

# Israel in the Red Sea Arena:

## An Updated Maritime Strategy

Yuval Eylon and Yoel Guzansky



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# ISRAEL IN THE RED SEA ARENA: AN UPDATED MARITIME STRATEGY

YUVAL EYLON AND YOEL GUZANSKY

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## INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES

The mission of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) is to support Israeli policy and decision-makers—both professional and elected—in shaping policies that ensure Israel's future as a secure, prosperous, Jewish, and democratic state, with a solid Jewish majority and defensible, recognized borders.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. **The Red Sea as a Multi-Dimensional Strategic Arena.** The Red Sea is a vital lifeline and a key link in global supply chains, being a shipping artery that accounts for approximately 17% of global maritime trade traffic. This is one of the main reasons for its status as an arena of inter-power competition, involving China, the United States, Russia, as well as regional players, and this arena is gaining strategic importance in fields such as communication, environmental protection, food security, and energy.
2. **Regional actors are working to strengthen their foothold in the red sea arena.** In addition to the major powers, countries including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey are attempting to establish a maritime-strategic foothold through investments and power-building. This may export rivalries to the Red Sea and fuel previous tensions.
3. **The Houthi-Western conflict as a maritime reality changer.** Attacks by the Houthis, who are supported by Iran, have disrupted trade traffic in the Red Sea and created a severe crisis with enormous economic costs (for Egypt, for example), posing a complex challenge to the international coalition operating in the Red Sea. This is a conflict that escalated in the context of the war between Israel and Hamas that broke out in 2023 but may continue for a considerable period, regardless of developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
4. **An increased importance of undersea infrastructure.** The undersea cables traversing the Red Sea have become strategic targets and essential infrastructure components due to a global, albeit undeclared, battle for their control.

5. **Regional convergence.** There is quiet cooperation between Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE under an American umbrella, addressing threats and creating security-related but possibly also policy-related opportunities as a sort of “preparation” for normalization agreements.
6. **The arena is characterized by complex coastal combat.** The geographic nature of the Red Sea necessitates combat capabilities near the coast, maneuverability and rapid response, and preparedness against diverse threats, with an emphasis on asymmetric warfare including the use of shore-to-sea missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles, mines, and unmanned surface and subsurface vessels.
7. **Israel as an “asset” to the regional countries.** Its presence at sea and the security and civilian collaborations with Israel make it a strategic asset for potential partners, while it maintains its operational independence.

## INTRODUCTION

In the Red Sea region, significant geo-strategic processes have been unfolding over the past decade, manifesting in political, security, economic, and technological changes. This region, stretching between the Middle East to the north, the Arabian Peninsula to the east, the Horn of Africa to the south, and East Africa to the west, has transformed from primarily a maritime trade corridor into a focal point for inter-power and regional struggles, while simultaneously creating opportunities for complex civil and security collaborations. These processes present Israel with a significant opportunity to leverage its geostrategic assets to strengthen its position and exert broader and deeper influence on its surroundings.

This memorandum focuses on maritime security as a derivative of security awareness in the maritime domain. In recent years, there has been a global increase in the focus on maritime domains in general, which are returning to the forefront of the global stage due to their centrality in the prominent conflicts occurring worldwide. This resurgence once again highlights the maritime domain's importance to the global economy and underscores its role as a medium where the ability to operate in it is key to superpowers, nations, and organizations.

Recent conflicts that illustrate this point include the Russia-Ukraine war, the maritime conflicts in the South China Sea, the competition over shipping routes in the Panama Canal and the Arctic region, attempts to damage undersea transmission infrastructures, and of course the centrality of the maritime domain in our region—the shipping routes in the Arabian Peninsula area, particularly the Red Sea, which has become a global focal point of interest in the past two years due to the activities of the Houthi terrorist army in Yemen.

For many years, Israel's discussion of the sea has focused on the Mediterranean Sea region and the energy resources discovered within it. However, the Red Sea is no less important, in contexts that remind us that



Israel is an “island nation” in the full sense of the term, due to its almost complete dependence on maritime supply chains. The term “awareness of the maritime domain” refers to issues pertaining to the maritime domain that affect a country’s security, safety, economy, or environment.

After 9/11, the United States, a pioneer in the maritime domain, defined the six overarching objectives of security in this realm:

1. Preventing terrorist attacks and criminal activities exploiting the maritime domain, and reducing the state’s vulnerability to attacks in this domain.
2. Enhancing national security and homeland security by strengthening the protection of population centers, critical infrastructures, borders, ports, and access routes in the maritime domain.
3. Improving and strengthening the ability to recover after an attack in the maritime domain.
4. Increasing awareness of maritime security in light of threats emerging from the maritime domain aimed at the state’s sites and assets on the coast and at sea.
5. Strengthening and expanding international collaborations and integrating the private sector to establish a maritime security framework, as well as formulating and promoting shared interests in the maritime domain.
6. Strengthening cooperation between various entities to implement a coordinated policy in the maritime domain and to fulfill the authority and responsibility of the involved entities.<sup>1</sup>

These principles were adopted by additional countries and organizations that developed such capabilities in various maritime domains, including in the

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1 S. Horev, *The Maritime Domain, Maritime Strategy, and What’s In Between*. The Center for Maritime Policy and Strategy Research and Systems (2021), 15–18.

Red Sea.<sup>2</sup> As a result, international bodies were also established to address threats in the maritime domain.<sup>3</sup>

When discussing strategy in the maritime domain, it is advisable to consider the words of British historian Basil Henry Liddell Hart, who asserted that the role of grand strategy is:

To coordinate and direct all the resources of a nation, or band of nations, towards the attainment of the political object of the war—the goal defined by fundamental policy [...] Moreover, grand strategy must look beyond the war to the subsequent peace. It should frame its course in the light of the most probable conditions of the peace, and aim to establish a more prosperous and enduring peace.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, the state's ability to integrate all components, both military and non-military, to maintain and foster the state's resilience for as long as possible.<sup>5</sup> Applying this thinking, therefore, presents an important opportunity to examine the significance of the maritime domain, with an emphasis on the Red Sea, where the importance of shipping routes and maritime supply to the global economy in general, and to the State of Israel in particular, can be observed.

The State of Israel is currently grappling with the need to formulate a security concept that takes into account the transformations and changes characterizing the entire region following the attack on October 7, 2023, and the continuation of the multiple front campaign. Within this framework, Israel should also address the maritime domain regarding insights and ideas that will

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2 Combined Maritime Forces, Joint Maritime Information Center (n.d.), <https://tinyurl.com/2s4mex2z>

3 Combined Maritime Forces, <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/>

4 B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy: Second Revised Edition* (Faber & Faber, 1991), 322.

5 Paul Kennedy, ed. *Grand Strategies in War and Peace* (Yale University Press, 1991), 169.

enhance understanding, opportunities, and challenges in the Red Sea region and assist in incorporating the domain into Israel's updated security concept.

The key to addressing challenges in the maritime domain lies in [maritime control](#), which entails achieving the right to exploit a specific maritime region for a defined period. Sometimes, maintaining a constant naval presence in specific areas and sea routes can deter the enemy from deploying its forces from its ports and prevent military actions or armed conflict. It is possible to achieve control over limited areas of sea, such as the Red Sea and its inlets, also through armaments launched from shore to sea, such as long-range missiles. Control of the sea is never absolute, as it is not possible to conquer an area at sea in the same manner as conquering land territory. When discussing freedom of movement in the Red Sea, it is essential to refer to the concept of "shipping route security," which describes the safeguarding of sea routes used for trade, logistics, and the movement of naval military forces.

This memorandum was written due to the mounting threat posed by the Houthis to the Red Sea arena and to Israel during the Swords of Iron war. The Houthi attacks on Israel, merchant ships, and international shipping routes emphasized the necessity of establishing a new international maritime framework. This should include not only the Western powers but also the relevant countries in the region who recognize that the stability of the Red Sea is a shared interest for all the nations bordering its shores and for the global economy as a whole. Near the completion of this paper, a direct military conflict occurred between Israel and Iran lasting 12 days, during which the United States also attacked nuclear facilities in Iran. The war will have far-reaching implications for the entire region and for the national security policies of the countries in the region. However, their interests in the Red Sea arena, as discussed in this paper, are not expected to change. This also holds true for the opportunities and benefits it holds for Israel. Therefore, even if the implications of the Israel-Iran war are not fully clear

yet, the assessments in this paper remain valid and may have become even more pronounced as a result.

To provide insights into these challenges, it is necessary to present the Israeli interests in the domain. In the immediate term, there is a clear and distinct interest in minimizing the Houthi threat to movement to, in, and from the Red Sea. In other words, it is imperative to stop the attacks on vessels navigating the Red Sea—regardless of ceasefires in Gaza—and restore the movement of goods in this sea to the same or approximate levels before the onset of Houthi aggression. This is irrespective of the clear necessity to stop the firing of rockets and UAVs into Israeli territory and to eliminate the threat to the movement of ships in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

On the surface, this appears to be a military issue requiring an appropriate military solution; however, a military solution does not stand alone, and there are additional broader implications here. It is evident time and again that dealing with a terrorist army—which has become a semi-state organization deeply embedded within the population and the area in which it operates—is particularly complex. This complexity is particularly significant in the case of the Houthi forces, which operate on one hand as an Iranian proxy serving the radical Islamic axis, while simultaneously pursuing interests in the local Yemeni arena.

Therefore, Israel should adopt a strategy of joining a coalition of entities working to eradicate Iranian influence in the region, and specifically to prevent the strengthening of forces of the radical Shiite axis in the Arabian Peninsula. Partnership with these forces is, of course, essential for addressing Iranian influence in the maritime domain as well. Israel may become an important and contributing partner in such a coalition. Therefore, the Israeli interest is to present the struggle against the Houthis—and thus, the struggle for freedom of navigation—as a broad and significant struggle for all partners. The response should be comprehensive, militarily, diplomatic, economic, and technological, otherwise, the solutions will be temporary and partial,

and there will be additional threats from the Houthi terror army or from other areas in the Red Sea region.

Israel's potential partners include the United States, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and in certain areas, even Russia. Within this framework, Israel can offer its contribution to international forces by providing them with an additional base for the relevant forces in Eilat. Thus, these countries will be able to benefit from priority access to the maritime and land trade routes concentrated in the Eilat region, as well as develop the free trade zone in the domain for the benefit of partners from these countries and, of course, participate in efforts to develop and establish military and economic bases in the Red Sea region, with an emphasis on the African coasts. Israel must ensure, through its short-term activities, a position as an important and relevant entity that can be relied upon, and more importantly, an entity to be considered in the Red Sea region.

In parallel with short-term activities (and assuming they indeed yield the desired results), Israel must form a long-term strategy aimed at consolidating the achievements of the short-term strategy to establish maritime and terrestrial security. This is achieved by positioning itself as an important player in the game involving all the Red Sea actors. It must become a legitimate and central partner of the Red Sea countries and the powers operating in this area, while deriving economic and transportation benefits from its geographic location.

Integrating in the Red Sea region entails numerous advantages—security, economic, commercial, and political. The Abraham Accords and the potential inherent in their expansion are just one example of them. The Red Sea is also a [key](#) to strengthening Israel's ability to address the ongoing Iranian threat. In the global context, this domain is one of the key points in the intense competition over global trade and communication routes, and consequently—over the physical infrastructures and foreign relations frameworks between countries, which will connect the East to the West, as long as Israel anticipates events and [invests](#) in these infrastructures.

## THE RED SEA ARENA

The Red Sea is an intercontinental body of water that separates the continents of Asia and Africa and serves as an elongated extension of the Indian Ocean (see Figure 1). It is artificially connected to the Mediterranean Sea through the Suez Canal—one of the most important transportation infrastructures in the world. Its shores are populated by numerous countries of strategic importance—Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen—some of which are considered conflict zones or, at the very least, face internal governance challenges. The Bab al-Mandab Strait at the southern end of the sea serves as a maritime gateway to the Indian Ocean, while in the north, the Red Sea branches into two extensions: the Gulf of Eilat (or Aqaba) in the northeast, and the Gulf of Suez in the northwest. The Red Sea is approximately 1,900 kilometers long and has a maximum width of about 300 kilometers. The average depth is approximately 500 meters, and the [maximum depth is up to 2,500 meters](#). Because it is surrounded by deserts on all sides and lacks strong rivers flowing into it, the Red Sea is considered the saltiest open sea in the world.

The Red Sea's importance has been evident for centuries, both due to its role as a major trade route connecting Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, and because of the concentration of strategic infrastructure along its shores—ports, refueling facilities, underwater communication stations, and even military bases of foreign nations. The opening of the Suez Canal to international navigation in 1869 not only contributed to enhancing the importance of the Red Sea but also transformed it into a preferred route for shipping goods between Europe and Asia, dramatically shortening the maritime path between London and Mumbai or between Rotterdam and Shanghai.

The Suez Canal is currently a maritime transportation artery of immense economic value: Approximately 12% of global maritime trade passes through it, and around 25% of the world's oil tanker traffic. Egypt, the country responsible

for controlling and managing the canal, generates annual revenues estimated at approximately \$10 billion per year ([as of 2023](#))—a significant sum for the country’s economy, which suffers from deficits and external debt. Any delay in navigation through the canal—as observed during the blockage of the massive Ever Given container ship in March 2021, for example—results in significant delays in global supply chains and could impact global commodity markets, maritime insurance, and oil and gas prices.

**Figure 1.** The Red Sea Arena



*Note.* This map was created by Stéphane Cohen/INSS using ArcGIS® software by Esri. Copyright © Esri. All rights reserved.

In recent years, there has been a growing understanding of the high risk characterizing the southern region of the Red Sea, with an emphasis on areas adjacent to the Bab al-Mandab Strait. This is a region fraught with instability, often characterized by lack of governance, the presence of terrorist

organizations, and ongoing armed conflicts. Particularly notable is Yemen, which has been experiencing a severe internal conflict for years, turning into a proxy battleground between Iran and the Sunni powers, led by Saudi Arabia. The Houthis, who have somewhat functioned as Iran's proxies in Yemen, have expanded their operational range in recent years to include the maritime domain. They utilize ballistic missiles, kamikaze drones, naval mines, explosive boats, and unmanned underwater vehicles. All these harm merchant ships, which has led to a sharp drop of approximately [60%](#) in the number of ships passing through this shipping route, leading to the redirection of ship traffic around the Cape of Good Hope on a more expensive and prolonged route.

In addition to Yemen, the African nations along the Red Sea coast also exhibit fragile government infrastructures: Djibouti serves as a logistics and security hub hosting French, American, Chinese, and Japanese bases, yet it heavily relies on foreign actors; Eritrea is considered an isolated and politically rigid country; Sudan is mired in a bloody civil war, resulting in hundreds of thousands of refugees, effectively causing the collapse of its state system. This chaos attracts foreign players: Iran is attempting to renew ties with Sudan, Turkey is acting through investments and religious activities, and the Gulf states seek to establish an economic and military presence in the region.

The maritime conflict in this area also exposes broader issues of governance at sea. In areas lacking effective sovereignty, risks such as piracy, arms smuggling, human trafficking, damage to underwater infrastructure, and unregulated exploitation of natural resources. Although the rate of piracy has dramatically decreased since its peak in 2010–2012, the potential for the return of organized criminal activity cannot be ignored, especially if the Horn of Africa countries do not regain control over their sovereign maritime areas.

