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The Red Sea: Rivals' Vying for Leverage and Security Control

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Dimensions for Strategic Studies

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Introduction

Red Sea, Arabic Al-Baḥr Al-Aḥmar, narrow strip of water extending southeastward from Suez, Egypt, for about 1,200 miles (1,930 km) to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which connects with the Gulf of Aden and thence with the Arabian Sea. It forms a link between the Mediterranean, the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea, that is, between the Atlantic and Indian oceans, and between Europe and Asia, the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf region in particular. The widest width of the Red Sea is 190 miles, its maximum depth is about 3,040 meters, and its total area is 174,000 square miles.¹

Since ancient times, the Red Sea has had a critical role as an international crossing for trade, communication, and military activities. It was mentioned in the Torah as “the sea of reed plants.” The Romans and Greeks called it “the Eritrean sea,” meaning the Red Sea, and the Arabs called it “the Sea of Yemen.” It was also known as the “Qalzum Sea” in reference to an ancient port located in northern Egypt. In the old day, the Byzantines, when they ruled Egypt, established customs point on the island of Tiran, which lies on the maritime border between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Also, one of the goals of Napoleon Bonaparte's campaign on Egypt was to control navigation in the Red Sea.

However, civilizations and kingdoms that dominated for long periods arose on and near the coasts of the Red Sea, such as the civilizations of Aksum in present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Kingdom of Sheba in Yemen and the Kingdom of Punt in Somalia. The ancient Egyptians and Nubians of northern Sudan also used it to trade with Somalia, East Africa and India. The Red Sea played a role in the history of Islam, as the first migrants crossed it to Abyssinia to escape the persecution of the Quraysh tribesmen, and thus laid the first seed for the spread of Islam outside the Arabian Peninsula, before the Islamic conquests of Egypt and North Africa later.²

(1) Red Sea, Britannica: <https://bit.ly/2XjQPSL>

(2) Security of the Red Sea Region, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, October-November 2018: <https://bit.ly/3lIQHdh>



With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1896, the Red Sea became one of the crossings for international trade, and the competing international powers sought to control its most important strategic crossings to control its navigation. Currently, the volume of trade through the Red Sea is estimated at about %13 of the total international trade, and about 3 and a half million barrels of oil are transported per day from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to international markets.

On the eastern side of the Red Sea are 4 countries: Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel, and 5 countries on the western side of it: Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan, and Egypt. Egypt, in fact, has the longest coastline on the sea, including the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Aqaba, with a length of about 1,200 miles, followed by Saudi Arabia with about 1,100 miles, then Eritrea, which has a coastline of 1,000 miles, in addition to a number of important islands with a combined coast length of about 1,100 miles. While the shores of Jordan and Israel on the Red Sea are confined to the ports of Aqaba and Eilat on the Gulf of Aqaba.



First:

THE HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION ON THE RED SEA

Before the arrival of the Europeans to the Red Sea, navigation and trade through it were carried out according to peaceful international norms, and it was considered a free trade zone. Consequently, in light of the Muslims' control of the Red Sea, the principles of treaty and safety, derived from Islamic law, governed navigation in it.³

With the discovery of the Cape of Good Hope in 1498 by the Portuguese and as soon as they were able to navigate around the shores of Africa until they reached India, they initiated the Second Crusade, as they sought to encircle the Muslims from the south and control the land of the Two Holy Mosques by seizing the port of Jeddah to eliminate Islam in its land, as planned by their military commander and deputy king of India, the sailor Albuquerque.

Since then, the Portuguese made four attempts to cross Bab el-Mandab to reach Jeddah, the third of which was in 1517, coinciding with the takeover of Egypt by the Sultan Selim I-led Ottoman forces. Accordingly, the Ottomans managed to repel the Portuguese attempts to seize Jeddah, after the Hejaz became part of their empire in 1520 and they became the dominant force in the Red Sea up to Aden, so they (Ottomans) established several ports on it, such as Suakin and Massawa, and they reconstructed the Islamic port of Jeddah.⁴

Meanwhile, the Ottoman control over most of the shores of the Red Sea protected the region from European interventions until the beginning of the nineteenth century AD,

(3) Nicholas W. Stephenson Smith, How the Red Sea Became a Trap, Foreign Policy, July 2021 .26: <https://bit.ly/3hruxVQ>

(4) Ibid
Ahmed bin Saleh Al-Darafi, that is why the Ottomans turned the Red Sea into a purely Islamic lake, Al Jazeera Blogs . 2020/5/20: <https://bit.ly/2YSxqc3>



when the Ottoman Empire had been weakened and a fever of competition dominated European powers in search of colonies and influence in what was known as the “Scramble for Africa.”

