

The GLOCEPS

Policy Brief

Research and Analysis in Foreign Policy Pillar

Implications of the Middle East Conflict on the Geopolitics of the Horn of Africa Region

Denis Muniu, Veronica Chepseba, Roseline Kiswii



Photo credit: NPR

Executive Summary

The Middle East conflict dynamics have profound impacts on the diplomatic, security, and economic landscape of the Horn of Africa (HoA) region. On one dimension, Israel has been involved in a protracted conflict encompassing Iranian-backed proxies, including Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis, and Iran itself. On the other hand, Syria, following the ouster of President Bashar al-Assad by the rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), is now mired in renewed conflict. These dynamics have diverted international attention and resources away from pressing regional crises, such as the ongoing civil war in Sudan and the effects of climate change, thereby exacerbating these challenges. Additionally,

the growing alliances between extremist groups like Al Shabaab in the HoA region and Middle Eastern factions, such as the Houthis, pose significant security threats to the region. The undercurrents also influence the domestic affairs of HoA states, affecting both economic and political spheres, further complicating the region's geopolitical landscape. To mitigate these impacts, this brief recommends that HoA states should robustly monitor extremist networks and the evolving dynamics of the Syrian conflict; maintain strategic neutrality; convene regional dialogues with multilateral partners to address arising vulnerabilities and address the ongoing war in Sudan; enhance naval



cooperation to secure regional waters; strengthen counter-terrorism and intelligence efforts through Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD); prioritize the allocation of financial and technical resources to support national and regional climate action plans; and boost intra-regional trade.

Context

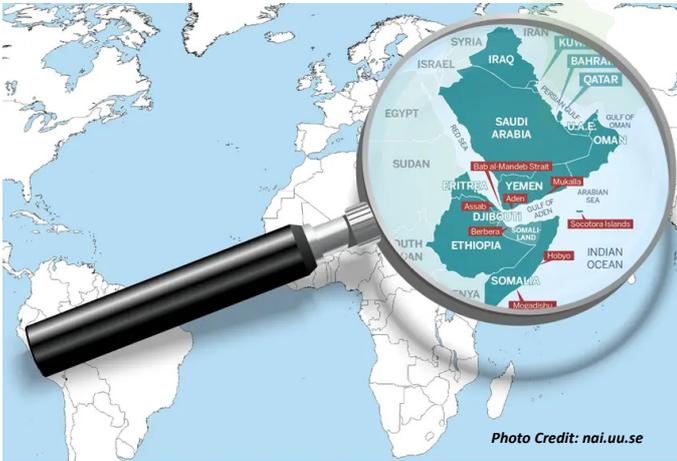
The Middle East conflict theatre remains a complex and dynamic landscape, marked by ongoing conflicts involving both state and non-state actors, all of which have significant consequences for the HoA region. A notable recent development in the Middle East region has been the removal of President Bashar al-Assad from power by the HTS with the backing of Turkey. Assad's authoritarian regime, widely unpopular among the Syrian population, had relied heavily on support from allies such as Russia and Iran. However, as both allies became preoccupied with military engagements elsewhere, Assad's grip on power weakened, culminating in his regime's collapse. Given HTS's connections to Al-Qaeda, its ascension has heightened concerns about extremist influence and regional destabilization. Countries in the HoA, already grappling with significant security challenges, may face spillover effects, including increased terrorism, arms proliferation, and regional insecurity. Israel which borders Syria in the Golan Heights region, has launched targeted airstrikes on Syrian military assets, citing security concerns

over weapons left behind by Assad's regime falling into the hands of extremists. While Israel's actions are framed as preemptive measures to mitigate security risks, they risk opening another conflict front, further increasing regional tensions and vulnerabilities. HTS's rise to power introduces new dynamics with far-reaching implications, not only for Syria but also for the broader Middle East and the HoA regions.

