primarily serving Gulf interests rather than Jordanian ones.

Ultimately, the UAE's investments in the Aqaba Terminal illustrate a nuanced strategy aimed at enhancing not only its economic and strategic presence in the region but also diversifying its oil-based regional prominence. These efforts, which intertwine economic development with infrastructural and technological upgrades, position the UAE as a key player in shaping the future of regional trade. Observations from local stakeholders highlight how these developments are expected to foster stronger economic ties between the UAE, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, solidifying Aqaba's role as a UAE critical hub in the Red Sea trade networks.

4.6 Transforming Aqaba: Reimagining the old city

Aqaba is undergoing a profound transformation as large-scale real estate projects, such as Ayla, reshape both its physical and social landscape, fundamentally altering local life. Ayla is a sprawling mixed-use development, extending over 4.3 million square meters of reclaimed land, situated near Aqaba's western edge, close to the Jordanian-Israeli border. With its luxury hotels, upscale residences, Jordan's first international-standard golf course, and a town center featuring a marina and artificial lagoons, Ayla stands in stark contrast to Aqaba's surrounding traditional urban fabric.

This transformation is primarily driven by UAE investment, with the Ayla Oasis Development Company (AODC) taking the lead, supported by substantial funding from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). The project promises to boost Jordan's tourism industry, attract international tourists, and provide employment opportunities in hospitality and

retail. Yet, the benefits of these changes seem to flow mainly toward developers, investors, and affluent tourists, leaving local communities on the periphery of this new luxury landscape.

The physical and social disconnection between Ayla and the broader city of Aqaba became palpable during a taxi visit to the development in August 2023. Passing through multiple security checkpoints, I found that my entry was permitted because I was moving through the space as a tourist. Local residents later told me that access for some Aqaba residents, especially young men, was more restricted. Whether or not this was a formal rule, the perception itself mattered: Ayla was widely understood as a selective space, physically attached to Aqaba but socially distant from it.

This dynamic extends beyond Ayla to other projects like Marsa Zayed, another UAE-backed venture that further illustrates the reshaping of Aqaba through foreign investment. Marsa Zayed is a \$10 billion development featuring the grand Sheik Zayed Mosque, financed by the UAE and prominently situated on a hilltop overlooking the city.

On a Friday during my August 2023 fieldwork, I joined the crowds for prayers at the Sheikh Zayed Mosque. Reaching the mosque required a taxi ride from the older parts of the city, and its hilltop position made its distance from everyday urban life immediately visible. The mosque's size, now the largest in Aqaba, surpasses that of the historic Sharif Hussein Mosque, named after the founder of the Jordanian Kingdom. This shift in prominence, from a symbol of Jordan's heritage to a new architectural landmark, speaks volumes about Aqaba's evolving identity and its alignment with Gulf ambitions.

These developments are altering Aqaba in ways that extend beyond new buildings and luxury amenities. They introduce a new rhythm to the city, prioritizing global capital flows and high-end

tourism over the deep-rooted traditions of Aqaba's local society. Ayla and Marsa Zayed represent spaces of modernity that are out of reach for many locals, creating a physical and social divide that alters the very fabric of the city. In a conversation near central Aqaba in August 2023, Abo Al-Magd, local resident who became my friend and invited me to his house for a *Mansaf* lunch, told me that these projects would likely generate jobs, but would also “make Aqaba less like Aqaba,” as the old rhythms of daily life gave way to new patterns centered around luxury, tourism, and exclusivity. He considers himself a true and old Aqabai, and he is witnessing a change in Aqaba. Whether it's its buildings, its neighborhoods, or its demography, Aqaba is not going to be the same.

The UAE's investment in Aqaba is not merely a matter of economic development; it is a reconfiguration of the city's social and physical landscape, challenging how local communities relate to their environment. Ayla, Marsa Zayed, and similar projects are not just changing the skyline—they are altering the relationship between people and place, reducing the friction that once existed between the traditional tribal ways of life and the imperatives of global capitalism. In doing so, they risk marginalizing the local identity of Aqaba, remaking it into a space that serves the interests of external investors more than those of the people who have long called this city home. Through this transformation, the UAE is effectively reshaping Aqaba's character, replacing the city's historical pulse with a new beat, one that is increasingly in sync with the rhythms of a globalized world.



Figure 29 Shiekh Zayid bin Sultan Mosque, Part of UAE's Real State Development Projects

4.7 Navigating Friction: The UAE's Vision Meets Aqaba's Complex Realities

While the story of Aqaba can be framed as a success story for the UAE, its maritime complexity challenges the UAE's vision of an imagined city. Aqaba's dynamics are intertwined with Anna Tsing's "friction" concept, where global frameworks encounter local realities, generating resistance that shapes their interactions (Tsing 2005). Positioned at the northeastern tip of the Red Sea—where Jordan, Israel, and Egypt's boundaries converge—Aqaba embodies this friction. The region's overlapping borders and complex governance systems challenge the seamless application of international norms, such as those established by the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Furthermore, local dynamics, including Jordan's engagement with tribal communities and the geopolitical intricacies of the area, introduce unique interpretations and

contested applications of these laws. These factors create a complex landscape that could complicate the UAE's aspirations for a frictionless, globally integrated port city.

The unique geography of Aqaba further complicates the UAE's vision of a frictionless port. Situated as Jordan's sole access point to the sea and bordered closely by Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, Aqaba's geographical constraints create a tightly bounded maritime space. Any expansion or development of the port must navigate not only international maritime laws but also the sensitivities of its neighboring states. The narrow access routes and shared borders present natural limitations—such as limited space for expansion and the need to negotiate shared maritime corridors—making it challenging to replicate the streamlined trade corridors the UAE enjoys in its own coastal spaces. This geographic reality inherently challenges the UAE's ambition for seamless, uninterrupted flows of goods and capital in Aqaba.