The Europeans used various means to achieve their goals, including invasion, pitting local rulers against each other, dividing the region into small entities according to their interests, and sometimes encouraging piracy and threatening navigation. This dated the beginning of a new phase of the frantic international conflict over the coasts of the Red Sea, where Britain, France, Italy and Germany, along with Khedive Egypt, competed to establish colonies and protectorates in the region.⁵

As is known, Britain took control of Aden and northern Somalia (currently the unrecognized Republic of Somaliland), as well as Egypt that was under the protection of Britain, whereas France had seized Djibouti. Moreover, Italy had colonies in southern Somalia and Eritrea, which were later divided between the Allies after Italy's defeat in World War II.

As for Ethiopia, which was directly colonized only for a few years by the Italians during World War II, it attracted the attention of international powers from an early age, such as Britain and Russia before the Bolshevik Revolution, which sought to employ the religious association between the two countries (the Orthodox Church) to obtain military facilities that give a foothold on the shores of the Red Sea or near it.⁶

Colonization in the coasts of the Red Sea divided the already existed countries of the region, and the emergence of new political entities that were not known before, which often included conflicting nationalities, while some nationalities and tribes were divided into more than one country. This represented the basis for many of the conflicts that the Red Sea coast countries witnessed internally and between each other.

(5) Nicholas W. Stephenson Smith, op. cit.

(6) Muhammad Salih Omar, the Russian-Ethiopian military cooperation agreement. What interests does it achieve for both parties?, Assessment of the position, Al Jazeera Net, 2021/7/18.
<https://bit.ly/3IkLOkY>



Meanwhile, as the race tightened between the two world poles, the United States and the Soviet Union, in the shadow of the Cold War in the aftermath of World War II, the coasts of the Red Sea became the scene of the inflamed conflict between the two superpowers. Therefore, each group of the region's countries had allied with the two camps, with the exchange of positions according to the ruling regimes in those countries. For example, Ethiopia was a strong ally of the United States during the fifties until 1974 when the communist officers of the Ethiopian army ended the imperial rule, and Washington established a large military base for it on the Red Sea.

In contrast, the Soviet Union had a military presence in Somalia, Egypt, and later in South Yemen. Ethiopia and Egypt exchanged their positions on the map of international alliances, as Egypt after Abdel Nasser became one of Washington's most important allies in the Middle East, while Addis Ababa became an active member in the system of Moscow's allies in Africa, including the Aden-Addis Ababa-Tripoli axis. And Moscow abandoned Somalia, and consequently the latter rushed to ally with Washington. France retained its largest military base in Africa in Djibouti after it granted independence in 1977, and Britain maintained a military presence in Kenya near the coast of the Red Sea.

In the meantime, Israel maintained tough relations with Ethiopia that were not affected by the fall of the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie, who gave these relations a historical religious dimension by claiming descent from the Prophet Solomon. Since 1970, there have been reports of Israel leasing the islands of Abu al-Tair, Haleb and Dahlak to Ethiopia at the time, which called on the Arab League to form a fact-finding committee. Israel also continued to oppose the Eritrean demands for independence, and even opposed the independence of Djibouti from France for geopolitical considerations related to the Red Sea.⁷

(7) Muhammad Abu al-Qasim Haj Hamad, Sudan's Historical Predicament and Future Prospects, Volume Two . 1996. British West Indies



Second:

THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE RED SEA TO THE ACTORS IN THE REGION

Obviously, the above briefing on the contemporary history of the international conflict over the Red Sea region makes it clear how strategic and important this very region is, which goes beyond being one of the most important trade corridors in the world, and that geopolitical and security considerations overlap with the civilization-cultural-ideological dimensions, and the economic and commercial interests of international and regional powers and riparian states. This can be addressed at three levels: international, regional and local.

1. Levels of strategic relevance

At the international level, and from a geopolitical perspective, the Red Sea is the most important waterway located in the entire Middle East, which, since the dawn of time, has been an arena for conflict between world powers in their quest for monopoly hegemony, as exemplified by the history of Egypt, which has the longest along the Red Sea coastline. Besides, the Middle East is the birthplace of heavenly messages and the cradle of the most ancient human civilizations, and embraces the religious sanctities of all the monotheistic religions. The Red Sea is also a main entrance to this region, and it is its lifeline because it is the corridor of trade and communication with the rest of the world.