The escalation of the conflict involving Israel, Iranian-backed proxies such as Hamas and Hezbollah, and Iran itself has also had significant implications for the HoA region. Tensions spiked on October 7, 2023, when Hamas launched a coordinated assault on Israel from Gaza, provoking a fierce military response that has resulted in thousands of casualties and the displacement of over 1.9 million people in Gaza. The crisis has since broadened to include the Houthi rebels in Yemen and an intensified role for Hezbollah on Israel's Northern front, where missile attacks have been met with targeted Israeli operations, including the killing of long-time Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and other Hezbollah figureheads. The conflict further intensified on October 26, 2024, when Israel targeted Iranian missile production facilities and air defense systems in retaliation for an earlier Iranian strike on Israel. This internationalized conflict has drawn major global powers into the fray, particularly the United States of America (USA), raising the risk of broader regional instability.

The conflict's escalation can be linked to both domestic and international factors. Domestically, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's military approach, intensified by upcoming elections in 2026, seeks to bolster and win public support by eliminating threats from Hezbollah and Hamas. Moreover, Netanyahu's idiosyncratic leadership style marked by his hardline stance and risk tolerance has



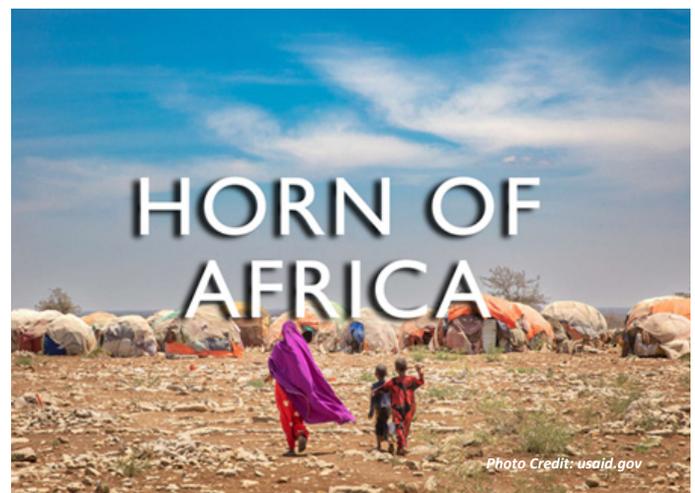


played a key role in perpetuating the conflict, as his decisions often prioritize assertive action over diplomatic compromise. This approach, coupled with the deeply rooted grievances of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has hindered long-term stability and reinforced cycles of retaliation. Additionally, Netanyahu's view of the Biden administration as indecisive has encouraged Israel to act independently of American influence, complicating regional diplomacy. This has seen the International Criminal Court (ICC) issue arrest warrants for Netanyahu, his former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant and Hamas leader Mohammed Deif on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Nonetheless, Netanyahu condemned the arrest warrant and termed it as anti-Semitic. Internationally, the conflict functions as a proxy battle, with Israel supported by the USA and Hamas and Hezbollah backed by Iran. Recent missile strikes from Iran, following the death of Hezbollah's Nasrallah, highlight the extent of this proxy dimension, adding complexity to the conflict and elevating the risk of broader regional insecurity.

The election of President Donald Trump in the November 2024 USA elections raises concerns about the implications for Middle East tensions, particularly in light of his strong pro-Israel stance during his first term. His policies previously included recognizing Israeli settlements in the West Bank, a move considered controversial

internationally. Despite positive developments, such as the recently agreed ceasefire deal between Israel and Hezbollah, much remains to be seen in its implementation. The agreement stipulates that Hezbollah should end its armed presence in southern Lebanon within 60 days, while Israeli forces are required to withdraw from the area within the same time frame. Additionally, he has stated that he will not support Syria following his consistent policy of reducing USA involvement in foreign conflicts.

Given its proximity, the HoA is exposed to these geopolitical tensions, and the growing involvement of major powers heightens this risk, positioning the HoA at the edge of a volatile conflict that could reshape its own security landscape and regional stability. Therefore, the Middle East conflict escalation has substantial security, economic, and regional stability implications for the HoA. Already strained by Sudan's civil war, diplomatic tensions over Ethiopia's Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), and disputes around Red Sea access, the region now faces the added threat of diverted global focus and resources, which has reduced international attention to pressing crises in the HoA, including humanitarian concerns in Sudan and climate-related challenges. The Middle East conflict also heightens the risk of radicalization, with groups like Al-Shabaab potentially exploiting