In the Israeli context, the Red Sea is a critical area of activity, both due to its economic significance and the security threats emanating from it. The Port of Eilat, although not competitive compared to the ports in central and northern Israel, remains a strategic gateway for the country, and its location



offers potential advantages for cooperation with regional countries. However, a substantial threat from forces such as the Houthis or Iranian infiltration undermines freedom of navigation and creates strategic pressures that compel Israel to combine military responses, regional coalitions, and proactive maritime foreign policy. Moreover, the necessity to formulate a long-term strategic approach that addresses the Red Sea as a domain for diplomatic and economic maneuvering—rather than solely a security arena—is becoming a fundamental component of Israel’s national security.

The Red Sea is not merely a geographical border between nations or a route for transporting goods; it is a distinct strategic arena where geopolitical interests, the global economy, competition among powers, and unconventional security threats converge. Only a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics will enable Israel, and the countries in the entire region, to operate effectively within it and realize its inherent economic and political potential.

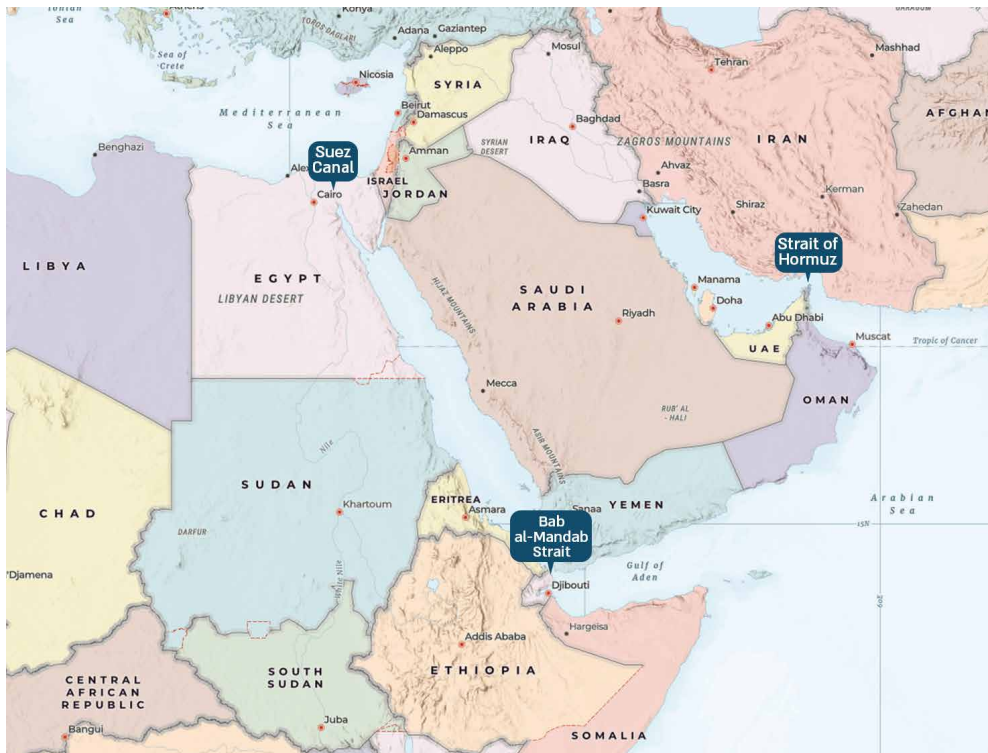
### **Maritime Choke Points: Strategic and Economic Implications**

A [maritime choke point](#) is a narrow passage or limited maritime geographical area through which dense maritime traffic of merchant ships, fuel tankers, strategic equipment, and occasionally military transportation passes. The significance of these choke points arises from the fact that any blockage, terrorist attack, armed conflict, or other violation of the freedom of navigation in them could lead to immediate and global disruption in the movement of global trade, shipping times, commodity prices, and the economic and military security of numerous countries.

The world’s main choke points include the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, the Panama Canal, the Suez Canal, the Strait of Gibraltar, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, and the Bab al-Mandab Strait in the southern Red Sea. The characteristics most share are limited depth, relatively narrow breadth, a multitude of regional actors, and absolute dependence on them by dozens of industrial and consumer countries.

In the Red Sea, there are two strategic points: The Bab al-Mandab Strait at the southern entrance to the sea, which is approximately 29 km wide but is divided by Perim Island, effectively narrowing the maritime passage to 25 km; and the Suez Canal in the northern Red Sea, which is about 190 km long and approximately 200 meters wide. These are the two choke points (see Figure 2). The entity controlling or influencing these passages effectively governs maritime traffic in the Red Sea.

**Figure 2.** Choke Points



Note. This map was created by Stéphane Cohen/INSS using ArcGIS® software by Esri. Copyright © Esri. All rights reserved.

The Suez Canal, inaugurated in 1869 and artificially connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea, is a major global maritime artery. It significantly shortens the shipping routes between Asia and Europe (for example, between Shanghai and Rotterdam) compared to sailing via the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa—a route that is about 8,000 km longer. The canal serves as a critical source of income for Egypt. Any delay in the canal—such as the blockage caused by the vessel *Ever Given* in 2021—results in immediate consequences: Delays for hundreds of ships, increased maritime transport costs, and concerns about subsequent ripple effects in the markets.

The dependence on the canal has become a global vulnerability. A dramatic decrease in the number of passing ships—due to terrorist activities in the Bab al-Mandab Strait (e.g., Houthi attacks in 2023–2025)—has reduced the volume of traffic in the canal. This decline not only adversely affected Egypt's economy but also caused global shipping companies to consider more expensive and less secure alternatives. Maritime choke points are strategic centers of gravity along routes such as the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, and for years, powers and regional actors have regarded influence over these centers of gravity as a strategic objective. The United States, Russia, China, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey—all seek to secure a foothold in the region, whether through military bases, permanent naval presence, agreements with coastal states (such as Djibouti, Sudan, or Eritrea), or infrastructural economic investments.

### **The Red Sea: An Underwater Junction of Communication Traffic**

One of the less visible yet most essential components for the functioning of the global economy, national security, and the digital infrastructure of states is the system of [submarine cables](#). These are relatively thin fiber-optic cables laid along the seabed, connecting continents, countries, and distant geographical regions, through which approximately 96% of global digital

traffic passes, including internet, phone calls, financial systems, online military systems, and commercial communication.

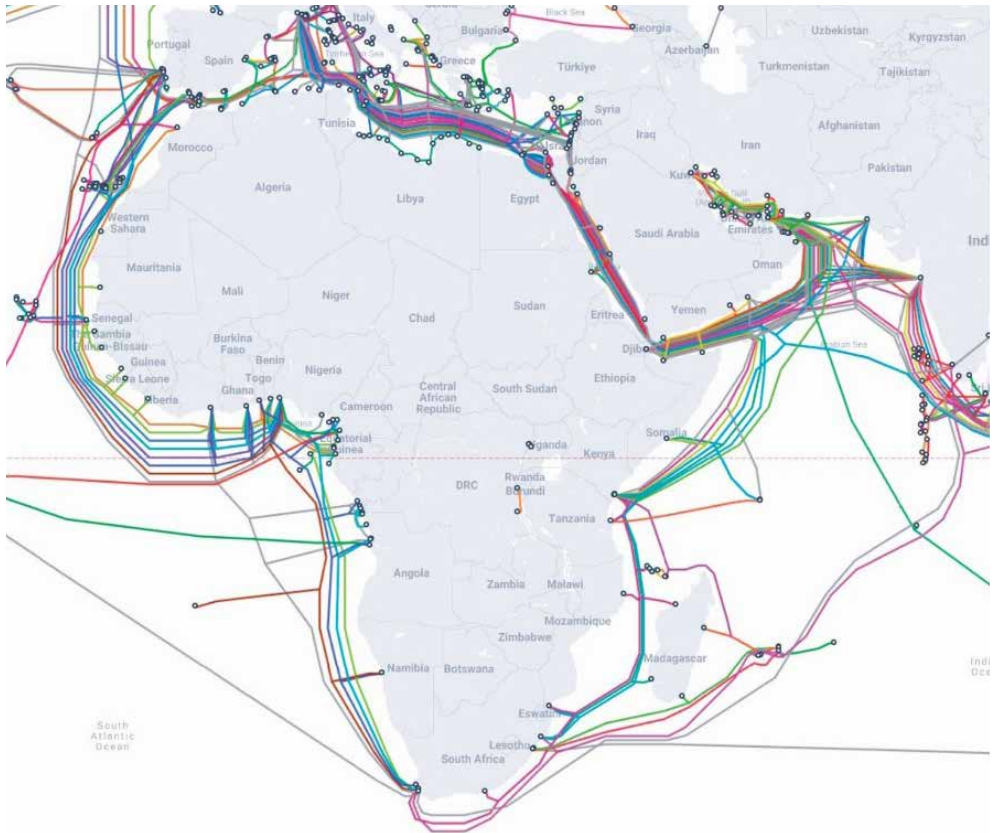
The fact that almost all global communication relies on only a few hundred cables—spanning a total length of approximately 1.4 million km—creates a high dependency and a significant vulnerability, as physical damage to a small number of segments could impact billions of users. Throughout history, communication cables have been a strategic target in wars and covert operations, but only in recent years has the international system begun to understand the full significance of protecting them—especially given the increased involvement of states, semi-state organizations, and terrorist groups in sensitive areas such as the Red Sea.

The Red Sea, beyond being a maritime artery for trade and shipping, is also one of the critical choke points of global communication infrastructure. The seabed in this area hosts dozens of undersea cables connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe (see Figures 3 and 4). The cables pass through India, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan via the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab Strait, heading north and continuing through the Mediterranean Sea to European countries, including Greece, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom.

As of 2024, there are at least [16 active cable systems](#) in the Red Sea region, including:

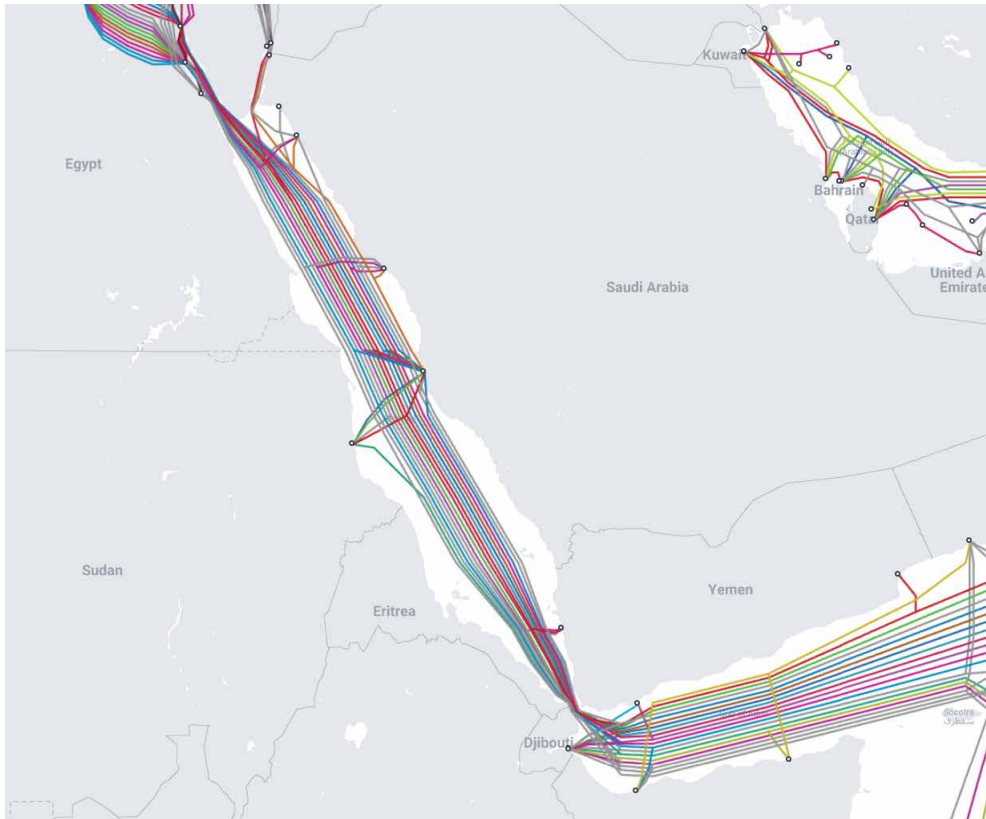
- SEA-ME-WE 3, 4, 5—One of the oldest cable systems, connecting Singapore, India, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Western Europe.
- AAE-1—A system connecting East Asia to Western Europe through the Red Sea.
- PEACE Cable—A new Sino-European project deployed in recent years, connecting China, Pakistan, Kenya, Djibouti, Egypt, and France—part of the Belt and Road Initiative.
- 2Africa—A massive project by Facebook (Meta), aiming to bypass the choke points in the Red Sea by deploying a cable around the entire African continent, with connections in Alexandria and Port Sudan.

**Figure 3.** Map of the Subsea Communication Cables Connecting Africa to International Communication



Note. From TeleGeography Submarine Cable Map, use according to License CC BY-SA 4.0.

**Figure 4.** Map of the Subsea Communication Cables in the Red Sea



*Note.* From TeleGeography Submarine Cable Map, use according to License CC BY-SA 4.0.

The concentration of cables in the Bab al-Mandab Strait and along the coasts of Djibouti, Yemen, and Eritrea makes the area highly sensitive: Any damage, accidental or intentional, could disrupt the connectivity of entire countries. The Houthi attacks during the years 2023–2025 changed the rules of engagement in the arena. The attacks on civilian ships, the deployment of explosive boats, and the firing of precision missiles have raised concerns that the next threat will target communication infrastructure and not just ships. The concern stems from the Houthis’ ability to damage infrastructure

ships that lay or maintain the cables, and in a more serious scenario—also intentionally damage the actual cables using diving equipment, underwater robots (ROVs), or unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs).

As early as 2022, a malfunction was recorded in several cables near the coasts of Yemen and Eritrea, causing severe disruptions in the connectivity of Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Somalia, which lasted for many days. Simultaneously, unverified reports raised concerns about the activities of foreign entities—including Russia and Iran—in mapping and disrupting infrastructure systems in these areas as part of hybrid warfare. In January 2024, British Telecom warned that the region had become a strategic vulnerability for global communication networks and called for the establishment of a dedicated international body to protect subsea infrastructure.

### **The Red Sea—Crises, Threats, and Challenges**

By the end of 2023, prior to the onset of the ongoing Houthi attacks on merchant ship traffic in the Red Sea, approximately [15% of global maritime trade passed through the Red Sea](#), specifically around 30% of intercontinental container traffic volume—highlighting the Red Sea’s centrality as a global transportation artery. Its location as a connecting link between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, primarily via the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Suez Canal, has made it a strategic axis in international trade, particularly for numerous industrial countries that rely on maritime import and export, foremost among them being European nations, the Gulf states, India, and China.

The State of Israel, located at the northern tip of the Red Sea, is directly affected by the changes and threats in this region. The Port of Eilat, although processing approximately 3% (as of 2022) of the ship traffic visiting Israel, plays a strategic role. It serves as a flexible and southern reserve port, operating as strategic backup for potential security emergencies that could impact the Mediterranean Sea ports (Ashdod and Haifa). The Port of Eilat holds a significant tactical advantage due to its proximity to the Gulf of Eilat and its



location outside the range of direct threat from actors such as Hezbollah or armed Palestinian organizations. However, in the past two years, its southern location has become a strategic liability due to the increasing risk posed by Houthi activities in the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

Since late 2023, a series of attacks carried out by the Houthis against foreign merchant ships visiting the Red Sea have significantly disrupted maritime traffic in the region. These actions, which included the launching of missiles, kamikaze drones, explosive boats, and even the hijacking of ships, prompted a response from an American-British coalition to secure the shipping routes as part of Operation Prosperity Guardian, initiated in December 2023. Although efforts were made to halt the Houthi attacks, most major shipping companies—including Evergreen, CMA CGM, Maersk, MSC, and others—have begun redirecting routes from the Red Sea to sail around the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa. This change caused the voyage duration between Asia and Europe to increase by an average of 30%–50%.