Although the Red Sea was one of the fields of the Crusader war, especially the attempts of the Portuguese to seize Jeddah in the sixteenth century to reach Mecca and Medina, as previously mentioned, the presence of Israel and its access to the Red Sea, and its continuous efforts to strengthen its influence on its shores - which we will detail later - another evidence that the ideological factor of establishing civilization remains one of the elements of Western strategic engagement with the Red Sea, especially in light of the strong influence of Christian Zionism in the United States,



which is the largest global power and leader of the Western camp. It is well known that Christian Zionism sees Israel's victory and sovereignty in its regional and international surroundings as a condition for the descent of the Messiah. This factor appears less in Russian efforts to strengthen the presence in the Horn of Africa and the western coasts of the Red Sea and the special relations between Russia and Ethiopia, given that the latter includes the largest number of Orthodox Christians after Russia.⁸

Although the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc in the early nineties of the last century supposedly means that the ideological conflict between the West and the East has ended, this conflict still overshadows the presence of these powers in the Red Sea region. A report written by a number of senior American experts and diplomats under the umbrella of the American Institute of Peace in 2020 on the challenges facing American policy in the Red Sea region, considered that the American-Chinese competition in the region is more on economic values and resources than on security issues.⁹

On the other hand, at the regional level, one of the motives for the UAE - and to some extent Saudi Arabia - to increase their influence in the Red Sea region, including building military bases - as we will show later - is to fight "political Islam" by besieging countries that the UAE believes they support the political Islam trend, such as Qatar, Turkey and Sudan before April 2019,¹² and using the military facilities it obtained in its military interventions in Yemen and Libya,¹⁰ Iran supports the Houthis in Yemen who control some Yemeni ports because of their Shiite affiliation.

Also, geostrategic considerations emerge in the great powers' keenness to strengthen their political, diplomatic, economic and intelligence presence in the region, and not to leave gaps might be used against them, and to include this in their national security strategies.

(8) Mohamed Saleh Omar, Ibid.

(9) Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena, op. cit.

(10) Ibid.



This can be seen in the size of the diplomatic missions as well as the specialized envoys to the countries of the region or the Horn of Africa, and the numerous visits have been made by officials of the ministries of defense and intelligence from the concerned countries to the region, as well as the huge number of studies on the region's issues from major regional actors-based think tanks.

At the local level and from the geostrategic perspective of the active countries in the region, the Red Sea region is of great importance. For Egypt, it means the Red Sea region within what it means the sources of the Blue Nile in Ethiopia, the main branch of the Nile River, which supplies it with about %75 of its water, given that the Nile is considered the lifeline for Egypt. The current Egyptian-Ethiopian dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam embodies the clearest example in this regard on reaching the sea ports.¹¹

As for Ethiopia itself, it fought the Thirty Years War in Eritrea in order not to lose its ports on the Red Sea, and when it was forced to agree to Eritrea's independence in 1991, there was an agreement that made it able to resume using and managing the port of "Asab" under economic and security understandings between the two countries.

Disputes over some of these aspects and other issues led to the outbreak of war again between the two countries between 1998 and 2000, causing Ethiopia to lose the right to use the port of "Asab" to this day, despite the reconciliation agreement that was held between them in June 2018. Currently, the expansion of fighting between the federal government and the forces of the Tigray region have threatens to cut off the vital road between Addis Ababa and Djibouti, which is the economic lifeline for landlocked Ethiopia.¹²

(11) Ahmed Shousha, Why is Egypt strengthening its military relations with countries neighboring Ethiopia?, BBC Arabic, 2021/5/30: <https://bbc.in/3hpXPUQ>

(12) Ibid
Al-Amin Al-Siddiq, What does the Balkanization of Ethiopia mean?, Volume One.
<https://bit.ly/3A8qRjm>



2. Security Challenges in the Red Sea Basin

The presence of the Suez Canal at its northern end and Bab el-Mandab at its southern end, and they are considered one of the most important passages for international trade, as the value of goods that cross them annually is estimated at 700\$ billion, representing %13 of international trade, in addition to the fact that a large part of GCC states' oil is exported via these two passages, at a rate of 3.5 million barrels per day,¹³ in addition to the fact that the Red Sea is the entrance to the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, the Arab Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, all of which are passages of strategic importance for international trade. This means the ease of stopping navigation in the Red Sea and the disruption of an important part of international trade if either of the two straits is targeted: the Suez Canal or Bab el-Mandab.

Previous experiences of stopping international navigation in the Red Sea, as happened in 1956 for a period of 6 months after the tripartite aggression against Egypt, and in the period between 1967 and 1975 due to the Six-Day War, and the impact of piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden in the period between 2008 and 2014, as the period between 2010 and 2014 witnessed about 350 pirate attacks on commercial cargo ships,¹⁴ as well as Houthi attacks on Aramco oil tankers caused Saudi Arabia to temporarily stop shipping crude oil in July 2018.¹⁵

The Red Sea, in fact represents the shortest sea route for warships from west to east. For example, between 35 and 45 American warships cross the Red Sea annually. France also uses the Red Sea to supply its¹⁶ military bases on its two islands in the southwest of the Indian Ocean near the Comoros: "Reunion" and "Marriott". This allows the opponents of these parties the opportunity to target their warships, similar to the bombing of the U.S. naval destroyer, the USS Cole in October 2000 in the port of Aden.