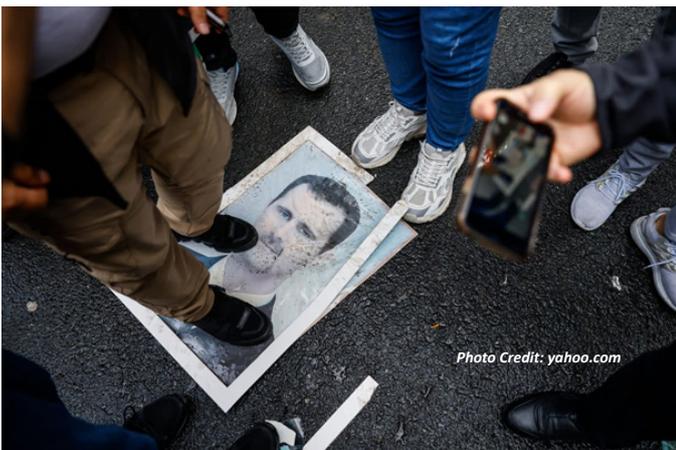
the situation to fuel anti-Israel sentiment and leverage the Palestinian cause to radicalize local communities. This increases the likelihood of new maritime and security threats, endangering trade routes and deepening existing regional tensions. To maintain stability, HoA states need to skillfully navigate these shifting dynamics, balancing immediate domestic concerns with an evolving geopolitical landscape.

Methodology

To examine the implications of the Middle East conflict on the HoA geopolitics, qualitative data was collected through interviews with expert respondents using structured guides. This primary data was complemented by secondary sources, and thematic analysis was conducted to analyze and interpret the findings.

Key Issues

The following key issues are pertinent to implications of the Middle East conflict on the geopolitics of the HoA region.



Syrian security threat

The Syrian crisis, especially the recent fall of Damascus to armed rebels on December 8, 2024, has significant implications for security in the HoA region. The overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad by HTS after 13 years of civil war has created an opportune environment for exploitation by terrorist

groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS. HTS, formerly affiliated with Al-Qaeda, has sought in recent years to rebrand itself as a more moderate entity and an alternative government in Syria. Despite these efforts to distance itself from its extremist roots, HTS remains designated as a terrorist organization by countries such as the USA. Therefore, without a proper government in place, the instability in Syria could enable the activation of sleeper cells and provide Al-Shabaab, a key threat in the HoA, with strategic opportunities to expand its operations through its affiliations with Al-Qaeda. Additionally, Al-Shabaab may leverage the crisis to amplify its recruitment efforts, bolster its ideological narratives, and potentially use the destabilized Syrian landscape as a staging ground for regional attacks.

The military and political ramifications of Assad's fall carry broader regional ramifications. The regime's reliance on Russian and Iranian military support has eroded due to Russia's preoccupation with the Ukraine war and Iran's vulnerabilities following Israeli strikes. This weakening of Assad's allies diminishes the influence of Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shia militias in Iraq, potentially reshaping the power dynamics in the Middle East region. These shifts may reverberate in the HoA, where fragile states such as Somalia and Ethiopia risk destabilization due to shifting regional influences and power struggles. Furthermore, the rise of militant governance under HTS, operating under a conservative Islamist regime with extremist roots, underscores the growing threat of transnational jihadist movements.

The Syrian crisis poses both risks and strategic challenges for international actors like the USA, with significant implications for the HoA region. While the incoming Trump administration has indicated intentions to reduce military involvement, ensuring a stable political transition in Syria is essential to





averting regional spillovers of violence and displacement, which could directly affect the HoA. Against this backdrop, it is imperative for HoA states to closely monitor the evolving dynamics of the Syrian conflict.



