



“The International Politics of the Red Sea “and Beyond: An Analytical Approach

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Description

The book¹ provides a comprehensive analysis of the Red Sea’s geopolitical significance, tracing its historical role from the Ptolemaic and Roman eras to European colonialism and the modern globalized order. It explores the region’s strategic importance due to its proximity to oil-rich Middle Eastern states and the Horn of Africa, shaping security, trade, and military dynamics. The authors² highlight how shifting power balances and evolving global interests have transformed the Red Sea into a key hub for international politics. Examining the Rimland³ theory of Spykman, the study underscores the region’s critical role in global maritime trade, especially following the events of October 7, 2023.

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¹The book is authored by Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Emma C. Murphy and was published by Routledge in 2011 as part of the Durham Modern Middle East and Islamic World Series, Durham University.(
<https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/middle-eastern-islamic-studies/>)

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³ The Rimland Theory, proposed by Nicholas Spykman(Oct 1893- June 1943), suggests that the Eurasian Rimland, an area encompassing coastal regions from Western Europe to East Asia, holds the key to global power dynamics. The

The Book at Glance

The book offers a critical analysis of the Red Sea's growing geopolitical significance, highlighting its role as a vital maritime corridor amid global and regional power struggles. It examines:

- Strategic maritime trade, including the Suez Canal's⁴ role in global commerce.
- Security and military presence, focusing on naval bases, alliances, and threats.
- Resource competition, particularly oil, gas, and natural reserves.
- Territorial disputes and regional conflicts, shaping political boundaries.
- Geopolitical rivalries, involving the U.S., China, Russia, and Middle Eastern powers.
- Regional power shifts, influenced by Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, and Ethiopia.

Rimland Theory highlights the strategic importance of coastal regions, which serve as a bridge between different continents and provide access to both land-based and sea-based territories. Control over the Rimland is seen as conferring a significant advantage in projecting power and influencing global affairs. It argues that controlling the Rimland can disrupt the dominance of land-based powers, such as those located in the interior of continents, by enabling maritime powers to exert influence over them. Spykman's theory has had a lasting impact on the understanding of world geopolitics, particularly in the context of the post-World War II period. It has influenced strategic thinking and discussions on global power dynamics, emphasizing the importance of coastal regions in shaping international relations.

⁴ The Suez Canal is an artificial sea-level waterway in Egypt, connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea through the Isthmus of Suez and dividing Africa from Asia. It was opened in 1869 after 10 years of construction and enables a more direct route for ships traveling between Europe and Asia, avoiding the long journey around the Cape of Good Hope. The canal has been an important global trade route, with nearly 20,000 vessels passing through it each year. However, in 2024, Suez Canal trade dropped by 50% from the previous year. The Suez Canal has also been the site of geopolitical tensions, such as the 1956 Suez Crisis when the Egyptian government nationalized the Suez Canal Company, which was jointly owned by Britain and France. This led to an international crisis and subsequent military intervention.

- Political instability and conflict, impacting security and trade.

Despite being first published in 2011, the book remains relevant, addressing contemporary crises such as the Israel-Houthi conflict and its effect on maritime security (Zeidan, 2024). It serves as a valuable resource for understanding the evolving strategic landscape of the Red Sea.

The Omani Empire's influence in the Red Sea region

The book undervalued the historical and contemporary role of the Omani Empire⁵ in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region. The Omani Empire once controlled key territories along the Swahili coast, including Zanzibar, Mombasa, and parts of Mozambique, while extending northward into modern-day Somalia and the strategic island of Socotra⁶. This influence shaped regional trade and politics for centuries.