While the UAE envisions a frictionless model for its port developments, characterized by high-tech infrastructure, regulatory streamlining, and a smooth trade flow, its involvement in Aqaba encounters the inherent friction of local realities. The UAE's investment in the Aqaba Container Terminal, through a joint venture with APM Terminals, exemplifies this tension. Although such investments have modernized Aqaba's port and increased its trade capacity, they also highlight the disparities between the UAE's vision and the challenges posed by regional geopolitics, traditional practices, and the complexities of local governance.

The UAE's ambitions also impact the power dynamics within the Gulf of Aqaba, as its economic influence shapes maritime practices even as a non-littoral state. This raises questions about external influence on local policies and the sovereignty of coastal states; despite international norms, such as the "innocent passage" principle of UNCLOS that allows vessels to transit

territorial waters peacefully, Aqaba's status as a vital international waterway demands compromise and negotiation between regional and global interests.

The Houthi missile and drone campaign directed at Eilat beginning in October 2023 underscored the Gulf of Aqaba's vulnerability to conflicts originating beyond its immediate shores.⁸ Although primarily aimed at Israel, these attacks brought aerial interception, electronic warfare, and heightened maritime surveillance into the vicinity of Aqaba. Together with Houthi attacks on commercial shipping farther south in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, the campaign disrupted established trade routes and encouraged coastal states to strengthen their security controls and military coordination. These events demonstrate how regional conflict can unsettle the boundary between commercial circulation and security governance in this strategic waterway.

Moreover, the role of tribal communities in shaping maritime norms is a critical yet often overlooked element in Aqaba's legal and cultural landscape. Several local interlocutors in Aqaba described tribal communities as still important to questions of land, employment, and access, even when formal authority rested with the state and ASEZA. Historically, these communities have governed aspects of coastal access and fishing rights. Though modern state structures now dominate, the influence of these traditional systems persists, especially in Jordan, where the government must navigate the tensions between local customs, international law, and development priorities. Balancing these interests remains an ongoing challenge, requiring nuanced negotiation

⁸ Ansar Allah, commonly known as the Houthi movement, is an Iran-aligned Yemeni political and military organization that controls Sana'a and much of northwestern Yemen. Following the outbreak of the war in Gaza in October 2023, the Houthis began launching missiles and drones toward Israel, repeatedly identifying Eilat as a target, while also attacking commercial vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The movement described these operations as an effort to support Palestinians and pressure Israel to end its military campaign in Gaza. In April 2024, the interception of a drone approaching Eilat coincided with electronic-warfare measures that interfered with Automatic Identification System signals off both Eilat and neighboring Aqaba. See "[Yemen's Houthis Conduct Military Operations in Gulf of Aden, Israel's Eilat](#)," *Reuters*, July 14, 2024. See also "[Ambrey Says Israel Intercepted UAV 'Launched from Yemen'](#)," *Reuters*, April 14, 2024.

to ensure that regional development respects both local traditions and global maritime standards. This dynamic illustrates how friction between the UAE's vision and Aqaba's localized realities creates a layered global connection and resistance narrative.

4.8 Conclusion:

This chapter examined how the UAE's investments in Aqaba—spanning tourism, trade infrastructure, and real estate development—embodied a contemporary form of imperial influence. The UAE's investments were not merely commercial ventures but deeply intertwined with Jordan's state authority and regional power relations. The strategic success of these projects hinged on Jordan's centralized control over Aqaba and its capacity to manage local tribal institutions and maintain stability in this critical port city.

While the UAE's engagement with Aqaba appeared as a regional success story, the reality was far from seamless. As we know from Keller Easterling's concept of "extraterritorial infrastructure," UAE's efforts to reshape Aqaba encountered challenges inherent to its geography and political landscape (Easterling 2014). Although the UAE aimed to create a frictionless, modernized trade and tourism hub, Aqaba's maritime complexity disrupted this vision. Its location at the confluence of competing regional interests and its historical role as a contested space introduced layers of tension and negotiation.

Laleh Khalili emphasized that ports are not merely nodes of trade but spaces where global ambitions intersect with local realities (Khalili 2020a). In Aqaba, this dynamic manifested as a struggle between the UAE's desire to streamline operations and the ongoing geopolitical and cultural frictions. These tensions demonstrated that while the UAE aimed to assert its influence

and establish a new economic order in the Red Sea, it had to contend with the existing power dynamics and historical legacies that shaped Aqaba's development.

In essence, Aqaba's evolution illustrated how the UAE's investment strategy attempted to impose a new regional order yet remained entangled in the complexities of local governance and geography. The city's transformation reflected both the allure and limits of modern imperial ambitions, where the stubborn realities of place continuously reshaped the imagined vision of a streamlined port city. As such, Aqaba stood as a testament to the enduring interplay between global capital, state power, and the persistent presence of local frictions in making regional trade hubs.

Chapter 5: Conclusion: Port Imperialism and War

5.1 Introduction: Leaving through the port

On May 4, 2023, after days of waiting in a crowded and militarized Portsudan, I boarded the USNS Brunswick with my family and crossed the Red Sea to Jeddah. The port that had been the center of my research became the route of my evacuation. Hotels had turned into processing hubs. Social clubs, public buildings, and sidewalks had become shelters for displaced people and foreign nationals waiting for passage. Embassy staff, Sudanese officers, foreign military personnel, aid workers, evacuees, and stranded families moved through the city in overlapping circuits of fear, paperwork, and logistical improvisation. Portsudan was no longer only Sudan's commercial gate. It had become a wartime capital, an evacuation corridor, and a military-logistical node.