On the strategic-military level, Israel, along with other Western and regional countries, expresses increasing concern over Iran's direct and indirect entrenchment in the Red Sea area. This phenomenon is particularly evident in three trends: The first—deployment of Iranian warships along the western route of the Red Sea, sometimes under the guise of maritime security patrols, but suspected of intelligence-gathering activities; the second—prolonged anchoring of Iranian intelligence ships, such as the Behshad, which engaged in collecting communication signals and transmitting location data to support maritime terrorist operations by its proxies; and the third—strengthening Iran's ties with African coastal nations, particularly Sudan, where Iran seeks to reestablish military or logistics bases that were active in the past, prior to the severance of diplomatic relations between the countries in 2016.

The renewed Iranian interest in Sudan over the past decade, particularly in the strategic Port Sudan and the port of Suakin, raises significant concerns in Jerusalem and among the security establishments of other nations—chiefly



Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. Iran may utilize these spaces for smuggling weapons, transferring technological equipment to the Houthis, or for anchoring and deceiving naval forces. Beyond that, a permanent Iranian presence at key points along shipping routes implies that international freedom of navigation might increasingly fall under Tehran's influence, leveraging the instability of the Horn of Africa states to advance a hostile regional agenda.

Consequently, Israel is finding it necessary to formulate an active maritime policy, which includes the continuous deployment of the Israeli navy in the area to enhance the State of Israel's defense capabilities in the maritime domain, alongside the need to project power far from Israel's borders. All this necessitates adapting the Israeli fleet for extended and continuous operations in the area, combined with continuing to provide the required response in the Mediterranean region, participating in international coalitions, and developing regional capabilities (intelligence, technological, and operational). Rethinking the Port of Eilat's role, incorporating it into national logistics and emergency plans, and strengthening ties with African countries and international organizations that are working to safeguard maritime routes—are all essential for bolstering Israel's position in the tense domain of the Red Sea.

### **Houthi Activities in Yemen**

In the Red Sea region, there are several ongoing crises that reflect the interests of the various actors in the arena. The ongoing and most severe crisis pertains to the operations of the Houthi terrorist military in Yemen. The Houthis, officially known as Ansar Allah, are a Shiite-Zaydi movement with religious, political, and military characteristics, originating from northern Yemen in the Saada Governorate bordering Saudi Arabia. Their roots are embedded in the Zaydi community—a relatively moderate branch of Shia Islam that was dominant in northern Yemen for centuries until the Republican Revolution of 1962, which led to the overthrow of the Imam and the end of the Zaydi kingdom. The renewed politicization of the Zaydi identity occurred in the 1990s when

Hussein al-Houthi, the son of an influential Zaydi cleric, established the Ansar Allah movement in response to the growth of Sunni influence in the country and the pro-Western policies of the Yemeni regime.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Houthis became a [combatant force](#) following a series of rebellions against the central government in Sanaa led by President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Between the years 2004 and 2010, [six](#) rounds of conflict between the Houthis and the Yemen military occurred, during which the Houthis gained combat experience, recruited fighters, and consolidated their control in the northern part of the country. In these wars, Hussein al-Houthi was killed, and his brother, Abdul-Malik Badr al-Din al-Houthi, assumed leadership. The movement underwent radicalization, adopting distinct anti-American and anti-Saudi narratives, and began receiving increased support from Iran and Hezbollah.

The turning point occurred with the outbreak of the Arab Spring revolution in Yemen in 2011, which led to the ousting of President Saleh and the transfer of power to his deputy, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, as part of an arrangement mediated by the Gulf Cooperation Council. However, the political transition process failed when Yemen entered [a spiral of political, economic, and security instability](#). The Houthis exploited the weakness of the central government and the dissatisfaction in the north, capturing the capital Sanaa in 2014 with the support of forces loyal to former President Saleh—their adversary from the past who became their tactical ally. This was a pivotal moment in their transformation from a regional insurgent force to a semi-state actor effectively controlling approximately one-third of the country's population, including governance structures, an education system, media, and welfare services.

The Houthis' takeover of state institutions and the removal of the Hadi government led to a large-scale military intervention in March 2015 by an Arab coalition, led by Saudi Arabia and in cooperation with the United Arab Emirates. The coalition's goal was "to restore legal legitimacy" in the form of the Hadi government. Saudi Arabia viewed the Houthi takeover not only

as an immediate security threat along its southern border but also as an Iranian proxy on its border—part of the regional Shiite axis. The military operation, initially named Decisive Storm, and later named Restoring Hope, included intensive airstrikes, support for the ground forces of the exiled government, and backing for local Sunni militias. On the other hand, the Houthis increasingly relied on a tight military-ideological alliance with Iran, which promoted their transformation into a strategic arm in Yemen, similar to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Since the outbreak of the conflict, the struggle in Yemen has turned into a complex and multi-actor [civil war](#) with intertwined ethnic, religious, geopolitical, and economic considerations. The country has effectively split into several control zones: The Houthi-dominated areas in the north and center, including the capital Sanaa; the internationally-recognized government is based in the south-west and in the Aden area, together with the Southern Transitional Council supported by the Emirates; Jihadi organizations like al-Qaeda and some ISIS groups maintain a presence in the country's east and center; and finally, the armed tribes continue to play a central role in the country. The involvement of the Saudi coalition has led to limited tactical achievements but has failed to achieve its strategic objectives. Attempts to establish a unity government failed, and the Houthis continued to consolidate a relatively stable rule in the areas they seized. Additionally, Iran has increased its military support—dispatching instructors, facilitating the construction of UAVs and missiles, and sending advanced technology.

In the Yemen conflict, another development occurred: The Houthis began expanding their military activities beyond Yemen's borders, primarily toward Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Using UAV and missile attacks, they targeted oil fields, civilian facilities, and ports, successfully undermining the sense of immunity in the Gulf states. In April 2022, the Houthis and the Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia reached a ceasefire [planned for two months](#) but has since persisted, even throughout the Swords of Iron war.

The ceasefire was the first in years of intense conflict between the Yemeni government, supported by the Saudi-led coalition, and the Houthi rebels backed by Iran. It included a commitment to cease military attacks, the partial opening of the Hodeidah Port for fuel transportation, and the resumption of commercial flights from Sanaa International Airport—steps representing a certain alleviation of the severe humanitarian crisis in the country.

The motives behind the ceasefire were diverse. On one hand, Saudi Arabia sought to reduce its direct involvement in combat due to heavy economic and security costs, including Houthi missile attacks on its territory. The image of Saudi power was also affected—its vulnerability and military weakness were demonstrated—its inability, even after seven years of war, to achieve tangible achievements and to halt the attacks against it. On the other hand, the Houthis hoped to strengthen their political and military standing in the local and regional arena. The international community, particularly the United States and the United Nations, pressed for a de-escalation that would allow humanitarian aid and the initiation of a political process. Although the ceasefire did not lead to a comprehensive peace agreement, it significantly reduced violence and demonstrated the potential for a broader arrangement—albeit fragile and dependent on the shifting geopolitical interests of the involved actors.

Since October 2023, following the outbreak of the Swords of Iron war in Gaza, the Houthis have exploited the situation to position themselves as part of the Iranian-led “Axis of Resistance,” presenting themselves as a pan-Islamic resistance movement. They sought to establish an image of “the protector of Palestine,” despite their actions being mostly directed against global trade routes, often targeting ships with no direct connection to Israel. The Houthis have managed to disrupt maritime transportation, particularly through the Red Sea, becoming a cross-border threat that raises concerns not only in Jerusalem or Riyadh but also in London, Washington, and Tokyo.

The Houthi struggle has evolved from a local movement with a religious-tribal identity to a regional power threatening international trade, destabilizing

regional stability, and providing Iran with additional strategic leverage in the heart of the Arab world. They are currently an armed non-sovereign actor with international maneuvering capability, presenting a dangerous combination of increasing military capabilities, radical ideology, and a willingness to undermine the regional order for their political and strategic needs. Given this, they cannot be dealt with using only classic military tools but rather require a multidimensional campaign—military, diplomatic, economic, and informational—to curb their influence and restore stability to the Red Sea region and the entire Arabian Peninsula.

Since the beginning of the Houthis' overt involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian arena in October 2023, with the outbreak of the Swords of Iron war, they have launched hundreds of advanced attack devices at Israel and at foreign vessels ([as of May 2025](#)): Approximately 300 kamikaze drones, over 150 cruise missiles, and nearly 100 ballistic missiles, some long-range, and more than 50 explosive unmanned surface vehicles (USVs) primarily targeted at civilian and military ships in the maritime domain.

According to data from the international coalition, more than 100 vessels have been attacked since the start of the wave of Houthi operations. At least five ships were severely damaged: Two sank (including MV Rubymar and another Asian tanker), four ships were hijacked, and some of their crew members were held as “maritime hostages.” Approximately thirty additional ships sustained minor damages but continued their voyage. This phenomenon created an immediate incentive for merchant ships to alter their routes and select one that circumvents Africa.

The severe impact on freedom of navigation is also reflected in the raw data: The number of ships passing through the Bab al-Mandab Strait has dropped from approximately 80 ships per day to about 35—a decrease of over 50%. Simultaneously, there was an approximate 70% decrease in the volume of maritime traffic through the Suez Canal. According to updated assessments by the World Bank and the United Nations, this could reduce Egypt's gross

domestic product by up to 5% during the years 2023–2025—due to lost revenue from the Suez Canal, damage to related industries and maritime logistics and support services, as well as a decline in investor confidence. Egypt’s President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said on March 2025 that the monthly losses of the Suez Canal revenues reached around \$800 million. This threat is not only economic but also undermines Egypt’s status as a “geo-transportation hub” of Africa and the Middle East.

In March 2025, in light of the continued Houthi attacks, the United States, under the Trump administration, changed approach. Operation [Rough Rider](#) was a large-scale military campaign conducted by the United States against the Houthi rebels in Yemen from March 15 to May 6, 2025. The purpose of the operation was to respond to the Houthi attacks on international vessels in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, as well as the missile and UAV launches toward Israel since the beginning of the war in Gaza.

The operation aimed to achieve several key objectives: Increase freedom of navigation in the Red Sea; damage the Houthi’s military capabilities, specifically its missiles and UAVs; and deterring Iran—the Houthis’ main sponsor—while attempting to reduce its regional influence. During the operation, United States military forces conducted over 1,000 air and naval strikes on Houthi targets. The strikes focused on command-and-control facilities, missile storage sites, air defense systems, strategic ports such as Ras Isa, and weapons manufacturing facilities.

On May 6, 2025, US President Donald Trump [announced](#) the conclusion of the operation following a ceasefire agreement mediated by Oman. According to the agreement, the signatories committed to cease attacking American vessels; however, they retained the right to continue operations against Israel and claimed that the agreement did not include a commitment to stop attacks on Israeli targets. The operation’s success is disputable. On one hand, clear tactical achievements were attained, including the destruction of Houthi military infrastructures and a significant reduction in offensive activities against

American forces. On the other hand, the operation failed to fundamentally alter the balance of power or create effective long-term deterrence.

The Houthis, while consciously understanding the strategic leverage at their disposal, utilize sophisticated weaponry produced in Iran, smuggled arms, and locally manufactured equipment, along with Iranian intelligence information. Their actions prompted a sustained response from the American coalition, starting with [the first interception](#) by an American destroyer against missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles launched toward Israel on October 19, 2023. These actions focused on attempting to neutralize military centers of gravity: Missile launch sites, ammunition depots, operational communication facilities, and regional command and control systems, while continuously striving to disrupt supply chains, both military and logistic.

Concurrently, Israel continued its targeted strikes, from the air and recently also from the sea, some of which, according to foreign reports, targeted advanced launch sites, technological centers, and bases where Iranian-quality equipment was stored or installed. Moreover, Israel also targeted senior Houthi figures, economic hubs, including facilities of Yemeni logistics companies linked to the Houthis, trade warehouses in the Red Sea, as well as Houthi-linked infrastructures or from which the Houthis benefit, such as the Hodeidah Port.

Despite this, American and Israeli military activities have not succeeded in completely halting the Houthi's activity. Their fragmented, mobile, and asymmetric mode of operation, combined with the survival skills they developed during prolonged combat in Yemen, enabled them to maintain a relatively high attack rate even under pressure. Only after the ceasefire agreement was drafted between the United States and Houthi representatives did their activities significantly decrease. The understandings included a commitment from the Houthis to cease attacking civilian ships, in exchange for the United States refraining from deep strikes—a step that led to an initial improvement in ship movement in the area.

Alongside the combat, the political arena was also influenced. The Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Egypt expressed explicit reservations about joining the American coalition in the Red Sea, partly due to concerns about direct confrontation with Iran, the Houthis, or stirring internal public opinion. These countries chose to promote diplomacy while maintaining ambiguity: They did not publicly condemn the Houthis, refrained from clear statements, and sometimes even encouraged indirect dialogue with them—in an effort to stabilize the security situation while avoiding direct escalation.

The Houthi terror army employs a strategy known as Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD), preventing movement in international shipping lanes in the Red Sea. Proper utilization of the terrain enables the Houthis to dictate the rules of engagement to fleets and countries that are ostensibly ranked among the most powerful militaries in the world. The Houthis manage to damage ships and even sink them using shore-to-sea missiles, ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles, and unmanned surface vehicles. It appears that they are also [acquiring the capability to operate unmanned underwater vehicles](#).

### **Additional Crises**

**Ethiopia-Somalia**—At the beginning of 2024, a significant geo-strategic development occurred in the Horn of Africa region when Ethiopia—the world’s most populous landlocked country—officially announced [recognition of Somaliland’s independence](#), a region in northern Somalia that has been functioning de facto as an independent state since 1991 but without broad international recognition. In exchange for this recognition, Ethiopia received a leasehold on a sovereign area of Somaliland along the Red Sea coast near the port city of Berbera, granting it direct access to the sea for civilian and military purposes. The agreement includes infrastructure for developing a transportation corridor connecting Addis Ababa to Berbera, as well as the



potential for future deployment of the Ethiopian Navy, which has begun a rehabilitation process in recent years following its disbandment in the late 1990s.

The move, which broke a decades-long taboo in Africa regarding the alteration of political borders, [sparked significant regional tensions](#). First and foremost, Somalia perceived this step as a severe violation of its sovereignty. The Somali government in Mogadishu rejected the agreement outright, accusing Ethiopia of attempting to undermine its territorial integrity and incite separatist movements. The president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, convened the parliament in Somalia's capital, announced that this was a "red line," and even began mobilizing support from Muslim and African countries in the Peace and Security Council of the African Union.

Ethiopia, considered one of the most rapidly developing economies on the continent, is almost entirely dependent on imports and exports through the port of Djibouti, through which approximately 95% of its goods pass. This dependency makes it challenging for Ethiopia to conduct a fully independent foreign policy, especially as Djibouti works to strengthen its ties with actors such as China and France. Moreover, following the Ethiopian Civil War (2020–2022) between the government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front and the regional uncertainty, Ethiopia sought ways to diversify its maritime options. Ethiopia's agreement with Somaliland represents a strategic breakthrough for it, ensuring it semi-sovereign access to the Red Sea—a goal it has aspired to since the 1990s, following the dissolution of the Ethiopia-Eritrea confederation and the latter's declaration of independence.