⁵ The Omani Empire(The Sultanate of Oman today) was a maritime empire that vied with Portugal and Britain for trade and influence in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. It rose as a regional player in the 18th century and reached its peak influence in the 19th century, extending its control across the Strait of Hormuz to modern-day Iran and Pakistan, and as far south as Cape Delgado in modern day - Tanzania. After Said bin Sultan's death in 1856, the empire was divided between his sons into two sultanates: the *Sultanate of Zanzibar* ruled by Majid bin Said, and the *Sultanate of Muscat and Oman* ruled by Thuwaini bin Said. This division marked the decline of the empire. The Omani Empire's decline was further exacerbated by a civil war over the struggle of the imamate political system in the early 18th century and the support of one side against the other by regional powers like Saudi Arabia and external like the UK and France. The empire's influence waned, and by the mid-19th century, it had significantly declined, leading to the division of its territories and the end of its status as a major maritime power. The Omani Empire's influence was characterized by its dominance in maritime trade, its expansion to Gwadar in present-day Pakistan by 1783, and its control over trade routes in the Indian Ocean, East Africa, and the Persian Gulf. The empire's legacy is reflected in the enduring impressions it left on the cultures and histories of the regions it influenced, particularly in the Red Sea region , East Africa and the Indian Ocean. See also : <https://www.oerproject.com/OER-Materials/OER-Media/Videos/1750/Unit1/The-Omani-Empire>

⁶ Socotra, island in the Indian Ocean about 210 miles (340 km) southeast of Yemen. The largest of several islands extending eastward from the Horn of Africa, it has an area of about 1,400 square miles (3,600 square km). The islands stand on coral banks and may once have been connected with the African and Arabian



⁷Source: Omani (2007)

mainland. Socotra's flora includes several famous species, among them myrrh, frankincense, and the dragon's blood tree. In recognition of its distinct plant and animal life, the archipelago was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2008. It has become part of the geopolitics rivalry in the region since the 2015 Saudi Arabia -Yemen war, with the UAE influence in the Island.

The Omani delegation's talks with Djiboutian officials, led by President Ismail Omar Gili⁸, focused on enhancing cooperation in ports and maritime navigation. Oman strengthened its presence in the Horn of Africa through a 2019 deal between its State General Reserve Fund (SGRF) and the Djibouti Ports and Free Zones Authority (DPFZA) to develop Djibouti's ports. This positioned Oman as a competitor, especially after Djibouti canceled its concession with D.P. World⁹. Oman's move responds to the Yemen war, the Gulf crisis¹⁰, and the UAE's expanding influence over Red Sea ports. For Djibouti, partnering with Oman diversifies alliances and bolsters its role as a regional trade hub and it is important for Djibouti's peaceful maritime strategy¹¹.

International politics of the “Red Sea “since the Cold War

The book *International Politics of the Red Sea* (Ehteshami & Murphy, 2013) analyzes the region's security, military, and economic shifts amid rising competition among Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and global powers

⁸ Since taking office in 1999, Guelleh has focused on maintaining stability and security in Djibouti. He has worked to strengthen Djibouti's stability and security, making the country an important regional hub for counterterrorism operations. He cultivated close relationships with international partners, particularly France and the United States. The country hosts military bases for both France and the US, and other global powers like China, which provide security assistance and intelligence sharing. Under Guelleh's leadership, Djibouti has become a key player in regional peacekeeping and conflict resolution efforts. The country has contributed troops to peacekeeping missions in Somalia and in Central Africa.

⁹ DP World is a multinational logistics company based in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. It specializes in cargo logistics and port terminal operations. The company plays a significant role in global trade, contributing to the flow of goods and improving the quality of life worldwide. With operations in various regions, including North and South America, DP World is investing in freight forwarding to offer end-to-end supply chain solutions. It is one of the main economic global arms of influence of the UAE in general and Dubai in particular.

¹⁰ In June 1917, the tension between Qatar and its neighbors Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, as well as Egypt, has reached unprecedented levels, as its relations with these countries deteriorated to the point of severing diplomatic relations with them. In a move aimed at putting pressure on Doha, the neighboring Gulf countries closed their borders with it, and Egypt also closed its airspace and ports to all Qatari means of transport. The internationally recognized government of Yemen, which resides in Ryad and the government in eastern Libya have severed relations with Doha also. The restoration of the diplomatic relation - by Saudi Arabia - was reached in Jan 2021 , the others followed.

like the U.S., Russia, and China. After the Cold War, Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, securitized the Red Sea to counter transnational threats, especially from Iran (Valbjørn & Bank, 2012)¹². The 2015 Saudi-led intervention in Yemen sought to weaken the Houthis but has arguably bolstered their influence, especially amid the Gaza War (Zeidan, 2024).