(13) Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena, op. cit.

(14) David H. Shin, The Red Sea: A magnet for outside powers vying for its control, the Africa Report, 27 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/3k5NEXv>

(15) Kristian Patrick Alexander, A Changing Balance of Power in the Red Sea, Gulf International Forum, 19 July 2021, <https://bit.ly/3tBXm6S>

(14) David H. Shin, op. cit.



The so-called US war on terrorism in the aftermath of the events of September 2001, 11, of which the Red Sea region was one of its arenas, led to the emergence and strengthening of extremist groups under the pretext of resisting US interference in their countries, which resulted in more security turmoil in the region.

Moreover, a third of the marine internet cables used in the world pass under the Red Sea, and targeting these cables would deprive half of internet users of this vital service on which most commercial transactions and communications have become dependent, in addition to the possibility of launching cyber-attacks on marine vessels' operating systems or controlling their movement from remotely, given the state of security fragile situation and the lack of security requirements in some coasts of the Red Sea.¹⁷

The proximity of the Red Sea to the fields of regional and international conflicts such as the Yemeni crisis, the Libyan crisis, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the eastern Mediterranean conflict between Turkey on one side and Greece, Cyprus, Egypt and France on the other side, the Gulf crisis and its spillovers in the Red Sea region, and what is known as the port war between the Emirates Arab and Qatar on the one hand, and the Emirates and Djibouti on the other hand, and the Emirates and Turkey on the third hand, and the mutual attack between Iran and Israel for the interests of each other, and recently the military conflict in Ethiopia in the regions of Tigray, Amhara and Afar, and the possibilities of spreading this conflict to Eritrea - the port of Assab - and Djibouti.

Piracy activities, and arms smuggling, drug trafficking and human smuggling across the Red Sea by exploiting the scattered small islands.

Overfishing activities and threatening the marine environment by disposing of hazardous industrial waste in the Red Sea on coasts where the control of riparian countries is weakened.

(17) Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena, op. cit.



Maritime piracy is active off the Somali coast



Third: COMPETING FOR STATIONING OF SECURITY AND MILITARY FORCES

In light of the strategic importance of the Red Sea, the geopolitical imperatives of international and regional actors in the region, and the renewed security challenges posed by the political, economic and social dynamics in it, and with the willingness of some coastal countries and entities of the western coasts of the Red Sea to trade the advantages of their geostrategic positions for economic and political benefits with those who wish, the region has become an arena for infighting and a field in which the regional and international superpowers are vying for security and military control, especially during the last six years, because the region has become an integral part of the security systems of the Middle East, the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and the Mediterranean basin.

1. The beginning of militarizing the Red Sea shores

As previously mentioned, the coasts of the Red Sea have been foreign military bases since the middle of the last century, especially in the western coastline, where the United States, the former Soviet Union, France and Israel had permanent military bases in some countries of the region, but the beginning of the current wave of militarizing the shores of the Red Sea appears to be due to two dynamics:

- The American military intervention in Somalia, which dates back to Operation Restore Hope in 1994, which failed and its forces withdrew in 1995, then the United States included Somalia and East Africa in its war against “terrorism” after the events of September 2001, and carried out military operations against those it designates as terrorists, launching air raids from its military bases in the region, which are still continuing in many ways. In this context, an African command was established within the commands of the US Army (AFRICOM),



which the Horn of Africa was one of the regions nominated to host, were it not for the fact that South Africa led a move in the African Union to refuse to host the center of this command in any African country.¹⁸

- The military operation initiated by the European Union to counter maritime piracy in Aden and the shores of East Africa on the Indian Ocean at the end of 2008, which is Operation Atlanta, with the participation of countries outside the European Union such as Norway, Serbia, Ukraine and New Zealand, and other countries joining it independently, topped by Russia, China, Japan, India, South Korea and others.
- Although maritime piracy activities off the coast of Somalia have almost stopped since 2014, the process is still ongoing, and the Council of the European Union extended the mandate of the operation at the beginning of this year until the end of 2022, and added to it new tasks, related to helping to enforce the arms embargo on Somalia and supporting the initiative the European Union on Somalia and the Horn of Africa, cooperating with regional maritime security institutions, combating arms, drug and charcoal smuggling, and controlling fishing off the coast of Somalia.¹⁹

It is noted that a number of countries that participated in the operation from outside the region established a permanent military presence there, especially in Djibouti, as will be detailed later, and justified this by the need to follow up on the activities of the operation. The United States also had a similar military operation.

