

## How Great Power Competition and Regional Rivalries are Destabilizing the Red Sea Region

The current strategic trends in the Red Sea region enhance a prospect of further security destabilization and of a setback in the realm of economic and social development of the fragile political entities in the region.

By [Yoel Guzansky](#), [Daniel Rakov](#) / August 28, 2020

Over the past decade, the Red Sea region's strategic environment has been experiencing a fast transformation, as a result of intensifying competition and military build-up by Middle Eastern countries and global powers. On the one hand, the growing external involvement was fostered by profound problems of the region that brought destabilization, fragmentation, and extreme poverty to Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen. These conditions allowed for radical violent Islamist movements—the Islamic State, al-Shabaab, the Houthis, and Al Qaeda—to strengthen. On the other hand, Africa poses enormous economic opportunities that attract investments and military presence from these outside actors.

The Red Sea region, spanning from the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden, possesses tremendous economic importance for the global economy as a major hub of trade routes (valued at \$700 billion U.S. dollars annually) between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait in the South and the Suez Canal in the North provide maritime chokepoints, often attracting “troublemakers” (pirates, terrorists and rogue state actors). The Red Sea coast, ports, and waterways are the main sources of trade and revenue for the littoral countries, most of which are among the poorest in the world and are entangled in long and violent conflicts.

The international interest in the region has fluctuated over the years. During the Cold War, the Soviets, while promising progress and socialism, in fact, supplied significant military and economic resources to new-born decolonizing belligerent regimes to fight each other (primarily Somalia, Ethiopia and South Yemen). The United States reciprocated by giving its support to the opponents of Soviet “clients.”

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