Photo Credit: Financial Times

Sudanese civil war

The global community's attention has majorly shifted towards the Middle East, particularly with the ongoing Israel-Hamas-Hezbollah conflict, leading to diminished international focus on Sudan's civil war. The conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which erupted in April 2023, has triggered a catastrophic humanitarian crisis in Sudan, resulting in extensive civilian casualties, mass displacement, dire shortages of food and water, and the collapse of healthcare and essential services. More than 11 million people have been internally displaced, with around 3.1 million seeking refuge in neighboring countries such as Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, Uganda, and South Sudan. The war has also claimed over 23,000 lives in Sudan. However, international focus and media attention has been diverted towards the Israeli conflict, impacting humanitarian aid, diplomatic efforts, and peace negotiations essential to resolving the Sudanese crisis. The USA, which had been co-facilitating the peace process in Sudan with Saudi Arabia through the Jeddah process, has majorly shifted its focus to supporting Israel. This

diversion has emboldened the warring parties in Sudan and prolonged the conflict, with a notable decline in global pressure to halt widespread violations, such as indiscriminate airstrikes, shelling of civilians, and attacks on schools, hospitals, communication networks, and critical water and electricity infrastructure. Donors and international organizations have also prioritized relief for the Middle East conflict, especially in Palestine, leaving Sudan's war-torn population with fewer resources and support.

The diminished focus on the Sudan conflict due to concurrent crises in other regions, notably the Middle East and Ukraine has inadvertently allowed external actors to fuel the Sudanese war by supplying arms to warring factions to pursue their strategic interests, sustaining and intensifying the violence. For instance, the SAF have accused the United Arab Emirates (UAE) of arming the RSF, leading to heightened tensions. Similarly, states such as Iran, Egypt, and Russia have also supported the SAF, with Russia using proxies like the Wagner Group to supply arms to both sides. While the Middle East conflict heightens the risk of spillover into Sudan, potentially resulting in proxy battles, the escalation of the Sudanese war cannot be directly attributed to the Middle East conflict. Despite shared interests in both regions, these actors generally refrain



Photo Credit: Democracy in Africa





from interfering directly in each other's conflicts. Although the dynamics of these conflicts reveal competing interests, they do not necessarily involve direct interference across the two theaters.

The escalation of the Sudan conflict has had negative impacts on the HoA, not only through the influx of refugees but also by destabilizing fragile states like South Sudan, which relies heavily on Sudan for the export of its oil via Port Sudan. The ongoing civil war has severely disrupted these oil exports, which are the mainstay of South Sudan's economy. Oil accounts for 90% of the country's revenue and almost all exports. This disruption is pushing South Sudan towards an economic meltdown, which could exacerbate political instability in a country already facing internal strife. With reduced access to oil revenue, the government is struggling to maintain its economy. If oil exports are not restored back to normalcy, economic collapse and increased political turmoil are likely, intensifying elite infighting over dwindling resources.



Global humanitarian assistance to climate change havocs

The Middle East conflict is severely straining global humanitarian assistance and diverting attention and resources away from climate-related catastrophes in vulnerable regions such as the HoA. This has exposed the incapacity of HoA states in managing these climate change calamities due to their over

reliance on aid. The region, already one of the world's most climate-affected areas, is grappling with worsening conditions of drought, floods, food insecurity, and widespread displacement. For instance, due to the combined impact of climate change and ongoing conflicts, an estimated 26 million people in Sudan face acute hunger. Similarly, Ethiopia and South Sudan are experiencing worsening hunger crises, with millions at risk of starvation. Despite the pressing need for immediate and sustainable resources to address the region's vulnerability to climate change, donor priorities have shifted toward providing emergency relief in conflict zones, including in Ukraine, Lebanon and Gaza Strip. Funding for climate change adaptation and mitigation in regions like HoA has become secondary. To this end, the growing competition for humanitarian aid has exacerbated existing challenges, leaving climate-vulnerable populations with fewer resources to combat the severe impacts of climate change. Moreover, it undermines collective efforts to address climate-related disasters.

Most funders addressing climate-related disasters in the HoA region have framed the region's humanitarian crisis as primarily developmental rather than humanitarian, leading to a reduction in direct humanitarian aid and personnel. This approach has worsened the climate crisis in the region. Humanitarian funding has therefore been redirected to areas of greater interest to donor organizations, such as Gaza and Ukraine.

Compounding the issue, is that most HoA countries have reactive approaches to climate change disasters, addressing the impacts of climate change only after they occur. This leaves them vulnerable and unprepared for effective disaster management. Against this backdrop, integrating a proactive





humanitarian focus complete with dedicated resources, trained personnel, and strong institutions is imperative to enhance resilience and preparedness across the region.