(18) Ibrahim Shabir El-Din, AFRICOM. Protecting American interests under the cover of partnership, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 2013/6/23: <https://bit.ly/3huX7pB>

(19) Eunavfor website: eunavfor.eu.



Warship in the Red Sea



2. Current military bases

The number of military bases in the Horn of Africa (the western and southern side of the Red Sea) is currently estimated at 19, belonging to 16 countries, and hosted mainly by three countries: Djibouti (more than 9 bases), Somalia (5 bases), and Eritrea (3 bases), in addition to a possible Russian base in Port Sudan, and the Egyptian "Bernice" base within the Egyptian borders. The details of that are as follows:

The United States

- Camp Lemonnier base in Djibouti, which was opened in 2002 with the aim of fighting terrorism, and currently has more than 4000 troops.²⁰ It is the command center for US operations in the Horn of Africa, and drone operations for all of Africa. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the US military has maintained F15 and F16 combat aircraft and tanks at the base since 2011, against the backdrop of the events in Yemen and South Sudan.²¹ The US base hosts British special forces.
- An American military base in Somalia that includes between 600 and 800 troops to fight the Somali youth organization.²²
- According to the Stockholm Institute report, the United States was using some sites in Ethiopia to launch drones until 2015.
- In addition, the United States has naval forces in the Gulf of Aden to combat maritime piracy and terrorism, as well as a military base in Seychelles in the Indian Ocean, and military forces in Kenya to train its forces to combat terrorism and piracy.

(20) David H. Shin, op. cit.

(21) 16 A country that has military bases in the Horn of Africa, Sputnik . 2019/10/29: <https://bit.ly/3hy1YpU>.

(22) David H. Shin, op. loc.



France

France has three military bases in Djibouti, including a naval base, and two military airports. It also hosts military forces from Germany and Spain. And the French naval base in Djibouti is a center to support the attack nuclear submarines that France sends to the Indian Ocean, while military helicopters and special forces are stationed at its land base, on which France relies on to support any military operation it has in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East.

China

China has independently participated in the European Union's anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden "Atlanta", and then established a military base in Djibouti in 2017, its first, and includes about 2,000 soldiers. China considers that Djibouti can play an important role in its "Silk Road" initiative.²⁴

Israel

Since the seventies of the last century, there have been reports indicating that Israel is renting a number of strategic islands in the Red Sea that belonged to Ethiopia before the independence of Eritrea, namely: Abu al-Tair, Haleb and Dahlak²⁵ islands.

Reports in 2018 stated that the islands of the Eritrean Dahlak archipelago have been under Israeli control for more than two decades, and that its aircraft, which it used in the attack on the Yarmouk Defense Industries Complex in Khartoum in October 2012, were launched from these bases, along with another naval base in Eritrea, which is considered the second Israel's largest naval bases outside its borders.

Also, reports in 2012 talked about a large Israeli military and intelligence presence in Eritrea, especially in the city of Massawa, to spy on the Iranian presence in the region, Russian "Sputnik" agency reported.

(23) Sputnik, Ibid.

(24) Ibid.

(25) Muhammad Abu al-Qasim Haj Hamad, Ibid.



Italy

It has a military base in Djibouti since 2013 to support the Italian fleet in the region, participate in the fight against piracy, and the use of drones.

Japan

Japan has been involved in anti-piracy operations since 2009, and its ships and warplanes have been operated from the US base in Djibouti. In 2011, it established its own military base there, its first since World War II, and it has agreed with India that the latter will use this base in their joint efforts to counter Chinese influence in the region.²⁶

Russia

Russia sought to establish a military base in Djibouti, but it was not approved, and signed an agreement with Sudan in 2019 to establish a maritime logistics supply station for a period of 25 years, and is negotiating with Eritrea to establish a base in its territory. There are reports of China's approval of Russia's use of its military base in Djibouti.²⁷

Turkey

It has a military base in Mogadishu, which houses about 200 personnel to train the Somali National Army. In 2017, it signed an agreement with Sudan to rehabilitate the historic island of Suakin for the purposes of preserving its monuments and encouraging tourism, but there was speculation that the agreement might have been a cover for military cooperation between the two countries. After the fall of the government of President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019, the agreement was suspended. During the visit of the head of the Sudanese Sovereign Council to Ankara in August 2021 at the head of a large government delegation that included the Minister of Defense, the two countries reportedly renewed their commitment to their previous agreements.

(26) David H. Shin, op. cit.

(27) Ibid.



