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The Red Sea: An Old-New Arena of Interest

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The Red Sea, and particularly its southern section surrounding the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, has in recent years become the site of competition and struggle among regional actors and superpowers alike. In addition to the states along the coast of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, the US, China, Turkey, Iran – which is involved in the war in Yemen – and sub-state actors have a presence there. Thus far there have been no disruptions to Israeli shipping and flight paths, which connect Israel to the Indian Ocean, the Far East, and Africa. However, those engaged in decision making on strategic issues in Israel must be increasingly aware of this arena and consider whether to invest military and political resources to prevent the realization of potential threats against Israel in this region, particularly on the part of Iran and its proxies. To this end, Israel should identify parties with an interest in cooperation from among the Red Sea countries, and mechanisms for cooperation, including prevention of weapons smuggling, should be considered and proposed directly and indirectly to relevant actors. The involvement of non-regional players creates conflicts of interest between them and the countries located along the Red Sea coastline, which in turn produces fertile ground for formal and informal security, economic, and political cooperation with Israel.

The Red Sea, and particularly its southern section surrounding the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, has in recent years become the site of competition and struggle among regional actors and superpowers alike. In addition to the states along the coast of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, the US, China, Turkey, and Iran – which is involved in the war in Yemen – have a presence there. Sub-state actors, such as the Islamic State organization, al-Shabaab in Somalia, the Houthi rebels, and al-Qaeda in Yemen, are also active in the region. In the meantime, there have been no disruptions to Israeli shipping and flight paths, which connect Israel to the Indian Ocean, the Far East, and Africa. However, those engaged in decision making on strategic issues in Israel must be increasingly aware of this arena and consider whether to invest military and political resources to prevent the realization of potential threats against Israel in this region, particularly on the part of Iran and its proxies.

The War in Yemen

From Israel's perspective, the most troubling source of potential danger is Iran. Already in the previous decade, Iran increased its naval presence in the Gulf of Aden, claiming that its forces were there to fight pirates. It likewise strengthened its relations with Sudan, Djibouti, and Eritrea, such that it was able to maintain an active military presence in the Red Sea, with the option of using it to take action against Israel, including by smuggling weapons to Palestinian elements. Iran still aspires to have a naval presence in the Red Sea, evidenced by its increased aid to the Houthis, and its ships even flew the Iranian flag in the Mediterranean Sea. However, the weakness of Iran's standing army and air force hampers its operational access to this arena.

Although the threat posed by pirates in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait has declined in recent years as a result of international action, a new threat to freedom of navigation has emerged there due to the war in Yemen, which assumed a distinctively regional character with the onset of the Saudi campaign against the Houthis in 2015. The Iranian-supported Houthi rebels have mined areas along the coast of Yemen, used explosive boats and anti-ship missiles to attack primarily American and Saudi military maritime vessels, and on at least one occasion (in April 2018) struck a Saudi oil tanker.

The war in Yemen, now in its fourth year, has resulted in the widespread destruction of infrastructure and has thus far claimed around 10,000 lives, leaving tens of thousands wounded and millions of refugees and displaced persons. In addition, thousands of others have died of cholera. A recent campaign was launched for the strategic Red Sea port city of Hodeida, the conduit for most humanitarian aid to Yemen, as well as – according to Arab assessments – Iranian aid to the Houthi rebels. Control of the city will provide Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates with military momentum and greater morale. It will also help these countries to pressure the Houthis and their supporters in Iran to agree to go back to negotiations.

Israel has a clear interest in ensuring that the Arab coalition in Yemen has the upper hand, as the Iranian Quds Force and Hezbollah contingents in Yemen poses a threat to Israeli interests and could pose a threat to maritime traffic to and from Israel. It could also turn Yemen into an intermediate stop for smuggling to Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip, instead of Sudan. According to foreign sources, Israel also has a military presence in Eritrea and intelligence access to the Yemeni arena. In the past, the Houthis have threatened to strike at these Israeli installations.

Mounting Regional Competition

The Horn of Africa and Red Sea region has witnessed increased competition between Middle East countries, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and

Turkey. All of these countries strive to consolidate their presence in African states – in some cases failed states – in order to gain access to distant arenas and to project power far beyond their borders. As a result, many actors, some of which are hostile to Israel, are trying to establish themselves along the southern access route to the Gulf of Eilat and the Suez Canal, which could also result in security threats.