However, the crisis did not remain confined to the Ethiopia–Somalia borders. It provoked a strong reaction from Egypt as well, which has a longstanding conflict with Ethiopia over the construction of the Renaissance Dam. The dam, which began partial operation in 2022, is one of the largest projects in Africa, yet Cairo perceives it as an existential threat to its water security. The Ethiopian recognition of Somaliland was perceived in Egypt as another

regional defiance by Addis Ababa and led Egypt to deepen its involvement in the Horn of Africa, particularly in Somalia.

Egypt, as part of a direct response, declared full support for Somalia's sovereignty and announced its outright rejection of the agreement between Ethiopia and Somaliland. Beyond diplomatic declarations, Cairo took practical steps: It dispatched military aid forces to Somalia, including light weapons, communication equipment, and logistics supplies, aiming to reinforce local forces fighting against the jihadist organization al-Shabaab. This step was accompanied by a proposal to assist in replacing the Ethiopian peacekeeping forces, deployed in various regions of Somalia as part of the African Union's international mission (ATMIS), with the aim of reducing Ethiopian military influence in Somali territory.

The international response to the move was reserved. Countries such as Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria expressed concerns about the implications of Ethiopian recognition on the continent's stability, since a precedent of unilateral recognition of secessionist regions might extend to other areas, such as Cameroon, Congo, or Western Sahara. The African Union, which is committed to the principle of non-alteration of colonial borders, found itself in a dilemma: On the one hand, Ethiopia is one of the organization's major supporters and serves as its host, but on the other hand, the move contradicts its principles. Mediation attempts have not yet been successful, and Somalia insists on demanding an official condemnation from all member states.

The agreement between Ethiopia and Somaliland is bolstered by the support of the United Arab Emirates, which has invested hundreds of millions of dollars over the past decade in developing the Port of Berbera, transforming it into a deep-water port, and establishing adjacent free trade zones. The Emiratis are interested in establishing a trade corridor to connect Ethiopia with the Gulf, thereby bypassing Ethiopia's reliance on Djibouti—a move that will also enhance the United Arab Emirates's strategic power in the Red Sea region.

**Sudan**—This country in the heart of East Africa, with its vast territory and abundant resources, has been embroiled [in a devastating civil war](#) since April 2023 between two of the country’s strongest armed factions: The official Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) commanded by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as Hemedti. The conflict, which began as a political dispute following the delay in the transition to civilian rule after the 2021 military coup, quickly escalated into brutal fighting characterized by massacres, rape, looting, and population displacement, with a focus on the Darfur region—an area already burdened by a grim history of genocide. As of May 2025, according to UN data, over 15,000 individuals have been killed, and more than nine million displaced—most within Sudan and a minority as refugees in neighboring countries such as Chad, South Sudan, and Egypt.

The ongoing chaos in the country has severely weakened the central government, turning Sudan into a playground for foreign actors competing for influence—seeking a port, access to resources or a geostrategic foothold in the Red Sea region. These actors are headed by Russia, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and now also Iran—which has resumed relations with Sudan after many years of severed ties.

Iran, which operated intensively in Sudan during Omar al-Bashir’s rule (1989–2019), considered the country a [logistic and military bridge for supporting Hamas and Hezbollah](#), primarily through arms smuggling and strategic transit routes across Africa. This activity was conducted, among other ways, through the Port Sudan harbor on the Red Sea, and it was temporarily halted following Sudan’s rapprochement with the Sunni camp and the West, primarily between 2016 and 2019. However, now, in light of the collapse of state institutions, Iran sees an opportunity to re-establish and deepen its foothold there, not necessarily through official agreements only, but via direct connections with military commanders, smuggling of weapons, technological assistance, and supporting local intelligence agents.

Russia also operates in the region with increasing intensity, having already signed an agreement in 2020 with Sudan's transitional government to establish a naval base in Port Sudan. Although the agreement was not ultimately approved due to internal Sudanese disagreements and American pressures, it was not shelved. As the chaos continues, Russia has renewed its efforts to gain access to the port as part of expanding its maritime presence in the Mediterranean and Red Seas (as it also operates in Tartus, Syria), within the framework of Moscow's "Warm Seas" Doctrine. Russia perceives Port Sudan as a strategic target—for refueling and naval presence as well as a forward position for arms export, logistics, and intelligence gathering on American and Saudi activities in the region.

The United Arab Emirates, a central economic and diplomatic player in the Horn of Africa, also has a [direct interest in the situation](#). Although the United Arab Emirates was considered to implicitly support the RSF at the beginning of the conflict (due to previous connections with Hemedti), in the past year Abu Dhabi has begun to change its approach and work toward mediating between the parties, coupled with extensive economic investments in developing Port Sudan and alternative ports, including the establishment of regional infrastructure for maritime and land transport. The reason: A desire to stabilize the region and establish the United Arab Emirates as a commercial and security power in the Red Sea, which serves as a global supply artery, particularly within the context of the race against Iran and Turkey for maritime dominance.

Port Sudan, the central coastal city of Sudan, located in the northeastern part of the country on the Red Sea coast, has thus become a national and international focal point. While the majority of the country is mired in anarchy, the city has become a stronghold for surviving government entities, foreign delegations, and a coordination office for international aid organizations. The Sudanese army, having withdrawn from several major cities in the west,

established alternative headquarters in Port Sudan, thereby effectively making it the de facto capital in military and logistics terms.

Control of the city and the port has become a particularly sensitive issue, as any entity—be it Iranian, Russian, Turkish, or Saudi—interested in a naval presence in the Red Sea region views the port as a strategic target. A scenario in which Port Sudan falls into the hands of the RSF, for example, could enable entities supported by Russia or the Russian militia Wagner Group (which remained active in Africa even after it staged a rebellion against the Russian government in June 2023) to take control of a port with immense strategic potential.

Beyond inter-state entities, non-state actors are also attempting to exploit the Sudanese chaos. On the ground reports indicate the smuggling of arms, goods, and human trafficking along the coastlines, coupled with increased activity of criminal and piracy networks, particularly on routes between Sudan, Eritrea, and Yemen. The fragility of the Sudanese coasts makes them a preferred target for organizations such as al-Shabaab or even al-Qaeda affiliates seeking a foothold in the Red Sea belt.

Meanwhile, the United States and France are seeking to exert diplomatic pressure to prevent the infiltration of formal foreign forces into the region. However, in the absence of a functioning government and due to the complexity of the local actors, efforts are repeatedly hindered. The UN and regional organizations are attempting to revive the peace initiative that collapsed at the end of 2023; however, as of 2025, there is still no clear framework to rehabilitate state institutions.

Sudan is not merely a failed state; it is a critical case study for assessing the level of regional stability in East Africa and the Red Sea. Control over Port Sudan is not merely a matter of logistics but also a crossroads of geopolitical influence between rival blocs. In the vacuum that was created, the danger of direct military intervention by outside powers increases, and in the near future, new international decisions may be required regarding the future of

a country that has become a symbol of what is referred to as the collapse of a sovereign state under the watchful eyes of the international community.

### **The Red Sea: Key Players**

To understand the range of opportunities available to Israel, it is necessary to examine the map of actors that operate in the Red Sea region. Some actors operate against Israeli interests, such as Iran, which is establishing a maritime presence through its Houthi proxies, intelligence ships, and activity in African ports; and the Houthis, who are carrying out attacks on commercial ships and attempting to challenge freedom of navigation in the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Furthermore, there are countries in and around the Red Sea with potential for cooperation with Israel, including the United Arab Emirates, which invests in the Horn of Africa ports and maintains diplomatic relations with Israel; Egypt, a quiet partner in ensuring the security of the Suez Canal; and Saudi Arabia, where there is a potential for advancing normalization processes with and which is interested in maritime stability as part of Saudi Vision 2030. Even countries like Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya, and Somalia present potential for civil, technological, and even security relations. Simultaneously, global powers are active in the arena—foremost the United States, which maintains a permanent naval presence in the Red Sea; France and the United Kingdom, which operate bases in the region; and China, which has a base in Djibouti and seeks to expand its influence through infrastructure and undersea communications. All these illustrate how the Red Sea has become a dense sphere of interests, where Israel can position itself as a legitimate and valuable player.

**China**—China's presence in the Red Sea region has become a central pillar of its global expansion strategy in recent years. This refers to a multi-dimensional presence encompassing economy, security, logistics, and diplomacy—converging into an ambitious project of sustained influence in a domain of paramount strategic importance. The Red Sea arena, connecting

Asia, Africa, and Europe, has become a central goal in China's realization of its vision to be a global power.

The Chinese objectives in the region reflect geoeconomic, geo-security, and geopolitical interests. On the economic level, it primarily concerns the need to ensure the continuity of China's maritime supply chains—a vital component of its economy. To accomplish this, Beijing initiated the Belt and Road Initiative, which includes the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road—a maritime corridor connecting Far East ports to the Mediterranean Sea via the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. This route is not only for trade but also a tool for creating economic dependency, military accessibility, and projecting soft power in key regions.

For this purpose, China has invested substantial amounts of money in recent years in port infrastructure along the Red Sea. In Egypt, it has invested directly or through government companies such as COSCO in amounts estimated at approximately one billion dollars for the renovation and expansion of vital ports near the Suez Canal—both in the north (Port Said) and in the south (Ain Sokhna). These investments include transportation infrastructure, logistics centers, and high-speed rail projects between ports.

In Djibouti, the most strategically significant country at the entrance to the Bab al-Mandab Strait, China has invested billions of dollars in port infrastructure, railways, warehouses, high-voltage lines, and digital infrastructure. The country, which is entirely dependent on Chinese funds, has become a hub for Chinese activities—economic, security, and diplomatic. The main port in Djibouti, upgraded with Chinese financing, serves as a key gateway to the entire African continent. China also assisted in building the railway line between Djibouti and Addis Ababa—a vital trade artery for landlocked Ethiopia. The Chinese presence in this country is so well-established that, according to estimates, more than 70% of Djibouti's external debt is held by Chinese financial institutions.

The establishment of China's first military base outside its borders in Djibouti is likely the most symbolic aspect of Chinese influence. The base, constructed in 2017, is located near the longstanding American base, Camp Lemonnier. This is a naval-logistics base leased to China until 2026 at an annual cost of approximately 20 million dollars. Chinese navy ships operate from the base as part of maritime protection missions, military exercises, escorting Chinese vessels, and civilian aid operations. China has also conducted joint exercises in Djibouti with Russia and Iran, which is expected to raise further concern among Western countries.

In Saudi Arabia, China holds significant shares in two major ports—Jeddah and Jizan. Chinese companies such as China Harbour Engineering and CRBC are involved in port operations, expansions, and the construction of surrounding infrastructure. Additionally, discussions are ongoing with the governments of Sudan and Eritrea regarding involvement in the ports of Port Sudan and Massawa. In the case of Sudan, both Russia and China aspire to gain strategic access to a port that would allow refueling, naval presence, and even a foothold in Africa.

Beyond economic aspects, China has been promoting an active naval presence in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden since 2008, under the guise of combating Somali pirates. Over the years, this activity has evolved into a platform for projecting a continuous presence. In recent years, particularly following the escalation in Houthi activity, China has increased its naval presence under the pretext of safeguarding commercial interests and is engaging in the maritime sphere with countries of the region, among them the [UAE](#) and Saudi Arabia.

Meanwhile, China is also conducting soft “[maritime diplomacy](#).” A notable example is the Chinese Navy hospital ship, Peace Ark, which in recent years has conducted humanitarian port visits to numerous African countries, including Djibouti, Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique. During the visits, medical teams provided free medical and diagnosis services to thousands of



citizens as part of a soft power policy and efforts to gain local support. This is a prominent example of how China merges its military tools with awareness and diplomatic objectives.

In Washington's view, the Chinese presence in the Red Sea constitutes a growing challenge, particularly due to the gradual rapprochement between Beijing and Tehran. The strategic partnership agreement between China and Iran, signed in 2021 for 25 years, includes informal clauses on maritime cooperation. In this context, the United States is augmenting its security cooperation in the region, including with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and key nations in Africa. However, China's success on the ground—economic, logistic, and security-related—is increasingly impressive, and China has clearly managed to penetrate deep into the Red Sea arena in ways not perceived as directly threatening but effectively establishing a permanent infrastructure for influence.

The Chinese presence in the Red Sea is not a local occurrence but rather an expression of the global expansion of a global power. Through a combination of strategic investments, targeted military penetration, and soft power tools, China is consolidating its position at the heart of one of the world's most critical choke points.

**The United States**—The Red Sea, from its northern branches at the Suez Canal to its southern end at the Bab al-Mandab Strait, has become a global focal point where the geopolitical, military, and economic interests of world powers collide, with the United States playing a central and complex role. The United States's primary interest in the region lies in its desire to ensure freedom of navigation in one of the world's most critical trade routes, while curbing the expanding influence of China and Iran and fostering cooperation with its regional allies—predominantly Israel, the Gulf states, and Egypt.

Washington's interests in the Red Sea are primarily based on the strategic importance of the maritime route, which accounts for approximately 40% of Europe's trade with Asia and the Middle East, and about 8% of global energy product transportation. For the East Coast of the United States, which imports

energy, fuel, technology, and consumer goods from the Far East, this route's importance is increasing in light of the impacts of climate change, which are leading to reduced ship traffic through the Panama Canal, thereby increasing reliance on the Red Sea shipping lanes.

Beyond the commercial interest, the United States views the Red Sea as an arena for countering the penetration of rival powers, primarily China. Coupled with the desire to curb Chinese influence, the United States is working to strengthen its traditional alliances in the region, particularly with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and Jordan. These efforts gained further significance with the transfer of responsibility to Israel for the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) in 2021—a move that enables closer military coordination between Israel and the Gulf partners within a regional framework to counter Iranian influences. One of Washington's core objectives in the arena is to reduce Iran's penetration into the Red Sea through its Houthi proxies, intelligence ships, warships of the Revolutionary Guards Navy and the Iranian Navy, and military overtures in failed states such as Sudan.

American presence in the Red Sea is conducted through Central Command (CENTCOM), whose naval headquarters is located in Bahrain, and the Fifth Fleet, which is responsible for a vast maritime area extending from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea. In addition, Africa Command ([AFRICOM](#)), which conducts military and civilian collaborations in West Africa, the Gulf of Guinea, and the Horn of Africa, operates actively. The overarching objectives include securing freedom of navigation; deterring the threats of terrorism and piracy; supporting allies; and enhancing the capabilities of local navies to maintain order.

Over the past two decades, the United States has led a series of international maritime task forces. Among these is Task Force 153, established in collaboration with other states for reconnaissance missions in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab. However, this force was not authorized to directly engage in securing navigation against armed threats—a political issue stemming from the refusal of many Arab states to appear as acting against the Houthis.

The escalation in Houthi activity during the years 2023–2024, which manifested in the launching of hundreds of missiles and kamikaze drones against merchant ships, led the United States, as mentioned, to undertake maritime escort operations, intercept weapons, and conduct counterattacks on launch infrastructure in Yemen. At the height of the escalation, American aircraft carriers, destroyers equipped with advanced interception systems and anti-missile batteries, arrived in the Red Sea.