That experience changed the question at the center of this dissertation. I had begun this project by asking how ports become objects of foreign investment, state planning, and local contestation. I wanted to understand why Gulf-based firms and states were so interested in Red Sea port cities, and why some projects succeeded while others failed. By the end of my fieldwork, the question had become sharper and more urgent: what happens when struggles over ports, corridors, land, labor, and security move from contracts and protests into war?

This conclusion argues that port imperialism cannot be understood only through concessions, free zones, terminal leases, and investment agreements. It must also be understood through the coercive arrangements that make those projects possible or desirable. Port imperialism names a mode of power that reorganizes coasts through infrastructure, contracts, corridors, security partnerships, and selective alliances. It does not usually require formal annexation. It works through management contracts, port concessions, joint ventures, logistics platforms, state-backed

companies, private capital, and political brokerage. But these arrangements are never merely technical. They depend on the control of territory, labor, customs, roads, gates, documents, and political authority.

War exposes this hidden structure. In peacetime, ports are often imagined as spaces of efficiency: cranes, containers, berths, scanners, free zones, shipping schedules, and customs reforms. In war, the same spaces reveal another function. They become evacuation routes, military supply lines, refuge corridors, strategic targets, bargaining chips, and symbols of sovereignty. The port is not outside war. It is one of the infrastructures through which war is organized, supplied, escaped, financed, and remembered.

This dissertation has followed that insight across three Red Sea port cities: Portsudan, Djibouti, and Aqaba. Each chapter examined a different configuration of port imperialism. Portsudan showed how foreign port ambitions collided with local sovereignty, Beja politics, labor institutions, and protest. Djibouti showed how a small state used its strategic location to bargain with larger powers, even as concessionary arrangements exposed the limits of legal and infrastructural sovereignty. Aqaba showed how UAE-backed port, tourism, and real-estate projects succeeded where the Jordanian state could centralize authority, manage tribal structures, and turn security into a condition for investment. Together, these chapters show that Red Sea ports are not simply nodes in global trade. They are arenas where sovereignty is leased, contested, secured, bypassed, and sometimes violently remade.

The argument of this conclusion is not that ports alone cause wars. Rather, it is that competition over ports, corridors, resource routes, logistics infrastructures, and coastal sovereignty can become part of the political economy through which wars are made possible. Wars also remake ports. They

alter the value of routes, shift the direction of trade, militarize commercial spaces, and produce new port hierarchies. A city that appears peripheral in peacetime can become central in war. A port that had been treated as an economic asset can suddenly become the last functioning gate of the state.

This is what happened to Portsudan after April 15, 2023. As Khartoum became a battlefield, Portsudan became the state's remaining window to the world. Foreign evacuations, humanitarian movement, military coordination, diplomatic contact, and civilian escape all passed through the same city whose port had long been treated as a source of customs revenue, strategic access, and foreign investment. The war did not invent Portsudan's importance. It revealed it.

5.2 Friction, Ports and Violent Connection

Throughout this dissertation, I have used Anna Tsing's concept of friction to think about global connection. Friction does not mean simple obstruction. It names the uneven encounters through which global projects become possible, contested, and transformed (Tsing 2005, 1–6). Ports are ideal sites for thinking with friction because they are built to promise smooth circulation while depending on dense social and political arrangements. Cargo moves only when workers, police, customs officials, companies, state agencies, shipping agents, truck drivers, local authorities, and regional actors are brought into workable alignment. When that alignment fails, the port becomes a site of delay, dispute, stoppage, and sometimes violence.

In Portsudan, friction appeared in the tension between concessionary modernization and local authority. Outside investors and national officials often described the port through the language of inefficiency, delay, modernization, and global standards. But for workers, Beja leaders, traders,

and local residents, the port was not an empty technical system waiting to be improved. It was a social world. It was a place of employment, patronage, dignity, protest, and regional claim-making. Efforts to reorganize the port therefore raised deeper questions: who controls the gate, who has access to work, who receives revenue, who negotiates with foreign companies, and who has the right to decide the coast's future?

In Djibouti, friction appeared in legal and geopolitical form. The state's strategic location made it attractive to global powers, but also gave it leverage. Djibouti could host foreign military bases, lease port facilities, and position itself as a gatekeeper to Ethiopia and the Bab al-Mandab. Yet this leverage produced new vulnerabilities. Port concessions, arbitration, debt, and competing external interests became mechanisms through which sovereignty was both strengthened and constrained. Djibouti's friction was not simply local resistance against foreign capital. It was the state's own effort to maneuver within a crowded geopolitical field.

In Aqaba, friction appeared as controlled inclusion and selective exclusion. UAE-backed development succeeded because the Jordanian state could secure the city, manage local tribal structures, and present Aqaba as a stable platform for investment. Yet the city was not frictionless. Its border with Israel, its proximity to Egypt and Saudi Arabia, its tribal histories, its special economic zone, and its tourism enclaves all showed that global capital had to move through a carefully managed local and regional order. Aqaba's apparent success was not the absence of friction. It was the state's ability to discipline and organize friction in ways that made investment possible.

This conclusion add a final product of friction: conflagration. Friction can reach a point where it is not productive, but rather conflictual. Violent friction occurs when disputes over movement,

infrastructure, sovereignty, and authority are no longer mediated through contracts, tenders, protests, patronage, or legal struggle, but are reorganized through armed force. It is not the opposite of logistics. It is logistics under the sign of coercion. In war, checkpoints replace customs counters. Armed men control roads. Houses become barracks. Hotels become evacuation hubs. Ports become military corridors. Passports, lists, convoys, and armed permission determine who can move and who must remain.