UAE

It established a naval military base in Assab, Eritrea, with a military airport, and was using it in the operations of the Arab coalition in Yemen, and there were reports that it was using the same base to supply its allies in Libya with weapons and fighters. The Tigray Liberation Front, which is fighting the Ethiopian government, also stated that drones were used in the attack on the region from the Emirates base in Assab. Recently, there have been media reports that the UAE has begun dismantling its base in Assab. The UAE had an agreement with the so-called Republic of Somaliland to establish a military base in the city of Berbera, but it was canceled at the beginning of 2020.²⁸

Saudi Arabia

It used to use the Emirati base in Assab as part of their joint operations in Yemen. And it obtained the approval of Djibouti to establish a military base in 2016. According to the website of the African Research Association, Saudi Arabia is close to completing its military base by the end of 2019.²⁹

Iran

It established a naval military base in the Eritrean port of Assab in 2008 in exchange for economic aid to the Eritrean government.³⁰ It also offered Sudan in 2014 to install a missile system in Port Sudan after Israel repeated its attacks on Sudan from its bases in the Dahlak Archipelago, but the Sudanese government did not agree to that.³¹ In 2015, Eritrea agreed to support the Arab coalition in Yemen against the Houthis led by Saudi Arabia, and this led to the closure of the Iranian base.³²

(28) David H. Shin, op. cit.

(29) Sputnik, Ibid.

(30) Al-Sayyad, plbid.

(31) Sudan: The missile launch plan did not target Saudi Arabia, BBC Arabic . 52014/31: <https://bbc.in/3Ai5Mmz>.

(32) Sputnik, Ibid.



The Military Base in Djibouti



Map 1:

Map illustrates the locations of the military bases on the Red Sea coast³³



(33) Andreu Sola-Martin, Ports, military bases and treaties: Who's who in the Red Sea, The Africa Report, 13 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/3kecB3a>



3. Current military bases

- **Arab efforts**

The security of the Red Sea has been one of the challenges of Arab collective action for decades. A study was conducted by the King Faisal Center for Islamic Studies and Research (2018) indicates that Saudi Arabia adopted in 1956 the "Jeddah Charter for the Common Security of the Red Sea", but it does not provide details about that, neither in terms of what was included in the charter nor in terms of the countries that signed it. It was not clear whether it resulted in any collective action to achieve its goals.

- **Jeddah Conference**

The real beginning of collective Arab action in this regard may be in the seventies of the last century, in light of the results of the 1967 war on navigation in the Red Sea due to the closure of the Suez Canal until 1975, as well as the desire to keep the Red Sea as an "Arab lake." Haj Hamad³⁴ talks about the efforts of the League of Arab States between September 1970 and the same month of 1973, at the initiative of North Yemen at the time, to approve "collective Arab security measures for the Red Sea" after establishing the Israeli presence in the archipelago of Dahlak Islands, which belonged to Ethiopia.

The study of the King Faisal Center states that a conference was held in Jeddah in 1972 for countries to maintain the security of the Red Sea. There was a call for a meeting of the Arab countries bordering the Red Sea in September 1973, before the October war of the same year, during which the Bab el-Mandab strait was closed with Egyptian-Yemeni coordination, and the strait was reopened after the ceasefire, but the island of Perm in its middle was kept under Egyptian command.

(34) Muhammad Abu al-Qasim Haj Hamad, Ibid, p. -660p. 661.



■ Saudi-Egyptian-Sudanese summit

In January 1976, North Yemen requested the activation of the joint Arab defense treaty with regard to the security of the Red Sea and the development of a plan for its protection. During the same year, a meeting was held in Jeddah between King Khalid and the presidents of Egypt and Sudan on the issue, and another meeting in Khartoum between the presidents of Sudan, Egypt and Syria to discuss the security of the Red Sea and transforming it into an Arab lake.³⁵



King Khaled's visit to Sudan in 1976

■ Taiz Summit and the adoption of a plan for establishing an Arab force

The year 1977 witnessed intense Arab moves to reach collective measures for the security of the Red Sea and to involve all the countries bordering it, including Ethiopia. These moves came in response to Cuban leader Castro's call during his visit to the region to establish an alliance between the pro-Soviet countries, most of which overlook the Red Sea: South Yemen, Somalia, and Ethiopia, in addition to Libya.

(35) Ibid.



The Taiz Summit was held in March 1977 for the riparian Arab countries, including Somalia, and an invitation was extended to Ethiopia, but it did not respond to. However, a meeting of the Arab League Council in September 1977 called for the establishment of an Arab security force for the Red Sea, but the plan did not see the light of day. The League also called for a united Arab stance against the "Ethiopian-Zionist challenge", and demanded the Secretary-General of the Organization of African Unity to seek to settle the disputes of the Horn of Africa in a manner that ensures keeping it away from any foreign interference, and included the issues of Eritrea and the Ogaden region in its agenda.³⁶

These moves did not yield tangible results, especially in light of the division of the Arab states between the eastern and western camps, until the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel in September 1978 put an end to it.