Source: Delozier (2021)

¹¹ Djibouti Vision 2035, aimed at positioning the country as a global trade, logistics, and industrial hub. This strategy focuses on the development of ports and intermodal infrastructure to expand the hinterland served in East Africa, with the Djibouti Port remaining a crucial asset for the country's economy. Djibouti's strategic importance is further underscored by its hosting of military bases for several global powers, including the United States, China, France, and Japan. These military footholds play a significant role in expanding and strengthening the strategic footprint of these countries in the Western Indian Ocean and the Red Sea region, given Djibouti's location at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and the Indian Ocean. Djibouti's maritime strategy revolves around leveraging its strategic location for maritime trade and logistics, as evidenced by its ambitious Vision Djibouti 2035 plan. Additionally, the presence of foreign military bases further highlights Djibouti's strategic importance in the region and grantee its national security.

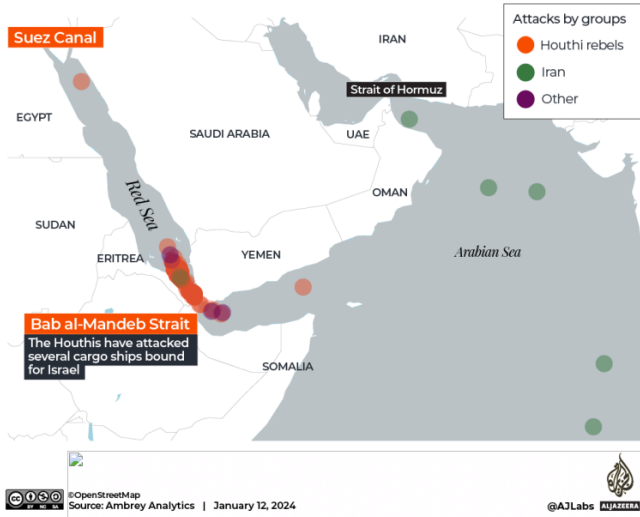
¹² Valbjørn, M., & Bank, A. (2012). The New Arab Cold War: Rediscovering the Arab Dimension of Middle East Regional Politics. *Review of International Studies*, 38(1), 3–24. (<https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/38265>).

The Red Sea's strategic position linking Africa, Asia, and the Indian Ocean via the Bab el-Mandeb Strait is crucial for global trade and energy flows (Inoguchi, 2019). Major powers have expanded military and infrastructure projects to secure their interests (Hashim et al., 2010; Megersa, 2020). Since 2014, the Houthis have targeted commercial and military vessels, citing retaliation against Israel and its allies (Zeidan, 2024). In response, the U.S. and U.K. launched strikes on Houthi positions, with CENTCOM confirming successful drone defense operations in May 2024.¹³

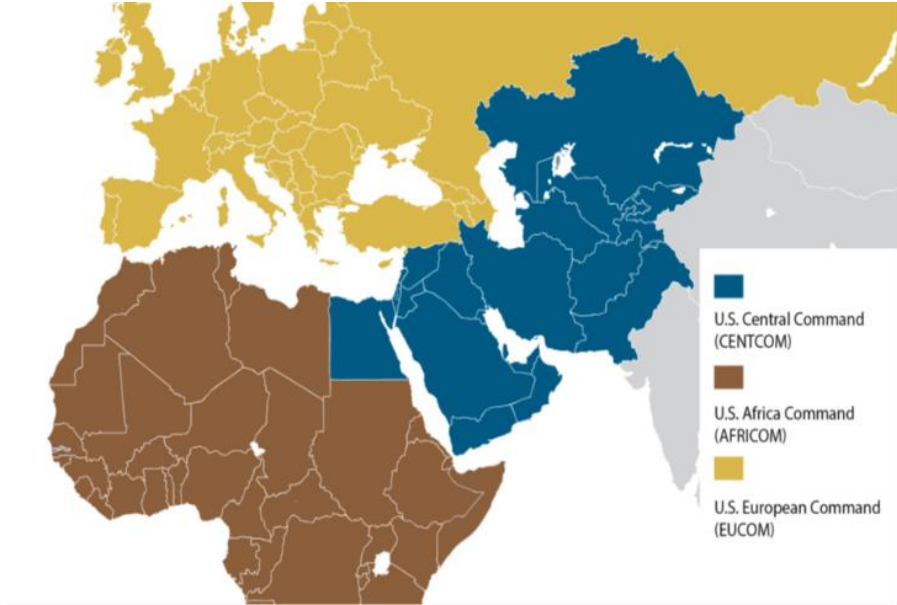
ISRAEL'S WAR ON GAZA

Attacks in the Red Sea

Houthi rebels have attacked ships in the Red Sea, disrupting maritime trade.
The map shows attacks from November 19 to January 11.