The Sudan war made this form of friction unavoidable. Before April 2023, the struggle over Sudan's Red Sea coast appeared mainly as a struggle over concessions, privatization, Abu Amama, DP World, AD Ports, local protest, and Beja sovereignty. After April 15, those struggles did not disappear. They became entangled with armed force, external patronage, militarized roads, and the collapse of the capital. The port remained central, but its meaning changed. It was no longer only a site where sovereignty might be leased or contested. It became a site through which sovereignty survived.

5.3 Three ports, three configurations of sovereignty

These three configurations can be pictured as a web, a hub, and a hierarchy. Portsudan resembles a web in which sovereignty is dispersed among interconnected actors. The central government and the Sudan Sea Ports Corporation possess formal ownership, but everyday authority is distributed among port managers, engineers, customs officials, police officers, unions, *kallat*, traders, and Beja political and tribal organizations. No single actor controls the entire system. During ordinary operations, SSPC managers, customs officials, and port police exercise considerable authority. During moments of political conflict, however, workers and Beja organizations can close roads and gates, giving them an effective veto over the movement of cargo and the implementation of

concessions. Gulf companies may possess capital, but they cannot easily convert that capital into control without negotiating this crowded social field.

Djibouti more closely resembles a hub-and-spoke arrangement. The presidency and state port authorities occupy the center, while foreign companies, lenders, military tenants, and neighboring Ethiopia form the surrounding spokes. The executive state has the greatest immediate influence because it can award or cancel concessions, lease military sites, and regulate access to the national gateway. Yet each external relationship limits its freedom in a different way. DP World exerts pressure through contracts and international arbitration; Chinese actors possess leverage through finance and infrastructure; Ethiopia matters because its trade sustains the corridor; and foreign militaries contribute rents while embedding Djibouti within wider security agendas. Sovereignty is therefore concentrated at the center but exposed to pressure from every direction.

Aqaba resembles a hierarchy. At its apex are the monarchy, the national government, the security apparatus, the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority, and the Aqaba Development Corporation. These institutions control zoning, land transfers, permits, security, and the implementation of development projects. Emirati investors occupy an influential position within this hierarchy because they provide capital and undertake major projects, but their influence depends on the Jordanian state's ability to make land available and manage local claims. Huwaitat communities, workers, and other residents possess social and territorial claims, but these claims are usually channeled through state institutions rather than converted into direct veto power. The state-development-security coalition therefore exercises the greatest influence over events.

Seen in these terms, sovereignty is distributed differently in each case. Portsudan is dispersed and contested, with local actors capable of stopping circulation. Djibouti is centralized but externally

encircled, with the state bargaining among powerful partners. Aqaba is hierarchical and managed, with centralized state authority enabling external investment while containing local friction.

To show how this comparison emerges from the dissertation as a whole, I return first to the conceptual framework established in the introduction before tracing each configuration through the three empirical chapters. The introduction developed the dissertation's central concept: port imperialism. I used this term to describe a form of regional power that works through infrastructure rather than direct territorial rule. In the Red Sea, Gulf-based firms and states do not simply invest in ports. They seek to reorganize corridors, customs systems, logistics routes, free zones, coastal land, and hinterland access around their own strategic and commercial interests. This is why ports matter beyond trade. They are gateways into hinterlands, tools of regional influence, and places where global capital encounters local authority.

The introduction also situated this project in relation to scholarship on logistics, sovereignty, empire, and maritime capitalism. Ports appear in policy language as nodes of development and efficiency, but in practice they are dense political spaces. They connect sea and land, but they also connect workers, states, companies, militias, tribes, customs officers, investors, and military planners. Ports are where the abstractions of globalization become concrete: in roads, cranes, scanned containers, delayed shipments, land deals, border controls, and labor disputes.

Chapter 2, on Portsudan, showed what happens when port imperialism meets a socially dense coast. Portsudan was built as a colonial port to replace Suakin and to connect Sudan's interior to imperial trade routes. After independence, it became part of a national public infrastructure project. The Sea Ports Corporation, railway links, ship-repair facilities, workshops, skilled technicians, and

port labor systems made the port more than a gate for cargo. It was an institution of public expertise and a source of livelihood for the eastern region.

Yet this public system was gradually weakened. Sanctions, state neglect, privatization pressures, containerization, spare-parts shortages, and the erosion of public-sector capacity transformed the port. Containerization reduced the importance of older hand-loading labor systems while increasing the value of cranes, chassis, scanners, software, and paperwork. The kallat did not disappear, but their position changed. The port became more dependent on technical systems and external expertise at the same time that local workers faced greater insecurity.

The chapter argued that Portsudan was not an empty infrastructure waiting for modernization. It was politically inhabited. Beja workers, unions, kallat, traders, tribal authorities, municipal officials, port police, engineers, customs officials, and Sea Ports Corporation managers all occupied positions in the movement of goods. This made concession politics especially sensitive. A foreign concession was not only a commercial contract. It was a possible transfer of authority over gates, cargo, labor, revenue, land, and the future of the coast.

This is why protest mattered. When roads were blocked and gates were closed, protesters did not merely interrupt logistics. They revealed the dependence of the national economy on a region long treated as peripheral. Stoppage became a way to make sovereignty visible. It showed that those who made cargo move could also stop it, and therefore had a claim on how movement should be governed. The proposed Abu Amama port north of Portsudan must be understood in this context. It was presented as a development project, but it also offered a way to bypass the crowded politics of Portsudan. If Portsudan was too full of unions, Beja claims, labor institutions, municipal politics,

and memories of protest, Abu Amama appeared to outside investors and national officials as a less crowded gate.

Chapter 3, on Djibouti, examined a different configuration. Djibouti is often described as a small state dependent on external powers, but the chapter showed that its position is more complex. Its location at the Bab al-Mandab gives it unusual leverage. Foreign military bases, port concessions, container terminals, rail corridors, and regional trade routes make Djibouti a gatekeeper state. Yet that gatekeeping position also produces vulnerability. The more Djibouti becomes valuable to global and regional powers, the more its sovereignty is mediated through contracts, arbitration, debt, military rents, and infrastructure deals.