The United States operates in the Red Sea on three main fronts: Maintaining freedom of navigation and international maritime order; countering the hostile influences of Iran and China; and strengthening the network of alliances and partnerships in the region. Its success depends on cooperation with key countries, cautious political management, and a combination of a deterrent military presence with smart soft power. In the rapidly changing Red Sea arena, continuous involvement based on a broad geo-strategic perspective is required of the United States, as well as political sensitivity and the ability to navigate between overlapping and conflicting interests.

**Russia**—The Russian presence in the Red Sea region is an integral part of the proactive foreign policy that Moscow has been promoting since the beginning of the previous decade. This strategy aims to deepen Russian influence on the international stage, challenge American hegemony, and establish permanent footholds at key points—particularly at geostrategic choke points such as the Bab al-Mandab Strait, the Suez Canal, and the Mediterranean Sea.

Beyond the military aspect, Russia is also active in the economic arena: It has renewed arms deals with Egypt, invested in infrastructure projects such as the construction of a nuclear power plant in El Dabaa, and has also attempted to establish a foothold in ports in Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. In 2024, due to the escalation in the Red Sea and amidst the war in Ukraine, Russia deployed warships to the Red Sea area—a move aligned with Moscow's perception that the Red Sea is a domain requiring the permanent presence of

the Russian navy. The Russian navy demonstrates flexibility in deploying its power: Participating in joint exercises with China; conducting naval maneuvers against Western countries; and implementing a “flag display” policy to project strength and stability.

Parallel to the overt presence, [indirect Russian support for the Houthi terror army in Yemen](#) has been reported. According to these sources, Russia provided the Houthis with access to [small arms](#) and its military satellite networks (GLONASS), supported espionage and communication measures, and possibly supplied intelligence to optimize missile and UAV launches toward targets in the Gulf and the Red Sea. While there is no conclusive evidence of direct cooperation in heavy weaponry, the Houthis have clarified in public statements that Russia (and China) are not targets of their attacks—a message attesting to certain understandings, if not more.

Russia’s possible support of the Houthis stems from several considerations: Firstly, undermining American control in the Red Sea, thereby harming international trade and the interests of Western countries; secondly, creating an arena where the West is compelled to allocate resources, thus diverting efforts away from Russia’s core arenas, primarily Ukraine; thirdly, strengthening collaborations with anti-Western actors, including Iran, Syria, Sudan, and allied Islamic entities.

It is important to emphasize that Russia maintains a moderate diplomatic profile toward Arab states; it does not publicly condemn the Houthis, nor does it express direct support for their attacks. This “plausible denial” policy enables Moscow to operate on two fronts: To benefit from undermining the West without bearing direct responsibility. This is a cautious yet effective approach, reflecting Russia’s overall strategy in distant arenas—indirect presence and support for the adversary’s weaknesses to promote a new order.

In conclusion, Russia views the Red Sea not only as a physical domain for naval presence but also as an arena for consolidating its influence in the Middle East, expanding its power in Africa, and challenging the existing

international order. The support for the Houthis, whether direct or indirect, is an indirect means in its global struggle against the West. In this dense and tense arena, every Russian action resonates not only on the ground but also in the broader struggle to shape the global arena.

**Europe**—European countries' approach to the Red Sea before the outbreak of the crisis with the Houthis was part of a stable yet quiet foreign policy, which focused on combating piracy, preserving freedom of navigation, and fostering economic cooperation. The European Union operated for many years within the framework of Operation [Atalanta](#), which dealt with addressing the threat of piracy off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden. The European forces carried out defense missions for UN humanitarian aid ships, monitored suspicious maritime activities, and escorted commercial convoys, while maintaining relative neutrality, avoiding involvement in regional conflicts, and refraining from direct offensive actions against sovereign or non-state actors.

With the exacerbation of Houthi threats to merchant ships in the Red Sea since October 2023, European countries have been forced to respond to the dramatic change in maritime conditions. The repeated targeting of civilian vessels, including ships owned or managed by European companies, has led to a shift in the European perception that the Red Sea is not only an economic route but also a strategic domain. However, although European interests have been harmed by the Houthi's activities, the actions of European countries were marginal even in defending their own interests in the Red Sea.

The increasing concern of insurance companies, the soaring transportation costs, and the redirection of ships to alternative routes (via the Cape of Good Hope) directly threatened the European economy, particularly trade with Asia and the Gulf. According to European Union data, trade volume with Asia constitutes nearly 40% of the EU's imports, and the route through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea is the shortest and most efficient for this purpose. Accordingly, there is broad consensus on the need for more active defense, while avoiding direct involvement in combat. In response, an independent

European Union naval task force was established in February 2024—EUNAVFOR ASPIDES. This is a pure maritime defense operation, whose primary purpose is to protect civilian ships operating in the Red Sea without conducting offensive actions or engaging in direct confrontations with the Houthis. ASPIDES represents the European effort to balance the operational need to ensure safe navigation with the aspiration to avoid military escalation or unilateral alignment with American strategy.

The objectives of the operation include escorting convoys, creating temporary safe zones, monitoring the traffic of suspicious vessels, and sharing information among EU member states. The countries contributing ships or operational equipment include Greece, France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain, although each maintains its own scope of involvement. In practice, the force operates in coordination but not under the command of the American Operation [Prosperity Guardian](#), and it is careful to not be identified with it.

The European decision not to join the American operation stems from substantive political and strategic considerations.

1. **Avoiding escalation**—Countries such as Germany, France, and Italy are concerned about a comprehensive military deterioration, which would adversely affect energy markets and regional stability.
2. **Foreign policy with an emphasis on diplomacy**—Brussels aims to be perceived as a neutral mediator capable of engaging with all parties, including Iran, in order to maintain the dialogue channel on the nuclear agreement and trade relations.
3. **Internal division within the EU**—Eastern European countries are closer to the American stance, whereas Western European countries prefer restraint and coordinated multilateral action.
4. **The Russian context**—Some European countries are concerned about a potential Russian response in other arenas (e.g., Ukraine) if they are perceived as directly aiding American or Israeli strikes against Moscow's partners.

The transition of European countries from perceiving the Red Sea as a peripheral area to perceiving the Red Sea as a strategic focal point represents a shift in the continent's security-geoeconomic awareness. Although their diplomatic and operational response was hesitant and passive, as threats in the Red Sea intensify, Europe will face the dilemma of whether to add offensive components to its arsenal.

**United Arab Emirates**—The United Arab Emirates has become a [central player](#) in the Red Sea arena over the past decade, combining economic and diplomatic strength with military capabilities and regional geopolitical influence. Its activities in this domain aim to achieve a series of strategic objectives, predominantly ensuring trade routes, protecting regional logistics hubs, preventing hostile influence from regional actors such as Iran and Turkey, and establishing its image as an independent and influential political-economic power.

The UAE's policy in the Red Sea aligns with its broader vision of promoting military, economic, and diplomatic presence and influence far beyond its borders. This is reflected, among other things, in massive investments in port infrastructure and maritime transport along the main traffic routes: From Egypt in the north, through Yemen and Somaliland in the south, to Sudan and Eritrea on the western coast of the Red Sea. The activity is sometimes conducted in quiet coordination with Saudi Arabia, but at other times concurrently and even in competition with its main partner in the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Through economic arms such as DP World, one of the largest port development and management companies in the world, the United Arab Emirates signs long-term contracts to operate strategic ports. A prominent example is signing an agreement in 2017 to operate the Port of Berbera in Somaliland, a key port on the western coast of the Gulf of Aden, for a period of 30 years. Simultaneously, agreements were signed to operate additional ports in Somalia (such as in Bosaso), despite opposition from the central Somali government.

Alongside investments in port infrastructure, the United Arab Emirates is strengthening its military presence in the maritime arena. Reports regarding military bases on Socotra Island and at the Port of Assab in Eritrea, as well as maritime refueling stations and intelligence collection centers, indicate an effort to establish an effective military deployment along the African coast of the Red Sea. The base in Socotra, for instance, is strategically located at the junction between the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, enabling control over maritime traffic in the Bab al-Mandab Strait—a critical maritime choke point for global trade.

This involvement increased significantly during the Yemeni Civil War. Despite the UAE's 2019 announcement of its official withdrawal from the war, it continued to provide logistic and military support to southern forces such as the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which operates against the central government backed by Saudi Arabia. The support included weapons, training, and even the physical presence of forces on the ground. The objective of the intervention was, among other things, to ensure control over strategic ports such as Al-Mukalla and Hodeidah, as well as the southern ports.

In the northern region of the Red Sea, the United Arab Emirates maintains a strategic partnership with Egypt, one of its key allies in the Arab arena. Within the framework of economic-political cooperation, the United Arab Emirates has invested substantial amounts in developing infrastructure in eastern Egypt—primarily along the Suez Canal and the Red Sea—and specifically in ports such as Safaga, Sokhna, Sharm el-Sheikh, and El-Arish. Some of the investments include planning free trade zones, establishing logistics centers, and railway infrastructure from the ports to industrial hubs, as well as military installations.

The primary consideration guiding this activity is regional economic expansion while simultaneously preventing the development of competing ports in the domain, which could threaten the dominance of the Jebel Ali Port in Dubai, which serves as an important regional transportation hub. The



result is a quiet regional “port war” between local forces and regional and international powers, with each actor attempting to establish presence or control at critical trade junctions.

Although the UAE’s policy relies on economic and diplomatic tools, it occasionally escalates into violent confrontations: The action in Somaliland provoked an angry response from Somalia’s central government, which perceived it as an infringement on its sovereignty. Simultaneously, there has been increasing friction between the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, which has signed competitive agreements to operate ports in Mogadishu and other locations in the Horn of Africa—intensifying the struggle over regional centers of influence. The United Arab Emirates also maintains economic ties with Sudan, including investments during periods of military rule. However, due to the civil war there, its policy has become more cautious, seeking alternative footholds.

It appears that the United Arab Emirates is establishing a network of logistic, economic, and military assets along the Red Sea corridor as part of a strategic spatial concept aimed at influencing regional trade hubs, ensuring maritime security, and creating political depth against competitors and hostile actors. It strives to maintain its logistic-economic advantage by controlling maritime passages and ports, thereby preventing the emergence of alternatives that would bypass its own main ports.

**Saudi Arabia**—has been working over the past decade to formulate a comprehensive maritime strategy in the Red Sea arena, combining security, economy, and multidimensional diplomacy. While in the Gulf it continues to grapple with the Iranian threat through deterrence and defense, in the Red Sea it is developing a new security, diplomatic, and logistics infrastructure based on regional and global cooperation and a pragmatic approach that posits the kingdom should become a central player, independent yet coordinated with international actors. Saudi Arabia, which relies on maritime transportation for oil, energy products, and goods, is aware of this sensitivity. Since the

outbreak of the civil war in Yemen in 2014, the Bab al-Mandab Strait has become a focal point of constant maritime threats, particularly from the Iran-backed Houthis.

As part of its strategic independence approach, the kingdom is advancing the establishment of a regional coalition, which will add a layer to the traditional reliance on the United States. This policy is reflected in the promotion of collaborations with countries such as Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and even Israel, while maintaining an outward-facing moderate diplomatic profile. This policy culminated in April and October 2024 and again in June 2025, in the combined Iranian attack on Israel, when regional actors, including Saudi Arabia, acted in coordination for the first time in a comprehensive air defense effort. This is a historical milestone that may indicate a shift in positions and power dynamics in the region, all carried out under the CENTCOM umbrella.

The connecting thread between the new geo-strategic policy and its implementation on the ground is the Saudi Navy. Riyadh is [upgrading the fleet](#) in the Red Sea arena as part of a comprehensive expansion of its maritime capabilities. The procurement plans include new corvettes manufactured in Spain, equipped with advanced systems for air defense and submarine warfare. This equipment has already been received at bases in the northern Red Sea and is intended to ensure the security of the kingdom's shipping and trade routes. Simultaneously, a new maritime control room is being established, equipped with advanced technological means for combat on multiple fronts: Both in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf.

Saudi Arabia is currently a partner in all three major multinational maritime task forces.

- Task Force 152, operating in the Persian Gulf.
- Task Force 153, which conducts patrols in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Bab al-Mandab Strait.
- Sentinel Force, which oversees the key maritime straits in the region.

Saudi officers occasionally serve as senior commanders in these forces, and joint exercises are conducted with countries such as the United States, China, and the United Kingdom. The cooperation with China in a naval exercise in 2023 demonstrates the multiple channels and expanding collaborations, including with forces outside the Western bloc.

Despite the attempt to improve diplomatic relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia is not reducing its investment in developing naval power against the Iranian threat. The Houthis are perceived as a threat that endangers the kingdom's freedom of navigation and security. In Riyadh, there is a clear understanding that if Iran increases its involvement in the Red Sea as well, it will be able to exert leverage not only against Saudi Arabia but also against the global economy. Monitoring Iran's involvement in Sudan, Yemen, and the Horn of Africa prompts Saudi Arabia to intensify its activities in these arenas as well, and to strengthen ties with Gulf states, Israel, and Horn of Africa countries. The kingdom also participates in economic and security initiatives in the East Africa region, thereby ensuring it has direct access to centers of influence and sensitive arenas.

For Saudi Arabia, the Red Sea has transitioned from a marginal arena to the core of its security and development strategy. The combination of naval modernization, the establishment of regional collaborations, and the formation of diverse alliances with global actors all serve the Saudi objective: Transforming the kingdom into an independent regional power that leads initiatives, safeguards its assets, and navigates cautiously between the rival blocs of the international system. This is a cautious yet determined policy, pragmatic yet visionary, positioning Saudi Arabia at the heart of the campaign for the future character of the Red Sea.

**Somalia**—Somalia serves as a prominent example of a country that is constantly grappling with an ongoing internal struggle for control and sovereignty, while simultaneously striving to formulate an independent and sustainable maritime policy. This country, possessing an exceptionally long

coastline stretching approximately 3,300 km along the Horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean, has suffered for decades [from governmental instability](#), which has rendered it a weak yet strategic player in the maritime arena of the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden, adjacent to the Red Sea.

The country, which has effectively disintegrated into fragments of independent entities since the outbreak of the civil war in the 1990s, has not yet succeeded in establishing an effective central government. The Federal Government of Somalia in Mogadishu struggles to enforce its authority over large parts of the country. Southern Somalia is partially controlled by the Islamist terrorist organization al-Shabaab, which maintains a de facto government in extensive agricultural and urban areas and is conducting a bloody terrorist campaign, which is also harming transportation infrastructure and maritime security.

Simultaneously, regions in the northern part of the country operate as independent entities. Somaliland, which declared its independence in 1991, operates as a relatively stable independent government but is not recognized by the international community. Puntland, also in the northeast, maintains a semi-autonomous governing system. This situation complicates the formulation of a comprehensive maritime policy for the entire country, particularly in light of the political fragmentation and the controversy between the central entity and the autonomous entities. Somalia's economic situation remains fragile. Approximately 70% of the population lives below the poverty line, with a high dependence on external sources, donations, and international aid. Port infrastructure, fishing, and maritime transportation are mostly in poor condition, and the lack of government investments due to the security situation limits the development of the maritime domain. The country is unable to independently operate maritime control systems, coastal security, or supervision of marine natural resources. Illegal fishing, primarily by Asian fleets, continues to exacerbate the economic situation of local coastal communities.

Somalia's maritime domain has served as fertile ground for maritime piracy over the past decades. If during the peak years of 2010–2012 Somali piracy became a global threat, in recent years there has been a certain decline, partly due to international efforts (maritime task forces of NATO, the European Union, and the United States), strengthening regional defense mechanisms, and agreements with neighboring countries. However, in the past year, this phenomenon has gradually returned—this time in close collaboration with terrorist organizations, particularly al-Shabaab, which sees the sea as a new source of income.