Source: Jazeera (2024)



Source: Delozier (2021)¹⁴

Rising tensions in the Red Sea threaten vital trade routes, particularly the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. In response, the U.S. launched Operation *Guardian of Prosperity*¹⁵ in December 2023, reinforcing ongoing security efforts. Since the post-Cold War era, the region has become a geopolitical flashpoint, from Somali piracy to conflicts involving regional and global powers, driving military interventions, economic competition, and shifting alliances.

Security and Military Dynamics of the Red Sea Region

A significant part of *International Politics of the Red Sea* examines the region's security challenges and increasing militarization. The book explores how regional powers like Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia extend

¹⁵ The "Guardian of Prosperity" is a multinational naval operation led by the United States to protect commercial shipping and trade routes in the Red Sea from attacks by the Houthi group in Yemen. The operation was launched in response to the growing threat posed by the Houthis, who have been targeting merchant vessels and other commercial ships passing through the strategic Red Sea waterway heading for Israeli ports.

their military and economic influence while fragile states struggle for stability.



Source: Al Jazeera (2023)

Key developments outside the book highlight ongoing power struggles:

- Egypt and Saudi Arabia benefited from Eritrea's 1993 independence, expanding their influence as the main Red Sea coastal states.
- The UAE and Saudi Arabia have pushed west of the Suez, brokering peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia and intensifying competition, as seen in the Yemen War (2015)¹⁶.

¹⁶ While the Arabian Gulf and the Horn of Africa share historical relations, geographic proximity and political links, transregional interactions increased dramatically since the 2015 Yemen war. Relations between the Arabian Gulf and the Horn of Africa have acquired a new dynamic following the 2015 Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, when Gulf States—namely Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—turned to the Horn of Africa as a geostrategic space critical to their war effort (Soliman 2017).



Source: Ala (2024)

- The UAE has established military bases in Eritrea and increased its presence on Socotra, leading to tensions with Saudi Arabia. Reports suggest Israeli involvement on the island.
- Iran's strategy in the region involves political and military activities following National strategy¹⁷ of the Islamic Republic including military presence and alleged arms shipments to the Houthis in Yemen.
- Israel has reportedly used Eritrea's Dahlak Island for surveillance near Bab el-Mandeb since 2015.

¹⁷ During the 80s and 90s, the Iranian naval doctrine has typically concerted its efforts on closing the strategic chokepoint" Straits of Hormuz" under the sovereignty of the Sultanate of Oman, using asymmetric forces, however and since 2011 efforts by Iran's naval leadership was seen to project naval power beyond the Persian Gulf into the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Iran presence was evident in the Red Sea region and the horn, with a permanent Task force of 2-3 ships deployed for 3-4 months and rotating, patrolling in the area part of the anti-piracy forces present in the area , and challenges to maritime security.



Source: AMoneim (2024)

- Sudan-UAE relations have deteriorated since April 2023, driven by competing geopolitical and economic interests.
- Turkey, beyond cultural ties with Sudan and Suakin¹⁸, has expanded its presence with its largest overseas military base in Somalia.