The conflict over Doraleh demonstrated that port concessions are never only commercial agreements. They are struggles over jurisdiction, reputation, law, and future access. Djibouti's state power rested partly on its ability to host competing powers while preventing any single external actor from fully controlling the national gateway. The state could use its location to bargain upward, but it also had to manage the risks that came with being a logistics hub. Legal disputes with DP World, Chinese financing, Ethiopian dependence, and foreign military presence all made Djibouti's sovereignty both powerful and exposed.

The Djibouti chapter therefore complicated simple narratives of dependency. Djibouti did not merely receive port imperialism. It bargained with it, redirected it, and sometimes resisted it. But resistance did not mean autonomy in any simple sense. Djibouti's ability to maneuver depended on the very strategic conditions that made it vulnerable to external pressure. Its sovereignty was layered across contracts, bases, corridors, debt, and diplomacy. In this sense, Djibouti showed that port imperialism does not always appear as foreign domination over a passive state. It can also

appear as a high-stakes negotiation in which a small state uses geography as leverage while accepting new forms of exposure.

Chapter 4, on Aqaba, showed a third outcome. Aqaba represents the most successful case of UAE-backed port and urban development in this dissertation. Unlike Portsudan, where protest and local sovereignty disrupted concessionary ambition, and unlike Djibouti, where the state pushed back through legal and geopolitical maneuvering, Aqaba offered a more controlled environment. Jordan's centralized state, its long management of tribal relations, its peace treaty with Israel, its security apparatus, and the Aqaba Special Economic Zone created conditions favorable to external investment.

Yet Aqaba was not frictionless. Its transformation into a tourism and logistics hub required the management of security, local access, tribal authority, border politics, and urban exclusion. Ayla, Marsa Zayed, the cruise terminal, port digitalization projects, and the expansion of tourism infrastructure all showed how Gulf-backed development can reshape a city beyond the terminal. In Aqaba, port imperialism did not appear primarily as a struggle over a container concession. It appeared as a wider remaking of the urban coast: tourism enclaves, selective access, real-estate development, border security, free-zone governance, and a desire to turn Aqaba into a "Red Sea Dubai."

Aqaba's apparent success therefore confirms the dissertation's larger argument. Port imperialism works best where the state can discipline friction, manage local claims, and present selective access as stability. The UAE's projects in Aqaba succeeded not because Aqaba lacked local politics, but because the Jordanian state was able to channel those politics through institutions, security arrangements, and development authorities. This is what made Aqaba different from Portsudan. In

Portsudan, local sovereignty interrupted the concessionary project. In Aqaba, state sovereignty made Gulf-backed investment possible.

Taken together, the chapters show that port imperialism is not one thing. It succeeds, fails, or mutates depending on the local configuration of sovereignty. In Portsudan, it met a dense social field and looked for a bypass. In Djibouti, it encountered a gatekeeper state that used external competition as leverage. In Aqaba, it advanced through a centralized state that could translate local authority and security into an investment environment. The Red Sea is therefore not simply a corridor between Europe, Asia, and Africa. It is a political field in which ports become instruments of regional order.

Table 1. Distribution of sovereignty across the three ports

Form of power	Port Sudan	Djibouti	Aqaba
Formal-legal authority	The central government and Sudan Sea Ports Corporation own and formally govern the port.	The presidency and state port authorities exercise concentrated legal authority.	The monarchy, national government, Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority, and Aqaba Development Corporation exercise concentrated legal authority.
Operational control	SSPC managers, engineers, customs officers, port police, unions, <i>kallat</i> , and traders share control over everyday movement.	Port authorities and the security apparatus exercise relatively centralized operational control.	Development authorities and security agencies control land allocation, permits, access, and project implementation.
Financial and contractual leverage	Gulf investors (DP World and AD Ports) and proposed concessionaires possess capital but limited authority when local opposition blocks implementation.	DP World, Chinese financiers and operators, foreign military tenants, and Ethiopia exert substantial but competing forms of leverage.	Emirati and other foreign investors exercise strong influence, but largely through state-controlled development institutions.
Territorial and social power	Beja organizations, unions, workers, traders, and tribal authorities possess substantial power to stop roads, close gates, and disrupt national trade.	In the conflicts examined here, influence is concentrated in executive and port institutions rather than in local veto coalitions.	Huwaitat communities, workers, and residents make claims on land and employment, but these claims are generally channeled through state institutions.
Most influential actors during key events	No single actor dominates. The state holds formal authority, while local coalitions possess considerable operational and veto power.	The executive state is the principal broker, although external actors can impose costs through contracts, debt, arbitration, military rents, and corridor dependence.	The state-development-security coalition exercises the greatest influence and creates the conditions under which external capital can operate.
Resulting configuration	Distributed and contested sovereignty; concessions can be blocked or redirected toward bypass projects.	Brokered and exposed sovereignty; the state bargains among external powers while accepting new vulnerabilities.	Centralized and managed sovereignty; investment advances because local friction is contained and institutionally channeled.

5.4 Ports make wars and wars make ports

The connection between war, trade, and port-making is not new in the Red Sea. In biblical tradition, the northeastern edge of the Red Sea appears as a place where kings imagined maritime power. The account of Solomon's fleet at Etzion-Geber, beside Eloth on the shore of the Red Sea, marks the Gulf of Aqaba as an early site where sovereignty, trade, and military ambition converged (1 Kings 9:26). Later, Ayla, the port city now associated with Aqaba, served Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic worlds as a place of caravan exchange, pilgrimage movement, military passage, and maritime trade (Parker 1999, 20–21).. Across these different periods, the Red Sea port was never only a commercial site. It was a place where trade, war, religion, and transport met.