Somali maritime terrorism is not limited solely to piracy. Extremist organizations use the maritime domain to transfer weapons, carry out attacks against commercial ships, and occasionally also disrupt civilian maritime traffic. Reports of unidentified vessels entering sensitive areas near Mogadishu or in the Gulf of Aden are additional concerns among regional and Western countries.

Due to its internal weakness, Somalia has become a region of geopolitical competition among regional and global powers. Turkey, for instance, signed a comprehensive memorandum of understanding with the Somali government in February 2024, granting it extensive responsibility for maritime security within Somalia's exclusive economic zone for a duration of ten years. The agreement also includes rights to exploit 30% of the offshore gas and oil resources. Turkey already operates Camp TURKSOM, a military base in Mogadishu, considered one of its largest bases outside its territory, using it to train Somali officers and implement combat methods.

The United Arab Emirates, on the other hand, primarily operates through DP World, which manages the Bosaso Port in the northern region of the country, and also engages in both military and civilian activities in Somaliland, which have led to conflicts with the central government. The Emirati activity includes humanitarian aid, refueling stations, infrastructure development, and also the deployment of security forces along the coast. The tension between the

United Arab Emirates and the central government persists, partly due to concerns about excessive interference in Somalia's internal politics.

The United States, recognizing both the threat and the potential, has recently been attempting to reassert and deepen its influence. The dialogue includes building bases to train Somali and American forces, plans for maritime law enforcement, and creating joint frameworks to combat maritime terrorism. Among other considerations, the possibility of establishing a permanent naval base in the northern part of the country is being explored, thereby expanding the deployment of AFRICOM and CENTCOM forces near key hubs of terrorism.

Somalia is positioned in the eye of the storm in the struggle for maritime control in the Horn of Africa. It is fighting for its maritime and political sovereignty in a reality of internal polarization, ongoing threats from Islamist terrorism, and acute dependence on foreign actors. Simultaneously, the strategic importance of its maritime domains—from the Gulf of Aden to the Indian Ocean—ensures it will remain a focal point of interest and influence for both regional and global powers. Keys to improving its situation include political stabilization, strengthening government institutions, building naval capabilities, and increasing investments in infrastructure; however, without significant external aid, these goals will remain an unattainable vision.

**Somaliland**—The northern region of Somalia that declared its independence in 1991, [continues to function as a de facto state entity](#) with government institutions, an education system, security forces, and civil order but without international recognition. This status largely dictates its maritime strategy, both regarding the Red Sea and in the context of power struggles in East Africa and the Horn of Africa. Its coastline—approximately 740 km—has become one of the primary strategic resources in its struggle for recognition, attracting investors, and forming new geopolitical alliances.

Despite Somaliland's historical image as a hub for piracy, recent years have seen significant improvements in maritime security along its coasts. Strengthening the local security forces, collaborating with foreign actors such

as the United Arab Emirates and the United States, and investing in maritime infrastructure have significantly reduced piracy incidents—unlike other regions in Somalia. Although cases of smuggling, illegal trade, and unregulated fishing still exist, Somaliland is currently considered much more stable than the central government in Mogadishu. The Somaliland government is investing efforts to enforce its sovereignty over the maritime domain and to foster an image as a reliable partner in combating maritime threats.

The absence of international recognition is the primary factor limiting Somaliland's ability to conduct a comprehensive foreign policy, receive institutional aid, and formalize international agreements. Therefore, operating in the maritime arena becomes not only an economic tool but also a diplomatic one. Operating the Port of Berbera, its upgrade by the United Arab Emirates, and the deepening ties with Ethiopia are all measures aimed at positioning Somaliland as an independent maritime player on the international stage.

In January 2024, a dramatic agreement was signed between Somaliland and Ethiopia, according to which Ethiopia was granted rights to use a 20-kilometer coastal strip near Berbera, including the possibility of establishing a military port there. Ethiopia, the most populous landlocked country in the world, views this move as a strategic renewal of maritime access—after losing its access to the port of Massawa in Eritrea subsequent to the end of the border war in 2018. In return, Ethiopia agreed to de facto recognize Somaliland's independence and even give it shares in the national airline, Ethiopian Airlines.

This move caused a stir in the regional arena. The central Somali government in Mogadishu strongly condemned the agreement, considering it a severe violation of its sovereignty, and threatening military action. Egypt, which is in a serious dispute with Ethiopia over the Renaissance Dam on the Nile River, has sided with Somalia and even sent security forces to the area in an effort to counter Ethiopian influence. Tensions are also escalating on the international stage, as the involvement of the United Arab Emirates,

which helped to finance the expansion of the Port of Berbera, is perceived unfavorably by regional rivals such as Qatar and Turkey.

The main port of Somaliland—the Port of Berbera, located on the Red Sea coast—has become one of the vital assets in the region. In 2017, Somaliland signed a port operation agreement with DP World, a company from the United Arab Emirates, where more than \$400 million was invested in upgrading infrastructure, establishing new container terminals, upgrading roads and railroads, and expanding transport capacity. The port’s operation also includes an important logistics component for Ethiopia, since some of its goods are already being transported through Berbera, along with the port of Djibouti. The Port of Berbera is also a potential site for naval military activity—both for the United Arab Emirates, which is expected to establish a military docking point there, and for Ethiopia, which may set up its first-ever naval military infrastructure at this location. This move reflects the regional trend of seeking a strategic deep-water port for countries without direct maritime access.

Over the years, there have been numerous [reports](#), both official and unofficial, regarding contact between Israel and Somaliland, in the context of potential mutual recognition and cooperation in security, agriculture, and maritime domains. In Israel, Somaliland is viewed as a potential partner against radical Islamic influence in the Horn of Africa and as a possible reservoir of strategic support near sensitive shipping routes. Although there is no certainty regarding the actual extent of the relations, the regional trend of shifting alliances and moving away from old paradigms may open more doors between Jerusalem and Hargeisa.

Somaliland stands at the crossroads between lack of global recognition and achieving an increasing presence in the African maritime arena. Through its strategic geographic location, willingness for cooperation, and investments in dedicated infrastructure—and primarily due to its much more stable domestic government than its neighbor Somalia—Somaliland is succeeding in entering the map of alliances and influence in the Red Sea region. Its



diplomatic struggle, combining maritime initiative and maritime economy, may serve as an exceptional test case for a state's ability, despite lacking international recognition, to position itself as a functioning maritime power in a changing global arena.

**Djibouti**—a small yet highly influential country located on the shores of the Bab al-Mandab Strait at the junction between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean—is [one of the world's most significant geo-strategic points](#). Despite its small population (approximately 1.1 million residents), Djibouti has managed to establish itself as a host country for bases, leveraging its unique location to generate economic, security, and diplomatic benefits.

The most prominent characteristic of Djibouti's policy is [its openness to global powers establishing military bases within its territory](#). Since the establishment of the United States' Camp Lemonnier base in 2002, the country has become a unique multinational military hub. Currently, the following countries operate bases or permanent points in Djibouti: The United States, France, Italy, Japan, Spain, Germany, and China. Some of the countries are even partners in joint naval warfare activities against terrorism and piracy. The United States and France—a former colonial state—maintain a naval and air base. Italy and Germany operate small bases for logistics and intelligence purposes.

In 2017, as mentioned, China inaugurated its first-ever overseas naval base in the capital of Djibouti, a short distance from NATO countries' bases. This facility serves as a supply and refueling station for the Chinese navy but also functions as a platform for intelligence activities, drone operations, training local forces, and projecting naval presence in the Bab al-Mandab Strait region. The base is a milestone in realizing China's Belt and Road Initiative, aimed at soft control over global maritime routes and logistics points in East Africa, South Asia, and the Persian Gulf. Subsequent to this move, concerns in Washington and Brussels about Chinese entrenchment near American infrastructure have intensified.

The Chinese entrenchment process sparked additional reactions: Japan expanded its naval base in Djibouti; India increased its diplomatic and military activities; and France began conducting joint exercises with Western countries. Russia and Britain are also considering establishing logistics points in the area, aiming to prevent Chinese exclusivity in such a sensitive region. Djibouti, for its part, maintains a delicate balance of official neutrality while maximizing benefits from each power.

Djibouti maintains close cooperation with Ethiopia—a landlocked country—through which approximately 90% of goods imported to Addis Ababa pass. The economic ties between the two countries manifested in building a modern railway line, an inland port, and storage and warehousing facilities. China financed a significant portion of these infrastructures as part of its interest in controlling Ethiopia's maritime gateway.

**Egypt**—is central in the Red Sea's strategic arena. Its significance arises from its historical status, strategic resources such as the Suez Canal, and its ability to serve as a bridge between Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. Its policy in the region relies primarily on two complementary axes—the economic and the security, with clear mutual connections between them.

The Suez Canal, connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea, constitutes, as mentioned, the most significant maritime transportation artery in Egypt and one of the most important in the world. To increase its revenues, Egypt initiated extensive upgrades to the canal, including widening shipping lanes, excavating a parallel canal in the southern section, as well as raising transit fees by 15% at the beginning of 2023, followed by additional increases of 5%–15% during 2024. These actions aim to maximize profits from the flow of global trade, particularly in light of competition with alternative routes such as the Arctic route (which has become more accessible due to global warming).

However, the Houthi attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab Strait area have turned the Red Sea into a dangerous arena

and [have led to a sharp drop in maritime activity](#). According to World Bank estimates, Egypt has lost [approximately seven billion dollars](#) in revenue since the beginning of the crisis—an amount constituting about 5% of its GDP. This damage is particularly severe due to the ongoing domestic economic crisis in the country, which includes inflation, a devaluation of the local currency, and an increase in public debt.

The Chinese vision of the Belt and Road Initiative brings significant investments to Egypt, particularly around the ports of Suez, Ain Sokhna, and Port Said. China regards Egypt as a central link in the bridge between the East and Europe, and it is involved in logistics and industrial projects, including an industrial free trade zone in the canal area. Moreover, in recent years, the United Arab Emirates has become a major economic partner of Cairo, with investments amounting to tens of billions of dollars in infrastructure, transportation, energy, and logistics projects. The investments also stem from a regional interest—to transform Egypt into a central transportation and maritime hub connecting the Gulf States, the Far East, and Europe.

Egypt has also been [rapidly](#) developing its navy in the Red Sea region in recent years. Egypt's southern fleet, which was established in recent years, is meant to address the numerous security challenges in the region—including terrorist threats, arms smuggling, and strategic threats from regional actors such as Iran and its proxies. The Egyptian Navy's Southern Command headquarters is located at the Safaga base, and it is undergoing significant expansion, including the construction of new docks. The Ras Banas base contains strategic infrastructure, including underground fuel reservoirs, an ammunition depot, an advanced naval port, and a military airfield. This is combined with the acquisition of advanced vessels from Germany, France, and Italy, including frigates, corvettes, and submarines.

The Egyptian Navy conducts regular exercises with regional partners—including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan—as well as with international forces such as the US Navy and the French Navy. Egypt

participates in the Saudi-led Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea, which aims to enhance security cooperation in the region while creating a forum for formulating strategies to counter joint threats.

Although it is one of the main victims of the Houthis' activities, Egypt, as stated, has maintained a relatively restrained position: It did not actively partake in American-British attacks on Houthi infrastructures, while simultaneously conducts diplomatic overtures with Tehran and attempts to mediate with its proxies in Yemen to achieve calm. This is a cautious policy aimed at safeguarding Cairo's economic interests, lowering the risk of escalation, and positioning Egypt as an influential mediator.

Egypt considers itself part of a growing regional alliance—including Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—that collaborates in the maritime arena for both security purposes and the development of regional transportation corridors. This subregion of the northern Red Sea largely serves as a geopolitical counterbalance to the Iranian axis and is also relevant to projects such as IMEC—the economic corridor project between India and Europe.

Egypt operates in the maritime arena of the Red Sea out of combined interests—economic, security, and geopolitical. The challenges in the region are numerous: Maritime terrorism, instability in Sudan, inter-power competition, Houthi activities, and the penetration of Chinese and Iranian influences. Simultaneously, Egypt's infrastructure, international relations, and geographic position enable it to transcend passivity and even leverage its status to shape the entire region. In an era of global geo-economic changes, Cairo aspires not only to be a central player but also to renew its status as a leading regional power in East Africa, the Middle East, and the Red Sea.

**Iran**—Iran's policy in the Red Sea is an extension of its broader national security concept, which focuses on confronting its regional adversaries—primarily Saudi Arabia and Israel—and generally destabilizing the region as a means [to expand its influence](#). Within this framework, the Iranian Revolutionary

Guards operate to strategically position the critical maritime area, while supporting local proxies such as the Houthis in Yemen, who play a central role in implementing this policy.

The Houthis, which receive technological, logistic, and military support from Iran, have in recent years become an active Iranian maritime arm in the southern Red Sea. They employ asymmetric warfare methods, including extensive use of drones, ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles, as well as unmanned surface vehicles—capabilities provided to them directly or indirectly by Iran. This system has transformed the Houthis into an entity with a proven capability of disrupting the freedom of navigation in the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

Iran operates persistently on several fronts:

- Enhancing the technological and strategic capabilities of the two Iranian fleets (the Navy and the Revolutionary Guard fleet) with an emphasis on the ability to launch missiles at the sea and from the sea, coupled with the development of unmanned capabilities above and below water that can be operated over long distances. These capabilities enable operations not only in the Persian Gulf but also in regions like the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea.
- Converting civilian vessels for military uses, with an emphasis on large ships that can serve as a naval base for a wide range of capabilities: Gathering intelligence, intercepting aerial threats, carrying missiles and unmanned vehicles that can be operated from the ships against maritime or land targets.

Iranian maritime activity in the Red Sea is aimed at a series of key strategic objectives:

- Gaining a foothold in the southern Arabian Peninsula, including in Yemen, Somalia, and even in Sudan and Eritrea, as part of the effort to encircle Saudi Arabia from the south and control international shipping routes.
- Controlling the Bab al-Mandab Strait, the strategic maritime route connecting the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea, thereby exerting economic and security pressure on the West.

- Expanding the spectrum of threats toward Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States by introducing additional maritime threats that can be deployed across the Middle East.

Although a complete blockade of the Bab al-Mandab Strait or the Strait of Hormuz is not feasible over time due to Iran's military limitations and the international presence in the region, the mere threat and capability to temporarily disrupt freedom of navigation serve as an important strategic tool for Tehran. Military exercises, missile tests, and public declarations by senior Iranian naval officials establish the Iranian narrative that they possess the capability "to punish" the West or harm the global economy in the event of escalation. Indirectly, this activity also positions Tehran as the "gatekeeper" of the Gulf's maritime energy routes, thereby providing it with political and economic leverage—both against its Arab rivals and the international community.

**Turkey**—Over the past decade, Turkey has [increased](#) its presence and influence in the Red Sea arena as part of a broader strategic policy of returning to areas once controlled by the Ottoman Empire. This policy is driven by a combination of geostrategic, economic, ideological, and security considerations. Turkey views the Red Sea as a region of significance both in terms of access to trade routes, particularly the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Suez Canal, and as a sphere of influence where it can project military, economic, and cultural presence toward Africa, the Gulf, and South Asia.