The Economics of the Red Sea

A substantial chapter in *International Politics of the Red Sea* highlights the region's economic significance as a key maritime trade route linking Europe, Asia, and Africa. The book explores how infrastructure development—ports, pipelines, and transportation networks—has shaped

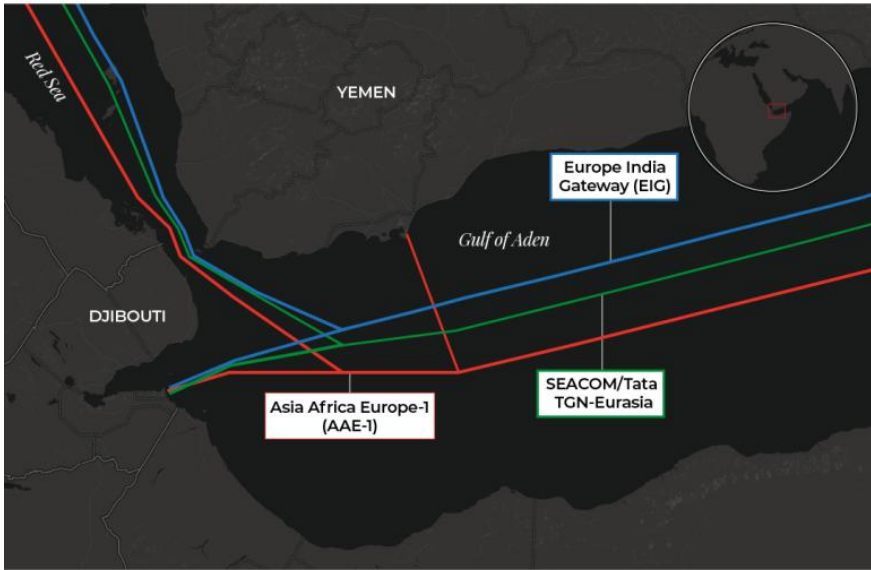
¹⁸ Suakin, which was formerly the main port of Sudan, is considered the first Sudanese city that was built of coral stones, on top of an atoll and its houses have now turned into ruins. Suakin was a city of money and trade on the Red Sea and in the Arab East during the sixteenth century. In the nineteenth century, it was the largest Sudanese Seaport on the Red Sea of the Ottoman Empire, and it reached its peak of prosperity during the reign of the then Turkish ruler Khedivee Ismail. From here came the Turkish initiative - during the last regime- to revive the Ottoman heritage on the Sudanese Peninsula, and Turkey considered doing so as a response to those who destroyed it in reference to British colonialism. Turkey has pledged to revive the peninsula in accordance with its ancient origin.

geopolitical dynamics, driving competition for trade, investment, and resource exploitation.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Red Sea cables damaged

Officials are still investigating the cause of damage to four undersea fibre optic cables, affecting 25 percent of data traffic between Asia and Europe.



©Mapbox, ©OpenStreetMap
Source: Submarinecablemap.com, Geolcollect | March 6, 2024



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Source: Captain's Notes (2024)

The Red Sea is a vital hub for global internet traffic, carrying 97-98% of data through submarine cables. In December 2023, cable damage near Bab al-Mandeb raised tensions, though initial claims against the Houthis were later disputed. Camille Morel's¹⁹ *Les Câbles Sous-Marins* highlights the strategic role of undersea cables²⁰, citing historical incidents like Napoleon III's 1849²¹ France-Britain cable and the Ottomans cutting the Constantinople-Odessa cable in 1877²¹.