This older history matters because it prevents us from treating the militarization of ports as a new or exceptional development. Red Sea ports have long been made through the convergence of commerce and coercion. They moved pilgrims, soldiers, merchants, grain, weapons, and imperial ambitions. What has changed is not the link between ports and power, but the form that power takes. Earlier empires sought control through garrisons, customs posts, pilgrimage routes, and naval presence. Contemporary port imperialism works through concessions, free zones, management contracts, digital systems, security partnerships, and regional logistics corridors. Yet the underlying question remains similar: who controls movement through the coast, and whose sovereignty is strengthened or weakened by that control?

Charles Tilly famously argued that states make war and wars make states (Tilly 1985, 169–70). In the contemporary Red Sea, this dissertation suggests a related formulation: ports make wars, and wars remake ports. This does not mean that ports alone cause wars. Rather, it means that

competition over ports, corridors, resource routes, and logistics infrastructures can become part of the political economy through which armed conflict becomes possible. It also means that war transforms the meaning and function of ports. A commercial gate can become a military base. A container terminal can become an evacuation corridor. A free zone can become a strategic asset. A coastal city can become a wartime capital.

Laleh Khalili's work is central to this argument. She shows that maritime transportation is not simply an enabling adjunct to trade, but part of the fabric of global capitalism. Ports and shipping routes emerge through histories of labor, empire, war, pilgrimage, capital, and state planning (Khalili 2020, 3–6). Routes are not simply the shortest distance between two points. They are made and unmade through power, technology, law, conflict, and infrastructure. This is why conflict can create ports and why ports can redirect conflict. As I argued in my review of Khalili's book, international competition around economic nodes can make war, and war can remake economic nodes (Zaidan 2023, 180–81).

The Red Sea has long carried this convergence of war and trade. Ottoman expansion into the Red Sea was tied to the protection of pilgrimage routes, the struggle against Portuguese maritime power, and the effort to control commerce between the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and the Hijaz. British interest in the region was similarly shaped by the protection of routes to India, the security of the Suez Canal, and the need to control strategic coastal points. Aqaba, Aden, Suakin, Massawa, Djibouti, and Portsudan all became important not only because goods moved through them, but because military power, imperial rivalry, and state-making projects also moved through them.

The twentieth century deepened this relationship. The closure of the Suez Canal after the 1967 war changed shipping routes, oil movement, and port hierarchies. Wars in the Gulf shifted cargo toward some ports and away from others. The Lebanese Civil War, the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, the War on Terror, the Yemen War, and the recent militarization of the Red Sea all show that ports are remade by conflict. Some ports grow because war diverts trade. Others decline because insecurity makes them risky. Some become military platforms. Others become humanitarian corridors. Ports are therefore not stable containers of commerce. They are historical products of conflict, investment, security, and displacement.

The war in Sudan brought this argument to the center of my fieldwork. Before April 2023, the struggle over Sudan's Red Sea coast appeared mainly as a struggle over concessions, protests, foreign investment, and local authority. The proposed Abu Amama project, the failed attempts to enter Portsudan, the role of business networks, and the interest of Gulf-backed companies all belonged to the world of contracts and development plans. After April 15, that world did not disappear. It became entangled with armed force.

The war should not be reduced to a single port project. It emerged from a wider crisis of Sudanese state power: the unresolved relationship between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, the failures of the transitional period, the political economy of gold, external patronage, counterrevolutionary regional politics, and the militarization of the post-Bashir state. But the war also revealed that control over Sudan's routes, resources, and ports was part of the broader struggle over sovereignty. The RSF's expansion, its external relationships, its recruitment efforts, its financial networks, and its interest in the eastern coast all showed that the conflict was not only about who would rule Khartoum. It was also about who would control Sudan's gateways.

This is where the concept of port imperialism helps explain the stakes of the war without reducing the war to a single cause. Port imperialism is not only an investment project. It is a project of control over movement. That movement includes containers, livestock, gold, wheat, fuel, soldiers, refugees, and diplomatic evacuation routes. The same coast that had attracted port companies and Gulf capital became essential to the survival of the Sudanese state after Khartoum collapsed into fighting. The same Red Sea that offered a corridor for investment became a corridor for escape.

5.5 War in Play: From Khartoum to Portsudan

Two days before the war began, on April 13, 2023, I spoke with my doctoral adviser, Professor Danny Hoffman, about the status of my field research. He was worried about reports of rising tension between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the RSF. I confirmed that the reports were real and that rumors of an imminent clash were circulating in Khartoum. Yet I also downplayed the danger. I thought, or perhaps hoped, that the confrontation was another political performance in Sudan's unstable transition. Two days later, the war began.

Planning field research is difficult. Planning survival is something else. Ivana Maček writes that war disrupts the ordinary ways people orient themselves in the world. The routines that make peacetime intelligible suddenly become useless, and people are forced to act amid chaos, emergency, and collapsing meanings (Maček 2009, 7). This was how Khartoum felt in the first days of the war. The city did not simply become dangerous. It became difficult to read. Roads that had been familiar became uncertain. Neighborhoods that had been desirable became traps. Rumors moved faster than verified information. Every sound demanded interpretation: artillery, anti-aircraft fire, airstrikes, motorcycles, generators, shouted orders, silence.

My family and I sheltered first in our home in El Taif, close to one of the RSF's major camps and near Khartoum International Airport. In peacetime, the neighborhood's proximity to the airport and central Khartoum had made it convenient and desirable. In war, those same advantages became dangers. The airport witnessed some of the heaviest fighting in the first days. RSF troops scattered through nearby streets. Airstrikes targeted their positions. Anti-aircraft fire sounded close enough to shake the house. We chose what seemed to be the safest place inside and rationed food, water, and electricity as the situation deteriorated.