In terms of protecting the environment of the Red Sea, the Arab Organization for Education, Culture and Science (ALECSO) launched in 1974 the Regional Program for the Environment of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, which resulted in the Regional Agreement for the Preservation of the Environment in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden in 1982.³⁷

(36) Muhammad Abu al-Qasim Haj Hamad, Ibid.

(37) Andreu Sola-Martin, op. cit.



Council of States of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden

- **African and multilateral efforts**

- **Djibouti Charter**

The current initiatives for security cooperation between the countries of the Red Sea coast at the African level began in 2009 with what was known as the "Djibouti Charter to Combat Piracy and Armed Looting of Ships in the Western Shores of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden".³⁸

- **High-level Implementation Mechanism**

In light of the competition that has raged between the GCC states, especially over ports and military bases in the Horn of Africa during the past six years, the African Union has shown more interest in the issue.

In 2018, the African Union launched its "High-Level Implementation Mechanism for Sudan, South Sudan and the Horn of Africa," headed by Thabo Mbeki, the former president of South Africa, to establish contacts with regional organizations on both sides of the Red Sea.

(38) Ibid.



The motive for this seems to be to help the countries of the Horn of Africa to deal with some level of equality³⁹ with the GCC states, and the mechanism conducted a series of consultations with the concerned Gulf states and the countries of the Horn of Africa, but the meeting of the foreign ministers of the member states of the African Peace and Security Council with the mechanism on the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea that was scheduled to take place in February 2020 has been postponed indefinitely.

■ IGAD Staff

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development "IGAD" - which includes all the countries of the Horn of Africa, but Eritrea suspended its membership in it - decided in 2019 to establish a working group on the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden tasked with developing a regional action plan in consultation with member states, but the absence of Eritrea represented a major challenge to the work of the team. Egypt also opposed IGAD having a role in the Red Sea issue, given that the organization was subject to Ethiopian influence, as Ethiopia had chaired the organization for many years until 2019, when the presidency moved to Sudan.⁴¹



Chiefs of Staff of the IGAD countries

(39) Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena. op. cit.

(40) Andreu Sola-Martin, Ports, military bases and treaties: Who's who in the Red Sea, The Africa Report, 13 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/3kecB3a>

(41) Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena. op. cit.



■ Western proposal to establish a forum on the security of the Red Sea

In light of the escalating international interest in the Red Sea, against the backdrop of piracy activities in the Gulf of Aden, activities described as terrorism, and the crises in Somalia and Yemen, the Council of the European Union adopted a proposal that was being discussed by Western diplomats to establish an organized international forum that seeks for all on the security of the Red Sea.⁴²

Accordingly, the European Union and Germany, as a member of the UN Security Council, adopted the call in September 2018 for a meeting on the security of the Red Sea in New York, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, but the meeting did not take place due to disagreement over who would participate in, especially with regard to the participation of Western countries.

■ Riyadh Council

In parallel, and over the period from 2017 to 2019, there were discussions between Saudi Arabia and Egypt on a proposal to establish a council for riparian states. Egypt had reservations about the proposal, out of its lack of enthusiasm for Saudi Arabia to abandon its leadership role in the region, as well as for fear of Ethiopia's participation in the new assembly.⁴³ Perhaps also due to its fear of allowing Israel to participate, in light of the apparent trend to normalize between the GCC states and Israel. Despite the diplomatic relations between Egypt and Israel, Cairo still considers the latter a strategic adversary, and does not welcome the normalization of relations with it except through it.

Apparently, Riyadh made a concession to Cairo by not inviting Addis Ababa to participate in the meetings of the founding of what was later known as the Council of Arab African States bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, or the Riyadh Council, which was announced in Riyadh in January 2020, with the participation of the countries bordering the Red Sea, with the exception of Israel, numbered 8 countries, including Eritrea, which did not show enthusiasm for such gatherings.⁴⁴

(42) Ibid.

(43) Zack Vetrin, Red Sea rivalries: The Gulf, the Horn of Africa & the new geopolitics of the Red Sea, Brookings, January 2019, <https://brook.gs/3tJKyeW>

(44) Saleh Al-Zayd, Launching the Council of Countries Bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, Asharq Awsat. 2020/1/7: <https://bit.ly/3C9NQLi>.



However, the structure of the council includes a supreme body, a ministerial council, and a secretariat, and its charter stipulates those decisions are taken by consensus.