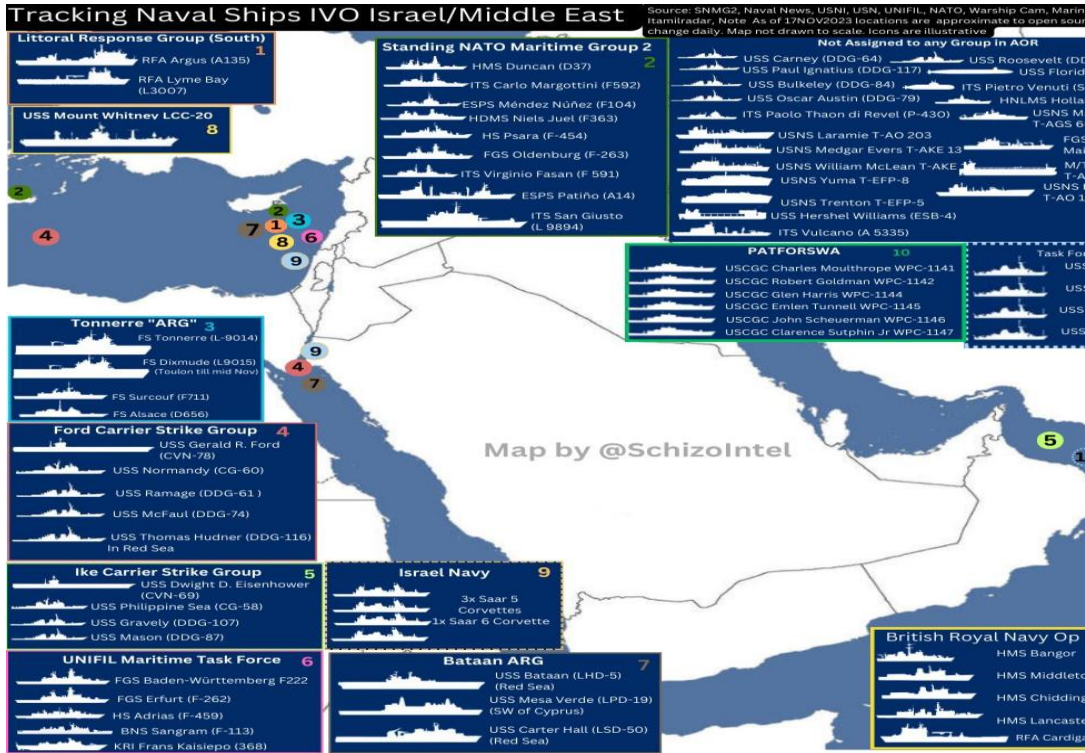
Red Sea networks, regional and International

The book *International Politics of the Red Sea* examines the intricate regional and international networks shaping the region's political, economic, and security dynamics. These networks, involving states, non-state actors, and international organizations, have facilitated both cooperation and instability as competing interests drive tensions and power struggles.

¹⁹ Camille Morel's book is a deep dive into the little-known world of undersea cables, an infrastructure that is vital to today's communications and information transfer, carrying 97- 98 percent of all intercontinental internet data.

²⁰ This was a strategic move by the Ottomans to disrupt communication and undermine the Russian Empire, which was leading a coalition against the Ottomans in the Balkans at the time.

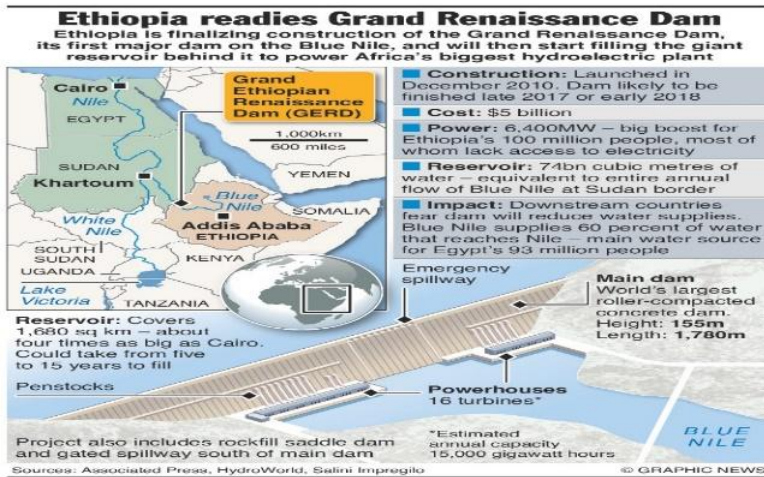
²¹ A surprise agreement between Ethiopia and Somaliland, an autonomous region that declared independence from Somalia in 1991 but is not recognized by any country, has heightened tensions in the Horn of Africa. Somaliland, which was previously a British colony along the Gulf of Aden, has managed to attract substantial foreign investment, in part due to its strategically important Berbera port. However, this new memorandum of understanding between Ethiopia and Somaliland has reverberated beyond the region, exacerbating the already complex political dynamics in the Horn of Africa. (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia-somaliland/stakes-ethiopia-somaliland-deal>)



Source: Intelschizo (2023)

Ethiopia's deal²² to secure land for a naval base in Berbera signals its Red Sea ambitions, though it has not formally recognized Somaliland's independence despite local claims. Meanwhile, Ethiopia's completion of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on September 10, 2023²², has heightened tensions with Egypt, which opposes the project but is unlikely to take military action.