At first, I assumed the army would quickly defeat the RSF because of its airpower and heavier weapons. That assumption collapsed as the days passed. The RSF spread through civilian neighborhoods, occupied buildings, used homes and streets as cover, and made the war harder to contain. Electricity failed in our neighborhood. The summer heat became unbearable. Movement became risky. The city's infrastructure, which had seemed ordinary a few days before, became part of the geography of danger.

The University of Washington's Office of Global Travel Security contacted me and began working with an evacuation agency. At that point, I started to understand that the conflict might not end quickly, at least not in my neighborhood. The agency offered two possible evacuation routes: one north to Egypt and another east to Portsudan. The Egypt route seemed faster at first, and we were briefly prepared to take it. But reports from the border were alarming. Crowds were stranded. It was unclear who would be allowed to enter. Egyptian policy toward Sudanese fleeing the war remained uncertain. We then changed course and decided to wait for a route to Portsudan, where we could take a ship to Jeddah because we had Saudi visas.

After several days, we moved from our house to my uncle's house in Al-Nakheel Street. Our car had been hit by anti-aircraft bullets inside our home, but it still moved. We packed clothes and food and drove through streets that had become hollowed out by fear. My uncle's house was safer. It was farther from the main clashes and had a basement that gave some protection from shelling. It also had more stable electricity. During those days, small acts of help became enormous. My uncle's security guard, Ishag, brought bread from a local bakery. A nearby seller provided vegetables. My wife prepared iftar meals during Ramadan under conditions no one had imagined when the month began.

Eid al-Fitr arrived under the sound of war. In Sudan, Eid is a time of family visits, food, movement, and reunion. That year, it was marked by brief truces, uncertainty, and gratitude for survival. We continued looking for evacuation options. With help from UW's emergency team, I applied for a U.S. Embassy land evacuation convoy from Khartoum to Portsudan. The convoy was available for U.S. citizens, permanent residents, and their families. We began preparing again.

Before leaving, I wanted to return briefly to our house to collect money and essential items. My wife was hesitant. The streets were dangerous, and she still hoped the conflict might end before we had to evacuate. She was also worried that leaving Khartoum would mean not seeing her family in Omdurman for a long time. We went anyway. Our neighborhood looked empty and gloomy. RSF fighters moved through the streets in stolen cars and motorbikes, carrying rifles. One stopped our car at what seemed like an informal checkpoint and then let us pass when he saw my wife. We reached the house and found the door still intact. Later, we learned that the RSF broke into it and used it as a barracks. While we were inside, we heard an airstrike and rushed to finish packing. By the time we returned and got internet access, we learned that we had missed the first embassy convoy while waiting for confirmation that my wife could join.

I was also worried about my grandparents, who lived in Al-Riyad, another neighborhood affected by heavy clashes and airstrikes. RSF-linked financial and security companies had used many buildings in that area, and I later learned that parts of the neighborhood had effectively become RSF weapons storage sites among civilian homes. My grandparents resisted leaving. Their home was their long-time place of safety and memory. They had water and electricity. My grandfather's mobility was limited by a recent hip surgery. The idea of leaving felt impossible to them. When I received confirmation that I could bring family members on the U.S. convoy, I moved to their house to try to convince them.

It was the first time I had seen family members since the war began. Seeing my grandparents alive and in good health was an immense relief. We ate together during Eid, even though Eid had been emptied of its usual social life. After two days, I arranged transportation to the convoy pickup point in Soba, south of Khartoum. My grandparents still refused to leave despite repeated appeals. Their driver took us to the pickup point. On the way, we passed through multiple RSF checkpoints. The streets were mostly empty except for people searching for buses out of Khartoum. At one place, families and children waited on the ground for transportation. It looked like a temporary station for people buying their way out of the capital.

The pickup point was a golf course in Soba owned by Osama Daoud, one of Sudan's most prominent businessmen. We registered our names and waited. Around 3 p.m., the convoy left. It consisted of several buses, each with a U.S. Embassy staff member, but without visible armed escort. We crossed Soba Bridge toward East Nile. For a while there was little RSF presence, but once we reached Sharq al-Neel, the situation changed. RSF checkpoints appeared along the road. Burned cars, empty streets, and covered bodies marked the landscape. RSF soldiers stopped the convoy several times.



Figure 30 US Evacuation Convoy Leaving Khartoum

It was our first direct encounter with RSF soldiers during the war. Although they knew the convoy was organized by the U.S. Embassy, they searched buses and humiliated passengers. One RSF commander boarded and lectured us about patriotism. He asked why we were leaving Sudan for “Trump’s country.” He accused us of cowardice and said we were going to the United States to work as cleaners. At another checkpoint, RSF soldiers stole smartphones from passengers in a bus ahead of us. When we finally entered an army-controlled area, the mood inside the bus changed. An army officer boarded, greeted us, and wished us a safe journey. The relief among passengers was immediate.

We arrived in Shendi around 9 p.m., ate, drank tea, and continued east. The road was rough and uneven, making sleep almost impossible. We stopped for Fajr prayers near Sinkat and reached Portsudan around 9 a.m. The city looked very different from my previous visits. The Coral Hotel, once a prestigious hotel and social landmark, had become an evacuation processing hub for the United Nations, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Hundreds of evacuees crowded the

halls. There were not enough chairs. People waited for instructions that did not come. Embassy staff who had accompanied the convoy had limited information. Rooms were unavailable because foreign missions and international organizations occupied them. Rental apartments and hotels were full. The city was overwhelmed.