The new Council is the largest one, as for the first time the riparian countries have gathered in one entity, with the exception of Israel, which still has an acceptability problem in the region. Nevertheless, the disputes between the GCC states and Middle Eastern countries still overshadow the circumstances of the establishment of the Council. The study prepared by the American Institute of Peace (2020)⁴⁵ quoted Saudi observers as saying that the Council would serve as a way to build a regional alliance to counter Turkish and Iranian influence in the Red Sea region. Also, the UAE's quickness to welcome the establishment of the Council may mean that there is an understanding or coordination for its participation as an observer in the Council. If this is true, then Ethiopia must be given the opportunity, for example, because it relies on the Red Sea ports for all its imports and exports, in addition to the need to regulate the relationship with the powers concerned with the Red Sea from outside the region.⁴⁶

The beginning of Saudi Arabia's efforts to establish this very Council was accompanied by a series of military exercises and maneuvers that it organized with its allies from the region and abroad, and their topic was the security of the Red Sea, such as the "Red Wave" maneuvers in January and September 2019 with the participation of 6 countries from the Red Sea region. Then the "Morjan 16" maneuvers in January 2020, in addition to maneuvers in which parties from outside the region, including the United States and China, along with the United Arab Emirates.⁴⁷

(45) Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena, op. cit.

(46) Zack Vetrin, op. cit.

(47) Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena, op. cit.



The Council of States bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden



Fourth: FUTURE PROSPECTS

Overall, the current dynamics of the security environment and politics keep progressing in large parts of the Red Sea region. On the other hand, the Yemeni crisis is still far from being settled, and new complications have emerged due to the contradictory agendas of the parties that can contribute to a peaceful solution to the crisis. In addition, the situation in Somalia remains fragile, as the goal of restoring security throughout the country and the return of state institutions remains elusive, let alone the reunification of Somalia. All of this makes the country vulnerable to foreign interference in all its forms. Ethiopia, eventually, is approaching scenarios of a war of nationalities that could extend to Djibouti and Eritrea.

The dispute over the Renaissance Dam is exacerbated between Egypt and Sudan, on the one hand, and Ethiopia, on the other, which deepens the state of loss of confidence between these countries and weakens their ability to contribute to achieving stability and consensus in the Red Sea region. This is in addition to the fact that Sudan is going through a difficult transition period, with multiple conflicting internal and external trends. As the political and economic crisis in Eritrea deepens, as a result of international isolation and internal repression. Even for Djibouti, which is relatively more stable, it remains captive to external equations that cannot change it much, especially in light of the heavy foreign military presence in it, and its contact with the volatile regions in Somalia, Yemen and Ethiopia.

On the other hand, notwithstanding the signs of calm between the parties to the Gulf crisis, between the Cairo-Riyadh-Abu Dhabi axis, and the Ankara-Doha axis, the contradictions between these parties are still present, whether at the level of the Red Sea region or other issues such as Libya, the East Mediterranean, and political Islam-based activities.



The agenda of the international powers interested in the Red Sea remains the same for the past years.

Accordingly, it is likely that rivals' vying for positions of power and influence will continue in the Red Sea region, especially its western coasts, as there are weak countries that are swapping and bargaining to make their regimes quite stable, making advantage of geopolitical cards they naturally have. Like their own strategic locations. This means that it is not excluded seeing more military bases, and the expansion of intelligence activities, especially what modern technology allows in this regard.

Specifically, it is expected that Russia and China will be active in this regard, given their growing relations with the countries of the region. As for Russia, it is clear that it will strengthen its military cooperation with Ethiopia and, to a lesser extent, with Sudan, and it seems interested and prepared to play a role in the Renaissance Dam crisis, which will bring it closer to the three countries involved in the crisis. Turkey, on the other hand, will apparently maintain its political presence in the region, which may be followed by a military footprint and security presence, in light of its keenness to restore warmth to its relations with Sudan, its developing relations with Ethiopia, and its growing role in Somalia.

As for the regional cooperation projects of the Red Sea countries, of which the Riyadh Council seems to be the most important at the moment, they need a lot of effort to gain credibility and seriousness, by distancing them from the policy of axes and narrow agendas, and real striving to be a tool for regional cooperation without isolating any concerned party.



Conclusion

Bottom line is, the Red Sea region appears to be at a crossroads. Either it is moving towards regional cooperation that seeks to address the hotbeds of tension with a comprehensive and realistic approach, recognizing the reasonable interests of each party and making the necessary concessions from all, or insisting on the same approach currently prevailing and moving forward with the militarization of the Red Sea region, which it will complicate the situation, fuel the political and ethnic conflicts raging in many parts of the region and create more tensions.



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