²² <https://bipr.jhu.edu/BlogArticles/18-Dam-Completion-Will-Elevate-Egypt-Ethiopia-Tensions.cfm>



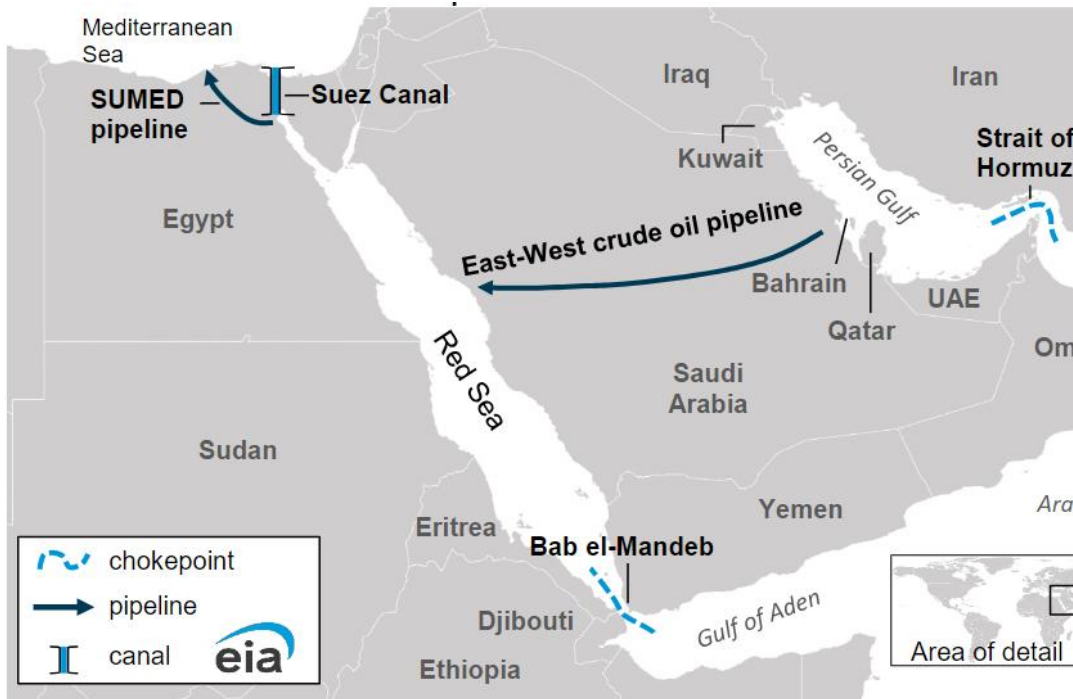
Source: E&T Magazine (2017)

- Renewed tensions among regional powers in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa complicate global powers' efforts to assert influence, further intensifying geopolitical competition in the region.



Source: Delozier (2021)

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)²³, comprising eight East African nations, plays a crucial role in Red Sea geopolitics. Except for South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Uganda, all IGAD members have coastlines along the Red Sea or Horn of Africa, influencing key waterways like the Suez Canal and Bab al-Mandeb. These routes are vital for global energy transport, with 12% of seaborne oil and 8% of LNG trade passing through them in early 2023 (Dunn & Barden, 2023).



Data source: U.S. Energy Information Administration

Sources: Dunn and Barden (2023)

²³ The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) is an eight-member regional organization in Africa that comprises the countries of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda. The IGAD region covers an area of 5.2 million square kilometers across the Horn of Africa and East Africa. The member states range from economically small countries like Somalia to continental powerhouses like Kenya.

Djibouti,²⁴ has leveraged its strategic location at Bab al-Mandeb, hosting Africa's largest U.S. base, China's only overseas base, Japan's first foreign base since WWII, and France's key African military presence. NATO and anti-piracy forces also operate there, while Russia, India, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia seek a foothold. Eritrea, controlling the Dahlak Archipelago and Hanish Islands, influences Red Sea trade routes, leading to periodic tensions with IGAD states, Yemen, and external powers.