As part of its efforts to promote its influence, Turkey has worked to establish a foothold in the Horn of Africa countries, particularly Somalia, where it has become a prominent player. As early as 2011, Turkey established a consulate in Mogadishu and engaged in humanitarian activities, infrastructure rehabilitation, and investments, coupled with strategic security operations. In 2017, Turkey inaugurated the TURKSOM base—a military base and academy for training Somali officers in Mogadishu—considered Turkey's largest military base outside its territory. Turkey also operates the Port of Mogadishu after rebuilding it as

part of a long-term agreement. Its investments in Somalia also encompass civilian sectors—infrastructure, transportation, health, and education—while establishing a long-term influence infrastructure.

Beyond that, Turkey also operated in Sudan, where it signed an agreement in 2017 to rebuild and develop Suakin Island. Although the agreement was suspended following the ousting of Omar al-Bashir, its very existence indicated Turkey's intentions to establish an influential position in the western part of the Red Sea. Despite lacking international recognition, Somaliland has also been a focal point for Ankara's overtures, both with the aim of bridging tensions between it and Somalia and out of an understanding of the geostrategic potential of its coastline.

Beyond civilian and military investments, Turkey seeks to establish itself as an active maritime player in this arena. It dispatches ships to the area for the purpose of humanitarian aid and demonstrating presence, especially in light of its concern about competing Iranian, Saudi, or Emirati influence. Although it is not an official partner in multinational coalitions like the American forces operating in the Gulf of Aden, Turkey seeks to present itself as an independent protector of the Muslim world—a message aligning with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's broader strategy.

Turkey's presence in the Red Sea is not without challenges. Countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates perceive its actions as a threat to the regional order, especially due to its affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood movement and Islamist discourse. However, in recent years, there has been a noticeable softening of attitudes, with Turkey attempting to rebuild relations with former adversaries and reintegrate into regional forums. Turkey's policy in the Red Sea reflects its aspiration to become a leading regional actor by combining diplomacy, civil assistance, and military presence. It operates to maintain a constant presence in the arena it defines as a strategic sphere of influence, serving its security and economic objectives and enhancing its international standing vis-à-vis both regional and global actors.

**Qatar**—One of the smallest and wealthiest countries in the Gulf, has been working in recent years to expand its regional influence in the Red Sea arena and more recently in Africa. This aligns with Qatar’s broader foreign policy, which seeks to strengthen its status as an international mediator, an important economic and diplomatic player, and a unique ally to both the West and the Islamic world. In the Red Sea, Qatar operates based on geopolitical, economic, and security considerations, striving to overcome geographic and political limitations and strengthen its soft power.

One of Qatar’s main objectives in this arena was to establish a strategic presence along the maritime trade routes connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe. The Red Sea, particularly the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Suez Canal, constitute vital [commercial arteries](#) through which a significant portion of global trade—including energy—passes, and thus are regarded by Qatar as assets to be invested in and protected. Qatar’s pursuit of direct access to these routes, independent of other Gulf states, also stems from the diplomatic rift it experienced with its neighbors between 2017 and 2021, during which it faced a political and economic blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Bahrain.

As part of its policy, Qatar increased its investments in key ports in the Horn of Africa region. It signed an agreement to operate the Port of Mogadishu in Somalia—a move also considered a strategic step in response to Emirati involvement in the country. Concurrently, Qatari engagements with Sudan and Somaliland have been reported, a trend aiming to penetrate additional markets in East Africa. Qatar is also investing in the development of connecting land infrastructures—railways, roads, and logistics centers—as part of its effort to strengthen supply and trade chains.

An additional central aspect of Qatari activity is soft power—using investments, humanitarian aid, and communication channels (with an emphasis on the Al-Jazeera network) to establish itself as a significant player in the political and regional arena. Qatari aid in the Horn of Africa and Yemen



is presented as an expression of Islamic solidarity, while it serves Qatar's deeper strategic objectives: Opening markets, diplomatic differentiation, and maintaining influence vis-a-vis larger players, primarily Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Qatar operates in the Red Sea with the aim of ensuring its access to trade routes, establishing an economic presence on the African shore, and strengthening its political power in a highly competitive arena. It achieves this through a combination of investments, multi-channel diplomacy, and humanitarian support, while striving to avoid overt conflicts and maintain its image as a moderate and influential power in the Middle East and Africa.

To conclude this section, it can be observed that the countries reviewed, despite their differences, share several common interests:

*Regional security and stability*

- Ensuring freedom of navigation and protecting vital maritime trade routes.
- Addressing maritime terrorism and piracy threats.
- Striving for political stability and preventing regional conflicts.

*Economic development*

- Exploiting the strategic location of the Red Sea to promote trade and economic development.
- Investments in maritime infrastructure—ports and energy facilities.

*Balancing external influences*

- Addressing the growing influence of foreign powers in the region, led by China and the United States.
- An attempt to maintain regional autonomy while leveraging opportunities for international cooperation.

*Regional cooperation*

- Promoting forums and frameworks for cooperation among regional countries.
- Policy coordination on security, economic, and environmental matters.

Figure 5 illustrates the potential for regional cooperation, divided by areas of interest and the type of possible cooperation that can be promoted in the Red Sea region. As a result of the analysis, it is possible to identify areas that could enhance Israel’s cooperation with relevant countries in the region, coupled with preserving its status, and areas where the deployment of Israeli naval forces could align with the interests of various countries in the region to strengthen Israel’s assets and status as an important partner and player in the arena.

**Figure 5.** Potential for Coordination

Country	Regional security and stability	Economic development	Balancing external influences	Regional cooperation
Somaliland				
Somalia				
Saudi Arabia				
United Arab Emirates				
United States				
Egypt				

Recommended collaboration with reasonable chances of implementation

Possible cooperation, but under limited terms

Cooperation is not recommended

## CIVILIAN COOPERATION IN THE RED SEA REGION: OPPORTUNITIES FOR ISRAEL

The maritime domain effectively facilitates activities and the integration of interests in various spheres, both civilian and security-related. Israel should build partnerships and capabilities, or strengthen existing capabilities, in order to integrate or collaborate with other entities in the region to establish as much control as it can in order to minimize threats against it and successfully address them. In recent years, the Red Sea has become one of the most important and complex arenas in the international sphere. In addition to security threats, the region offers extensive potential for regional civil cooperation, and Israel can and should position itself as a central player both in its military capabilities in the region and in leading civilian initiatives in the domain. The civilian arena, particularly in light of the geostrategic tensions in the MENA region, can serve as an anchor for stability, regional cooperation, and deepening ties with Arab states, African nations, and global entities. Civil collaborations in the Red Sea present a strategic opportunity for Israel to establish regional economic and diplomatic influence, build bridges with Arab and African countries, and emphasize Israel's role as a positive player in a tense geo-strategic domain. The link between investments in infrastructure, technological innovation, and interpersonal connections is key to a more stable future in the region.

### **Strengthening the Maritime Infrastructure in Eilat and Transforming it into a Regional Hub**

The Port of Eilat is Israel's sole maritime access point to the Red Sea and East Africa. In light of this, there is strategic and economic importance in expanding the port, upgrading its infrastructure, and developing it as a multi-dimensional logistics center. The port is currently not utilized to its full potential; however, in an era of threats to shipping routes in the Bab al-Mandab Strait, there is renewed feasibility for Israel to offer an operational-logistic alternative to the shipping lines.

Development proposals include transforming the port area into a free trade zone, developing railroads and dry ports to connect Eilat with Mediterranean Sea ports (Ashdod, Haifa, and possibly Gaza in the future), and expanding the use of EAPC facilities to move fuel and energy. Potential partnerships for this initiative include Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, all of which aim to diversify their supply chains and reduce dependence on transit solely through Egypt or Bab al-Mandab.

### **Undersea Communication: Israel as a Digital Hub**

Ninety-six percent of global digital information is transmitted through undersea cables, many of which traverse the Red Sea on their path between Europe and Asia. Israel is situated in a unique position within the digital corridor between East and West, and projects like Google's Blue-Raman cable highlight Israel's potential. Israel can offer terrestrial infrastructure, advanced regulation, data centers, and technological capital, enabling it to become a central undersea connection hub in the region.

Regional cooperation in this field—for example, with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—could establish an integrated, stable, and decentralized communication network resilient to technological or geopolitical threats. Upgrading the infrastructure in Eilat may enable an alternative routing of cables in emergency situations.

### **Marine Agriculture and Tourism: Economic and Environmentally Friendly Resources**

The Red Sea region is rich in unique resources—coral reefs, diverse fish populations, and natural conditions that promote the development of advanced aquaculture. Israel, a leader in the development of water technologies and desert agriculture, can share its knowledge with neighboring countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, which is developing coastal areas as part of its economic vision (Saudi Vision 2030), and Egypt, which is promoting tourism sites along the Sinai coast.

Possible topics for collaboration include eco-tourism, coral reef conservation, promotion of aquaculture (algae, fish), and addressing coastal pollution. Jordan can also join, creating trilateral projects in an atmosphere of trust and cooperation.

### **Search and Rescue: A Civilian Field with Security Value**

The field of search and rescue in the Red Sea remains underdeveloped, particularly along the sea's African coast. Countries like Djibouti, Somalia, and Eritrea are open to assistance and development of capabilities in this field, recognizing the shared need. Israel, which operates an advanced coast guard and drone technologies, warning systems, and rapid response capabilities, can contribute to the establishment of a shared regional center, as well as in training and exercises.

Projects of this type can be conducted within a multinational framework, in collaboration with countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and even international partners like the European Union. They will also serve as a basis for softened military-civilian cooperation, with the potential to strengthen ties and recognition in the region.

### **Maritime Medical Aid: Building Humanitarian Bridges of Trust**

Many countries, including China and the United States, operate civilian or military hospital ships that provide medical services in remote coastal areas. Israel, with proven medical experience in international emergency arenas, can operate medical maritime platforms—independently or in partnership—that will serve for training, disaster response, and strengthening ties with African and Asian countries. It is also possible to integrate universities, hospitals, humanitarian organizations, and government bodies into such projects, as well as combine medical assistance with training, mobile surgeries, and the dissemination of medical knowledge.

## SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE RED SEA ARENA: OPPORTUNITIES FOR ISRAEL

In the 21st century, the functioning of a war fleet is not limited to combat alone but includes a wide range of missions, primarily sea control, preventing maritime access, and projecting power toward the shore—as defined by theorists Ken Booth and Geoffrey Till.<sup>6</sup> Sea control is considered the primary objective of modern navies, and it is contingent on the ability to effectively execute a range of military operations under threat, with reasonable risk. The projection of sea power is an important component in creating deterrence and the ability to respond quickly to threats in the coastal domain, particularly in areas characterized by conflicts and strategic choke points—such as the Red Sea.

### **Characteristics of Combat in the Red Sea Coastal Arena**

The Red Sea is not an open and expansive domain but rather a complex one, constrained by varying depths, narrow waterways, mountainous shores, dense civilian presence, and islands that hinder maritime maneuvering. Therefore, any naval conflict in the area will almost always be conducted as “coastal warfare”—combat near the shore, where the advantage of the stronger navy is not absolute, and the weaker side has a greater chance of causing damage through asymmetric warfare capabilities—missiles, mines, and unmanned vehicles. The capability for self-defense, operational flexibility, and multi-arm connectivity is critically important.

Iran, through its Houthi proxy in Yemen, is a prominent example of exploiting the coastal zone to challenge international freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. Capabilities such as shore-to-sea missiles, kamikaze drones, naval

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6 Kenneth Booth, *Law, Force, and Diplomacy at Sea* (George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1985), 121; Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2018), 44–45, 152, 223–224.

mines, and unmanned high-speed vessels are deployed along the coasts or operated from the sea, threatening trade routes, energy and communication infrastructure, and military and civilian vessels.

### **The Implications for the Israeli Navy**

The Red Sea arena, including the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Suez Canal, requires Israel to prepare in accordance with the nature of the arena and the threats emerging within it. As noted thus far, this concerns not only safeguarding Israel's freedom of navigation but also protecting critical infrastructure such as the Port of Eilat, the narrow waterways leading to and from Eilat, strategic infrastructure and facilities in the Gulf of Eilat region, undersea communication cables, and even regional civilian and security cooperation.

The IDF—and the Navy in particular—is required to employ capabilities that will enable functional continuity even far from the country's borders. Force buildup does not necessarily need to include a very large fleet, but it must be adapted to the required missions in the arena: Long-range activities, constant operational presence, intelligence-gathering capability, active defense capability, and precise attack capability. The Sa'ar 6-class corvettes serve as a pertinent example, featuring advanced air defense capabilities, sophisticated command and control systems, cutting-edge sensors, and interoperability with other platforms. The force buildup of the Israeli navy must be adapted to operate in this arena and in maritime domains extending beyond the Red Sea, while maintaining and improving the capabilities that the naval force is obligated to uphold in facing Israel's challenges in the Mediterranean Sea domain. The force buildup must address the capability to operate simultaneously in two distinct, physically separated arenas.

### **Regional Cooperation: Challenge and Opportunity**

Milan Vego notes that in coastal combat, success also depends on close cooperation between the various navies, particularly in the ability to create

a unified operational front. Therefore, Israel must develop capabilities for integration with international forces, particularly with its regional partners—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Western entities. An integrated intelligence picture, connecting command and control systems, connection between naval, air, and ground forces, and data sharing between countries—all these will provide sea control capabilities in the region.

Israel can significantly contribute to this field, thanks to its technological advantage, operational experience, advanced control systems, close inter-branch cooperation, capabilities for combating maritime and aerial threats, and the development of maritime interception and collection systems. Therefore, the Israeli navy must strengthen and expand its presence in the Red Sea region, foster collaborations, and even spearhead new joint initiatives. Capabilities for reconnaissance and presence, collection and surveillance, threat interception capabilities using advanced maritime technologies such as those under advanced development (involving laser interception and similar methods), and precision strike capabilities from the sea using various maritime platforms for long ranges are what may position the Israeli navy as highly significant and valuable to all players.

### **Underwater Domain and New Threats**

One of the areas gaining momentum in modern naval warfare is the exploitation of the underwater domain—a field in which Iranian investment is evident, including the dissemination of technologies to proxies such as the Houthis and Hezbollah. This involves not only classic submarines but also unmanned underwater vehicles used for intelligence gathering, mine placement, attacking ships or infrastructure. For Israel, which possesses advanced underwater capabilities, it is necessary to maintain and even expand operational capacity in this domain—including in the Red Sea.



### **Added Value for Allies: Flexibility and the Ability to Coordinate**

An effective Israeli fleet in the Red Sea is required to also present added value for its regional and international partners. This is not limited solely to tactical capabilities but also includes the ability to share information, operate measures overtly or covertly, and keep pace with the changes in a complex arena. The aspiration is for an adapted, sharp, and flexible fleet that can operate to maintain freedom of navigation, protect vessels in the domain, defend strategic assets in the maritime domain, alongside offensive capabilities that enable the State of Israel and its partners to expand the tools at their disposal in a distant and important arena.

In an era where threats in the Red Sea are increasing, Israel does not have the privilege of relying solely on its allies. It must build an independent naval force, adapted for coastal combat against an asymmetrical adversary, but also capable of operating as part of multinational frameworks. The key is to constantly adapt to the environment, the adversary, and the challenge, transforming the Israeli Navy into a strategic asset in the emerging Red Sea region.

