# 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.[6] 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.