Photo Credit: Em.ImArabic

Al Shabaab- Al Qaeda- Houthi Alliance

The ongoing conflict has solidified ties between the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Shabaab and the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels, significantly threatening the security and stability of the HoA region. While this alliance is entirely not new, it reflects opportunistic cooperation, with both groups leveraging the Middle East conflict to advance their interests. The Houthis benefit financially, while Al-Shabaab gains access to more sophisticated weaponry. Both groups maintain shared links through the Axis of Resistance and the Al-Qaeda network, especially via the Yemen-based Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which has historically provided Al-Shabaab with explosives expertise. Despite their ideological differences and distinct operational theaters, the conflict has fostered a unified stance. Al-Shabaab has framed the Israel-Hamas conflict as part of a broader jihad, aligning with other Al-Qaeda affiliates in celebrating Hamas's October 2023 attack on Israel and organizing pro-Palestine protests in southern Somalia. Similarly, Houthis have launched attacks on ships in the Red Sea in retaliation for Israel's military actions in Gaza. Given their mutual interests, these groups may seek to use their terrorist affiliations to target Israel or its allies in the HoA

region as a means of settling scores and avenging perceived losses.

Security risks in the Horn of Africa now extend from land to maritime domains. The Middle East conflict has intensified international focus on the Red Sea, coinciding with a resurgence of piracy in the lower Western Indian Ocean. This shift has fostered increased insecurity threats in Somalia, creating a conducive environment for Al-Shabaab and Houthi operations at sea. The strengthening ties between these groups heighten concerns over escalating maritime insecurity in this region. The Houthis, experienced in piracy and attacks on Red Sea vessels, may embolden Al-Shabaab to disrupt vital maritime trade routes. This threat is compounded by limited maritime security capacity among HoA nations, particularly in fragile states like Somalia, where governance challenges undermine effective response capabilities.



Photo Credit: thebrief.co.ke

Internal affairs of states

The Middle East conflict has profound ramifications for domestic affairs of HoA states. Economic and trade disruptions along the Red Sea pose a direct threat to these economies, as many HoA countries rely heavily on oil imports from Gulf states and agricultural exports to these markets. The Middle East is home to major oil producers like Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)





and is central to the global oil supply chain. Amid the conflict, Iranian-backed Houthi rebels have escalated attacks on international vessels in retaliation for Israeli strikes, targeting key trade routes through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, passageways that account for 12-15% of global trade and 20% of container shipping. As a result, insurance costs have surged, and vessels are increasingly forced to avoid the Red Sea, opting for longer, costlier routes around the Cape of Good Hope, adding over \$1 million in expenses and up to two-week delays. This disruption tightens oil supply, leading to economic repercussions in the HoA region, where the added strain intensifies inflation and raises the cost of living across already debt-burdened nations.

The displacement of HoA diaspora workers in the Middle East countries such as Lebanon is adversely impacting on household incomes and economic stabilities of HoA states, where remittances play a crucial role. Many migrant workers from the HoA, particularly women employed as domestic laborers, have moved to the Middle East region due to high demand for such roles. However, due to the conflict, many of them are returning home leading to the loss of remittances which play a crucial role in stabilizing HoA economies. For instance, states such as Ethiopia, Somalia, and South Sudan have heavily relied on the diaspora remittances, which make up substantial portions of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) such as 16% in Sudan and 15% in Somalia. Additionally, in October 2024, remittances to Kenya reached \$437.2 million, highlighting their significant role in supporting the national economy. Therefore, the loss of these remittances directly impacts HoA economies increasing poverty and unemployment challenges. The disruption of these remittances

coincides with the HoA's current struggles with economic crises, rising unemployment, and high living costs.