Figure 31 Coral Hotel in Port Sudan turned into an evacuation processing hub

During my earlier fieldwork, Portsudan hotels and apartments had been cheap and available. Now the city was crowded with diplomats, evacuees, displaced families, foreign nationals, soldiers, and aid workers. My father eventually arranged for a family friend to host us. We expected to stay one night. We stayed four. The U.S. evacuation process was poorly coordinated after U.S. personnel had already been evacuated by air from Khartoum. The British evacuation appeared more organized, with military personnel visibly present from the day we arrived. Portsudan had become the logistical center of evacuation, but the city itself was unprepared for the scale of need.

Every aspect of the city was marked by war. Hotels and clubs that had once hosted weddings, meetings, and leisure had become evacuation hubs. Public spaces were filled with displaced people. Some foreign nationals erected tents on sidewalks because no shelters were available. Security checkpoints multiplied. The military presence intensified. Portsudan became the temporary capital of the country. The Sudanese Armed Forces coordinated with foreign militaries and embassies to organize evacuations by sea. Civilian and military vessels moved through the port. The United States, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, and other states used the Red Sea route to move people out of Sudan. The port space, once described in the language of cargo, customs, and trade, had become a militarized infrastructure of evacuation.

On May 4, we finally boarded the USNS Brunswick. The moment captured the central argument of this conclusion. The port that had been imagined as a commercial gateway became a military evacuation site. Civilian fear moved through military logistics. Families, passports, embassy lists, naval vessels, port security, and Red Sea routes converged on the quay. The same sea that had attracted empires, traders, pilgrims, port companies, and Gulf investors now carried evacuees away from a collapsing capital. The port was not a backdrop to the war. It was one of the infrastructures through which the war was lived.



Figure 32 USNS Brunswick that evacuated us from Portsudan to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

5.6 Port imperialism after war

The Sudan war forces a reconsideration of port imperialism. Before the war, port imperialism could be analyzed mainly through concessions, privatization, free zones, and logistics corridors. After the war, it must also be analyzed through militias, evacuation routes, arms flows, external patronage, and the wartime transformation of coastal cities. The same infrastructures that promise circulation can become instruments of coercion. The same actors who speak the language of development may rely on security arrangements that deepen local vulnerability. The same port that appears as a national asset may become a prize in a regional struggle.

This is why the Red Sea cannot be understood as a neutral maritime corridor. It is a contested political space linking the Gulf, the Horn of Africa, the Nile Valley, the Levant, and the Indian Ocean. Its ports are shaped by older imperial histories, postcolonial state-building, labor struggles, tribal authority, Cold War alignments, Gulf capital, and contemporary wars. The Red Sea is not

only crossed by ships. It is made by the conflicts and bargains that decide which ships move, which ports expand, which coasts are bypassed, and which communities bear the costs of movement.

The dissertation's central contribution is to show that sovereignty in Red Sea ports is layered and shifting rather than singular. It is exercised by states, but also by port authorities, customs officials, police, tribal leaders, labor organizations, companies, investors, militaries, and foreign governments. Concession agreements do not replace sovereignty. They redistribute it. Free zones do not remove politics. They reorganize it. Security arrangements do not simply protect trade. They decide who may move, who must wait, who can profit, and who can be excluded.

Portsudan, Djibouti, and Aqaba each reveal a different version of this layered sovereignty. Portsudan shows the power of local and communal authority to disrupt port imperialism, but also the vulnerability of such disruption when regional actors seek alternative routes or coercive partners. Djibouti shows how a small state can turn strategic location into bargaining power, even while becoming entangled in legal, financial, and military dependencies. Aqaba shows how external investment can succeed when a centralized state turns local authority and security into conditions for global capital. None of these cases fits a simple model of domination or resistance. Each shows how global logistics is made through negotiation, coercion, adaptation, and refusal.

The war in Sudan does not stand outside these cases. It is the event that reveals their stakes. When ports are treated only as instruments of development, the violence required to secure them disappears from view. When they are treated only as military assets, the labor, land, and social worlds that sustain them disappear. This dissertation has tried to hold both dimensions together. Ports are infrastructures of trade and war, development and displacement, sovereignty and

dependence. They are places where global capitalism touches the ground, but the ground is never empty.

5.7 Conclusion:

I began this project by following ports as sites of investment and regional competition. I ended it by leaving war-torn Sudan through the same coastal system I had studied. That movement from research site to evacuation route is not only biographical. It is analytical. It shows that the infrastructures we study can become the infrastructures through which we survive. Ports are not abstract nodes in global networks. They are lived spaces where workers wait for wages, families search for passage, officials guard documents, investors seek concessions, militaries organize movement, and communities struggle over the right to remain.

Port imperialism in the Red Sea is therefore not simply a story of Gulf expansion. It is a story of how global ambition enters coastal life and how coastal life answers back. Sometimes the answer is negotiation. Sometimes it is protest. Sometimes it is legal dispute. Sometimes it is bureaucratic delay. Sometimes, when politics breaks down and armed actors take over the routes of movement, it is war.

The promise of logistics is that goods, capital, and people can move smoothly across space. The Red Sea teaches a different lesson. Movement is never smooth. It is made through friction. It depends on histories, workers, roads, ports, documents, armed actors, local authorities, and political bargains. When those bargains fail, the port does not stop mattering. It matters more. It becomes the place where sovereignty is tested, where war is supplied, where escape is organized, and where the future of the coast is fought over.

This is the paradox at the heart of port imperialism. The more external powers try to make ports frictionless, the more they encounter the people, histories, and sovereignties that make ports possible in the first place. The Red Sea is not a blank corridor awaiting development. It is a crowded sea, bordered by crowded coasts. Its ports carry containers, soldiers, pilgrims, refugees, tourists, weapons, food, and memory. To understand them is to understand that trade and war are not separate histories. They are joined at the quay.

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