As part of its increasing activity on the African continent, Turkey has built its largest permanent base located outside its own borders in Mogadishu, Somalia, also the site of the largest Turkish embassy in the world. In 2018, Ankara signed an agreement with Khartoum that allowed Turkey to maintain a military presence in Sudan and Sudanese territorial waters, including a base on Suakin Island, and is conducting negotiations for the establishment of another base in Djibouti. In 2018, Qatar also signed an agreement with Sudan regarding the port in Suakin. This increasing involvement in Sudan on the part of Turkey and Qatar has resulted in a crisis in Sudan's relations with Egypt and Eritrea. In January 2018 there were reports regarding the deployment of Egyptian troops in Eritrea and the concentration of Sudanese forces to counter them.

Saudi Arabia is constructing a base in Djibouti adjacent to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the United Arab Emirates, which formerly leased a base in Djibouti, is now leasing a seaport and airport in Somalia and a seaport and airport in Assab, Eritrea, and is using this base for attacks in Yemen. The United Arab Emirates also has bases in Yemen itself, including the island of Perim, as part of an effort to prevent Iran and the Houthis from threatening free navigation through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and weapons smuggling to Yemen. In most cases, these bases consist of limited military installations, including runways and anchoring areas and a number of logistical buildings and equipment. At the same time, in recent years, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt have invested increasing resources in maintaining their navies, which will also provide them with an improved capacity to act in this area.

The Gulf states are competing over access to bases and installations in the Red Sea, and reports have indicated their efforts to disrupt the attempts of others to establish a foothold in a number of countries. It appears not only that the competition between a number of Gulf states and Qatar has spread to the Red Sea, but that this competition has the potential to fan existing flames and create new ones. The cultivation of closer relations between Qatar and Turkey on the one hand, and Sudan on the other is relevant here. Recent years have witnessed warming relations between Khartoum and Riyadh, manifested in part in Sudan's expulsion of Iran's ambassador from Khartoum in 2016 and its dispatch of military forces to assist Saudi Arabia in the fighting in Yemen.

The African countries located on the coast of the Red Sea are leveraging their strategic location with the aim of improving their political and financial situation. Djibouti, for example, is hosting French, Spanish, and Italian forces within its borders. World powers have also increased their interest in the region in recent years. The United States base in Djibouti, for example, is its largest in Africa, and China recently completed the construction of a naval base in Djibouti, which is its first military base outside its borders. China's base in Djibouti developed in parallel to a base it built in Gwadar, Pakistan.

Economic Importance

The Red Sea arena possesses considerable economic importance. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is 29 kilometers wide and constitutes a maritime chokepoint and strategic link between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. A significant volume of the world's maritime traffic passes through the Strait, including a daily average of some five million barrels of oil. The Suez Canal constitutes an important source of income for Egypt, as does the port of Aqaba for Jordan and the port of Jeddah for Saudi Arabia (its most important port). It is also the route of passage to the port of Eilat.

As part of its ambitious Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia seeks to develop some 200 kilometers of its Red Sea coastline, including 50 micro islands, for the promotion of tourist initiatives that will attract foreign investments. The coastline will also be the site of the future Saudi city Neom, as well as an Egyptian-Saudi plan for building a bridge over the Red Sea, which would facilitate the direct passage of goods between the two countries and bring the markets of the Arabian Peninsula and Europe closer together. These are also projects in which Israel can take part, even if not openly.

Recommendations

Whether a change in the thrust of US security strategy from a global war against terrorism to a standoff war against state competitors, most prominently China and Russia, will reduce the US administration's interest on the African continent is unknown. Despite reports regarding Washington's intention to cut the scope of the special forces stationed in Africa, no cuts have been made in US military activity there yet. It is important that the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea remain on the agenda in the strategic dialogue between Israel and the United States. The United States may help in facilitating contacts between Israel and countries of the region.

Israel must define its interests in the Red Sea and examine whether its current policy serves these interests. It should identify parties with an interest in cooperation from among the Red Sea countries, as well as opportunities and threats posed by the growing presence of different actors in the arena, some of which are new. Mechanisms for cooperation, including prevention of weapons smuggling, should be considered and

proposed directly and indirectly to relevant actors. According to foreign reports, significant cooperation is already underway on other issues with some of those actors on the Red Sea coast. The involvement of non-regional players creates conflicts of interest between them and the countries located along the Red Sea coastline, which in turn produces fertile ground for formal and informal security, economic, and political cooperation with Israel.