Governments in the region are also facing pressure to align with different factions in the Middle East conflict. The reluctance or refusal to take a stance has heightened tensions, especially in states with large Muslim populations. In several HoA countries, including Kenya, Muslim leaders and organizations are increasing pressure on their governments to support Palestine and denounce Israel's actions. For example, on October 10, 2024, Kenyan Muslim leaders criticized President William Ruto's silence, urging him to take a definitive stance on the Israel-Hamas conflict. Additionally, Somalia has witnessed pro-Palestinian demonstrations condemning the war. This volatile situation presents a dual risk, as it could be exploited by groups like Al Shabaab to stoke local grievances and inflame tensions. With rising media focus on the Israel-Hamas-Hezbollah conflict, there is a growing risk of extremism and violence within the region's Muslim communities.



Photo Credit: theafricareport.com

The Egypt-Ethiopia-Somalia diplomatic tussle

While the Middle East conflict does not directly interfere in diplomatic issues among Egypt, Ethiopia, and Somalia, it shapes the region by reinforcing existing alliances or introducing new areas of





contention, particularly concerning the GERD dispute and Ethiopia's access to the sea. This influence complicates regional dynamics, as overlapping interests among Middle Eastern and HoA actors create shifting alliances and potential friction points. The Middle East and HoA security complexes operate with limited interdependence. Despite overlapping interests, actors in each region are rational and generally avoid direct involvement in each other's conflicts.

Israel may look to its allies including Ethiopia for support if the Middle East conflict escalates, potentially complicating regional alliances. Historically, Israel has supported Ethiopia militarily, including during the Eritrean War of Independence, and has a significant Beta Israel community, with nearly 200,000 Ethiopians of Jewish descent. On the other hand, Israel has long perceived Arab states such as Egypt as potential threats to its security and, in part, supported the GERD project as a strategic counterbalance to Egypt. As a result, should tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia escalate into conflict, Israel might be compelled to support Ethiopia, which could strain its regional relationships. The Horn's proximity to the Middle East means any conflict spillover is likely, with each regional actor's distinct interests contributing to a complex and

evolving landscape.

Conclusion

The escalation of the Middle East conflict threatens the stability of HoA region, as it draws in major global powers and generates ripple effects throughout the region. The HoA faces significant risks to its economic stability, internal security, and diplomatic priorities. The diversion of international attention away from pressing issues in the HoA such as the crisis in Sudan and climate change impacts further exacerbates the region's vulnerabilities. Additionally, growing alliances between Al Shabaab and Iranian-backed rebels heighten security threats, with the potential to destabilize the region further. To safeguard their strategic interests, HoA states should recalibrate their foreign policies to effectively navigate these evolving geopolitical challenges.



Photo Credit: cypruseconomicsociety.org

Recommendations

1. The HoA states should;
 - a) robustly monitor extremist networks linking the Middle East and the HoA, with a particular focus on the evolving dynamics of the Syrian conflict and their potential regional spillover effects;
 - b) maintain strategic neutrality to prevent active involvement in the ongoing war;
 - c) convene a regional dialogue to develop a comprehensive strategy for addressing the vulnerabilities arising from the ongoing conflict;
 - d) increase the allocation of financial and technical resources to support national and regional climate action plans aimed at enhancing resilience and adaptive capacity;



Recommendations

- e) convene regional dialogues with multilateral partners, including the United Nations (UN), to address the ongoing war in Sudan and develop actionable recommendations for conflict resolution and humanitarian support;
- f) foster greater naval cooperation in patrolling the HoA waters to protect vessels navigating the region and deter potential maritime threats;
- g) enhance counter-terrorism and intelligence operations through IGAD to proactively address threats posed by extremist groups such as Al Shabaab and Houthi rebels;
- h) intensify intra-regional trade to strengthen economic ties and reduce dependence on Middle Eastern states, while also seeking new trading partners beyond the Middle East to diversify strategic partnerships and mitigate economic challenges, such as rising oil prices and labor market disruptions;
- i) accelerate the evacuation of diaspora populations in conflict zones like Lebanon and enhance diplomatic dialogue with Middle Eastern countries to safeguard the safety and rights of these individuals; and
- j) heighten regional water cooperation frameworks to address shared concerns and manage the influence of external actors from the Middle East.



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Off Kiambu Road, Nairobi Kenya
P.O. Box 27023-00100, Nairobi.
Telephone: 0112401331
Email: info@gloceps.org
Web: www.gloceps.org