### **Coping with Shore-to-Sea Missiles and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles**

Coping with shore-to-sea missiles and UAVs is complex and requires the development of means capable of addressing these threats. Therefore, these capabilities must continue to be developed in the Israeli Navy in order to bring them to the relevant maritime arena, as well as platforms that can remain for an extended period in this domain under threat. Such developments exist but must be expedited, as well as finding more efficient and cost-effective solutions to address these threats, with an emphasis on dealing with missiles and unmanned aerial or surface vehicles. The current primary response to these threats is an interceptor missile, the production and operational costs of which are relatively high compared to the production costs of these munitions and means. The American Navy intercepted more than 70 drones fired at vessels in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden by the Houthis. Until

January 2025, the cost of all drones to Iran ([which provided these to the Houthis](#)) was approximately two million dollars. Therefore, it is necessary to continue investing in the development of cost-effective and efficient interception systems installed on naval vessels (the cost of the Israeli systems currently installed in the Israeli Navy is significantly lower than that of the American systems).

It is necessary to continue developing interception and disruption systems for these munitions, as is currently being done with laser-assisted interception systems or [by other means](#). These capabilities must integrate with other existing capabilities in the arena that are operated by other countries and fleets. This cooperation between the various countries and arms has greatly contributed to addressing these threats. Continued integration of the IDF and the Israeli Navy within the Fifth Fleet Command, which is responsible for the Red Sea arena, together with further development of joint detection and interception capabilities, may provide an effective response to these threats. This has already been demonstrated since December 2023, with all coastal, aerial, and maritime detection and interception systems operating in close coordination and providing an optimal response to threats. However, this does not replace the capabilities of Israeli Navy vessels to detect, intercept, and defend in order to ensure essential maritime activities for the State of Israel, such as protecting specific vessels when necessary or by conducting [targeted defense](#) of vital national assets. Nonetheless, addressing these threats cannot rely solely on defensive capabilities such as intercepting and disrupting these munitions after they are launched, as this would require nearly infinite resource investment against threats for which defense capabilities are complex. Therefore, these threats must be prevented from developing, or eliminated before they become relevant.

To achieve this, capabilities must continue to be improved for constructing a threat assessment directed against the maritime domain. It appears that the Israeli Air Force and Navy strikes in Yemen, conducted on several occasions,

have demonstrated that such efforts are essential both for targeting capabilities and threats directed toward the Red Sea and the State of Israel and for striking the enemy's centers of gravity.

Naval intelligence and collection capabilities based on a wide range of means are part of gathering intelligence about the arena, yet naval intelligence has its own uniqueness. Therefore, it is essential to invest in developing dedicated analysis and research capabilities for the Red Sea domain, focusing on the maritime dimension and the threats targeting the sea. There is an opportunity here to utilize and even improve Israel's naval capabilities for intelligence gathering in general, and real-time intelligence in particular, from the sea and at sea. A continuous presence of naval forces in the area will improve the quality and availability of intelligence, particularly in a distant arena such as the southern Red Sea. A presence necessitates a surface fleet and an underwater fleet. The State of Israel's underwater fleet capabilities are significant and unique, capable of providing extensive information, enriching Israel's data repository, and serving as a valuable asset for other countries with similar interests in the Red Sea, fostering fruitful collaboration. This is to strengthen Israel's value to its partners in the region, primarily the United States and other countries under the umbrella of the American Central Command, and of course, additional countries that are aligned with the State of Israel's interests.

Prolonged stays at sea can and should include the resupply of vessels at sea, including the option of utilizing additional ports that Israeli vessels can visit or anchor in, aligning with shared interests in the southern Red Sea, such as Somaliland or other naval bases operated or developed by additional countries who have shared interests with the State of Israel. Additionally, the Israeli Navy should continue to enhance its long-range sailing capabilities, including accessing the arena from the southern direction. Such a move could aid in strengthening ties with other African states and also establish preparedness and capability for operations in distant and diverse arenas.

Enhancing prolonged presence does not necessarily require high visibility. It is worth considering collaboration with neighboring fleets from countries currently investing in establishing maritime capabilities in the region, such as the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, which possesses a significant number of military ports in the northern Red Sea.

Naturally, such activity necessitates upgrading the Port of Eilat's ability to support the Israeli Navy's operations in the area. Upgrading these infrastructures will enable support for additional fleets if necessary, and can serve as fertile ground for strengthening cooperation with other fleets and countries in the region.

### **Projecting Power from the Sea**

The Israeli Navy possesses the capability to launch precise weaponry from sea to land, as well as to deploy special forces arriving from the sea. It is essential to increase the quantities, diversify, and enhance these capabilities, in conjunction with strengthening cooperation in this field with other countries in the region, as well as with the US Navy and other navies operating in the arena. The Israeli Navy's capabilities to project power from sea to shore must be diversified and enhanced.

### **Unmanned Vehicles**

Unmanned combat systems have been in military use since the late 1980s. Unmanned technologies have primarily developed in the underwater world, initially in the civilian market and later adapted for the military domain. The technological capability that has developed in the military domain has gained momentum and is already a significant component, essentially constituting a fundamental revolution in military affairs. There are unmanned underwater and surface systems used for port defense, anti-submarine warfare, mine detection, electronic warfare, deception, routine security, and recently also for reconnaissance and attack—as observed in the Russia–Ukraine war. The

Houthi terror army borrowed these capabilities from the Iranian Navy and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy. These devices are even more significant when it comes to asymmetric warfare, employed by an inferior adversary against a superior one, particularly in combat near the coast.

The ability to acquire a large number of devices at a low cost and without a sophisticated arms industry contributes to the procurement of these means by both terrorist armies and developing countries. The use of such platforms requires the device's robustness, sensors adapted for spatial orientation and device operation, and, above all, the reliability of communication between the operator and the device. It seems that navies around the world understand the opportunities and challenges in operating such devices, which require the navy's adaptation and, above all, recognizing the need to invest in formulating a concept that integrates manned and unmanned vehicles across a variety of operational scenarios, both defensive and offensive. This is an excellent opportunity for cooperation in the maritime domain of the Red Sea, especially since the US Navy, with an emphasis on the Fifth Fleet, is investing [significant efforts](#) in the field and is looking for partners. Characterization and construction of military vessels in the 21st century, incorporating capabilities and insights from the field of unmanned systems, will propel Israel forward in the right direction.

### **Maritime Diplomacy as a Component of Israeli Diplomacy**

The maritime domain enables the development of maritime diplomacy, which can be influenced by the deployment of naval forces and the current situation in the Red Sea. As a backdrop for additional alliances, the maritime domain enables the State of Israel to integrate into the profile it chooses within the alliances that are forming. The State of Israel's introduction under the United States Central Command umbrella enables the continued and deepening cooperation with the 21 states in the same framework. It is also recommended that Israel attempt to join as a member or at least as an observer in the CTF

153 multinational task force, which is responsible for improving maritime security in the area of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

It is possible to enhance cooperation between countries in the maritime dimension, which by nature takes place in open seas and international waters, thereby enabling low-profile collaborations. The United Arab Emirates, for example, sees itself as a significant player that is building capabilities in this arena, including establishing significant footholds south and north of Bab al-Mandab. Exploring how to combine interests is advisable, since the State of Israel can enable the United Arab Emirates to have capabilities that it may not currently possess in the region, alongside strengthening Israel's own operational opportunities in this area.

Concurrently, it is necessary to continue exploring boosting cooperation with East African countries located along the Red Sea coast, with the focus being on the southern part of the sea, which is emerging as a center of gravity in this region. The situation in Somalia may serve as a platform for Israel to engage in cooperation across various fields—both civilian and, no less importantly, military. Somaliland's attempts to secede from Somalia and gain recognition as an independent state are drawing global attention, particularly from the United States. Especially in recent times, the State of Israel must consider the advantages and disadvantages of Israeli recognition of Somaliland, which could enable the expansion of maritime activity and Israel's ability to operate in the area.

When it comes to strengthening alliances and examining opportunities and threats in the region, it is important to remember that in the context of the competition between the United States and China over control of global trade routes and supply chains, the State of Israel should continue to adhere to its important and deep alliance with the United States—an alliance that also manifests these days in addressing the crisis in the Red Sea. In light of this, it is necessary to explore the opportunities, challenges, and risks while considering American interests in the region.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Red Sea has long since become a geo-strategic arena of increasing importance in the international system. Throughout the memorandum, the changes that have occurred in the region in recent years—political, security-related, economic, and infrastructural—were examined, and a map of the interests of global and regional actors in this arena was outlined. This analysis positions the Red Sea as a vital maritime transportation axis for global trade, with growing importance for Israeli national security.

This memorandum emphasizes how the Houthis in Yemen, backed by Iran, have turned the southern Red Sea into a challenging area that threatens international freedom of navigation and harms the interests of many countries, including Israel. Faced with this challenge, various countries—including the United States, European states, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt—aim to establish military or diplomatic coalitions to ensure maritime stability, despite significant gaps in perceptions and policies among the actors. The maritime policy of each of these countries and others was reviewed, whether in establishing naval bases, investing in infrastructure, promoting security agreements, or initiating civilian economic projects.

The memorandum presents a series of strategic recommendations for the State of Israel, pertaining to the buildup of an appropriate naval force for operations in the challenging coastal area of the Red Sea, promoting civilian and security collaborations with regional countries, and strengthening critical infrastructures such as the Port of Eilat, terrestrial and maritime conduits, and joint economic projects. The memorandum emphasizes that Israel needs to formulate a clear maritime policy, encompassing both the development of its navy to protect freedom of navigation and strategic assets, as well as to realize the civil-economic potential of the maritime domain.

Israel's position in this arena can be strengthened through several strategic avenues: First, it should deepen its security and intelligence involvement in

the maritime domain—both through cooperation with foreign navies and the deployment of naval forces, as well as through the smart deployment of advanced technological capabilities to detect and monitor threats. Second, it can promote civilian solutions based on its relative advantage in desalination, mariculture, cyber, and communication fields. Third, the Eilat area can be developed as a logistics and port center that could serve as an alternative to other trade routes in emergency situations. Fourth, Israel can initiate integration into regional and international coalitions focused on protecting freedom of navigation and lead innovative models of diplomatic-maritime collaboration. Finally, it should employ soft diplomacy in the arena—reciprocal ship visits, technological contributions, non-violent security assistance, and integration into regional initiatives.

The Red Sea is not merely a domain of risks and threats but also a profound arena of opportunities. Israel can—and perhaps must—position itself as a vital regional player, blending military strength, advanced technology, diplomatic vision, and a willingness for partnership. Maritime diplomacy is key to this process, and realizing its potential lies in the ability to formulate a multi-tiered strategy that is based on initiative, builds trust, and is aligned with the regional zeitgeist. The Red Sea is not merely a maritime corridor but also an emerging crucial arena, and Israel can shape and fulfill a unique role within it.

Israel, which is interested in strengthening freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and near the centers of Iranian-Houthi influence, must [follow](#) what is occurring in Djibouti. Although there are no direct diplomatic relations, monitoring China's presence and the Western countries' approach to this country are part of Israel's security considerations in the Red Sea's southern arena, especially in light of the Houthis' attacks on civilian shipping. Djibouti illustrates how a geographically and demographically small country can become a key player in international discourse, as long as it leverages its location and manages its foreign relations in a flexible and strategic manner.



The inter-power tensions in Djibouti is a microcosm of a much broader struggle between the West and China—over control, presence, and influence in the Red Sea and in the global maritime system. Therefore, developments in Djibouti will continue to be at the forefront of the security agenda for anyone interested in maritime stability in the southern Red Sea and maintaining freedom of navigation along this vital trade route.

In conclusion, this memorandum positions the Red Sea not only as a security challenge but also as a regional opportunity for Israel. It advocates for the integration of naval strength, smart diplomacy, and the development of civilian infrastructure to position Israel as a key player in the emerging arena, one that is poised to redefine the geopolitical balance between Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Israel can, and indeed should, become a full partner in establishing a new regional maritime security forum that combines intelligence, operational capabilities, international enforcement, protection of maritime and cyber infrastructure—while incorporating private and international economic sectors operating along these critical trade routes.

Beyond the security aspect, control over the undersea communication infrastructure has become a paramount geo-strategic tool: Israel must consider scenarios of deliberate cutting or disabling of these connections—scenarios that have implications not only for security systems but also for business, banking, and transportation activities. The undersea communication cables traversing the Red Sea are not merely conduits of information but lifelines of the digital economy. Every country that relies on information—and in our era, this includes all—must comprehend its vulnerability in this domain. Israel and the countries of the region must consider:

- Forming a joint maritime mechanism to protect communication cables.
- Establishing a maritime-intelligence warning system against sabotage attempts.

- Developing and increasing the number of undersea communication cables connecting Israel to the world, including defining the concurrent use of multiple undersea cables for transmitting essential communications and prioritizing essential communications over other communications to enhance infrastructure redundancy.
- Improving the response in cases of damage to undersea infrastructure by establishing state-level capabilities and fostering international collaborations to improve such capabilities.

### Recommendations for Israel: Policies and Actions

1. **Strengthening the Port of Eilat and communication and transportation infrastructure**—Transforming Eilat into a logistics hub, free trade zone, and a focal point for joint economic activities with regional countries, particularly with Egypt, Jordan, and the Arabian Peninsula countries, predominantly Saudi Arabia.
2. **Expanding and deepening maritime security cooperation**—Participation in multinational forces, unique exercises, and establishing coordination mechanisms with Red Sea states, emphasizing the creation of a shared maritime vision and addressing underwater threats.
3. **Expanding cooperation and developing the capability to utilize relevant maritime infrastructures in the region for the Israeli Navy**—Exploring and expanding cooperation with countries, with an emphasis on African states, to utilize relevant maritime infrastructures.
4. **Adapting the naval force buildup**—Improving and tailoring the Navy's capabilities in the Red Sea region parallel to the Mediterranean arena, with an emphasis on deploying naval forces in distant areas and addressing asymmetric threats, while improving and enhancing the ability to conduct strikes from the sea.

5. **Multidisciplinary civil-security involvement**—Promoting projects in mariculture, tourism, search and rescue centers, undersea communication infrastructure, and maritime healthcare initiatives such as hospital ships—as a means to create soft presence and positive civilian visibility.
6. **Strengthening the connection with local forces in Africa**—Deepening diplomatic and security ties with the Horn of Africa countries (Djibouti, Somalia, Somaliland), as a balancing factor against Iranian and Chinese influence and to strengthen the African dimension in Israeli diplomacy.
7. **Continuously monitoring foreign investments and emerging threats**—Tracking Chinese investments, Russian presence, undersea infrastructure, and Iranian actions, in order to preserve the national security domain and identify changes in the arena in real time.

In the Red Sea region, significant geo-strategic processes have unfolded over the past decade, manifested in political, security, economic, and technological shifts. This area—stretching between the Middle East in the north, the Arabian Peninsula to the east, the Horn of Africa to the south, and East Africa to the west—has become a focal point of both global and regional power struggles. At the same time, it has also generated opportunities for complex civilian and security cooperation. These developments present Israel with a significant opportunity to leverage its geo-strategic assets in order to strengthen its status and expand its influence on its surroundings.

In recent years, there has been a global resurgence of attention to maritime domains, which have once again taken center stage due to their centrality in major conflicts now unfolding around the world. This renewed focus highlights the vital importance of the maritime sphere to the global economy and its role as an arena where the ability to operate effectively is essential to the great powers, nations, and organizations.

Israel is currently facing the need to formulate a security concept that takes into account the transformations and shifts shaping the entire region in the wake of the Hamas's attack on October 7, 2023, and the ongoing multi-arena campaign. As part of this effort, Israel should also address the maritime domain. This memorandum offers insights and ideas aimed at broadening the understanding of the opportunities and challenges of the Red Sea region and assisting in incorporating this arena into Israel's updated national security concept.