Source: Ali (2017)

²⁴ A small Arab country - ex French colony till 1977 - with a strategic location on the Bab-Al Mandib and the mouth of the Red Sea, the total area of Djibouti is 23,200km sq , with its six ports leased to regional and global powers including military presence. The president national security strategy has guaranteed the country survival in the great struggle of influence in the region and globally.

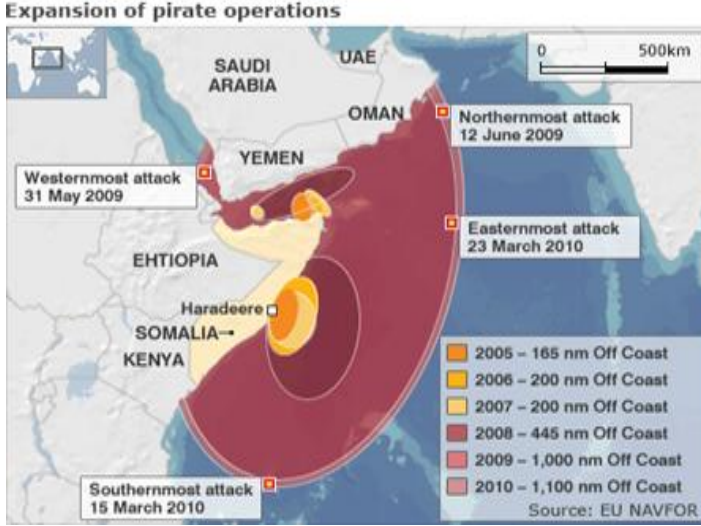
Ethiopia, despite being landlocked, has expanded its influence in the Red Sea through close ties with Djibouti and participation in regional security efforts. Its reliance on the Port of Djibouti links it to global maritime trade.

Somalia, divided into three entities, has a long coastline along the Indian Ocean and Bab al-Mandeb but faces persistent challenges, including maritime piracy for over two decades and territorial disputes with neighboring states.



Source: Janzen and Lewis (2024)

Somalia's coastline along the Indian Ocean and Bab al-Mandeb has long been a piracy hotspot. Although incidents have declined since 2017, persistent drivers and illicit networks keep the threat alive. Continued international efforts and Somalia's measures to tackle root causes remain essential to preventing a resurgence.



Source: Feldtmann (2018)

The I2U2 Group²⁵, formed in October 2021, unites India, Israel, the UAE, and the U.S. to strengthen economic cooperation and expand influence in strategic regions like the Red Sea. It focuses on food security, energy, transportation, space, and health, promoting stability while countering rival geopolitical interests.



²⁵ At the inaugural summit in July 2022, the I2U2 leaders announced several collaborative projects, including a \$2 billion investment by the UAE to develop a series of integrated food parks across India, and a hybrid renewable energy project in India's Gujarat State consisting of 300 megawatts of wind and solar capacity complemented by a battery energy storage system.

Source: Soliman (2023)

In 2023, the I2U2 Group announced a space-based initiative to tackle environmental and climate challenges. Talks on expanding to include Egypt and Saudi Arabia aimed to form an Indo-Abrahamic Alliance, but the events of October 7 have cast uncertainty over this effort amid shifting geopolitical dynamics.

Expanding Influence and the “Nine Littoral States” of the Red Sea

Since the Cold War’s end, the Red Sea has become a battleground for global and regional powers. The U.S. maintains dominance via CTFs²⁷ of the CENTCOM’s 5th Fleet, while China’s expanding investments in ports and trade have raised concerns in Washington. Regional players like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, and Iran also compete for influence.



Source: Som (2022)

According to General Yasser Al-Atta,²⁸ Russia has bolstered its Red Sea presence through military deals with Egypt and Sudan, securing a naval base in Sudan in January 2024. The nine littoral states²⁹ aim to leverage their strategic location and resources to enhance influence and negotiating power. While Egypt and Saudi Arabia align with the U.S., Eritrea and Sudan deepen ties with China and Russia. The UAE and Saudi Arabia invest in Red Sea infrastructure to protect trade routes and counter rivals,

with the UAE's DPA controlling key ports and Saudi Arabia strengthening military ties in the Horn of Africa to curb Iranian influence.



Source: Center for Preventive Action (2024)

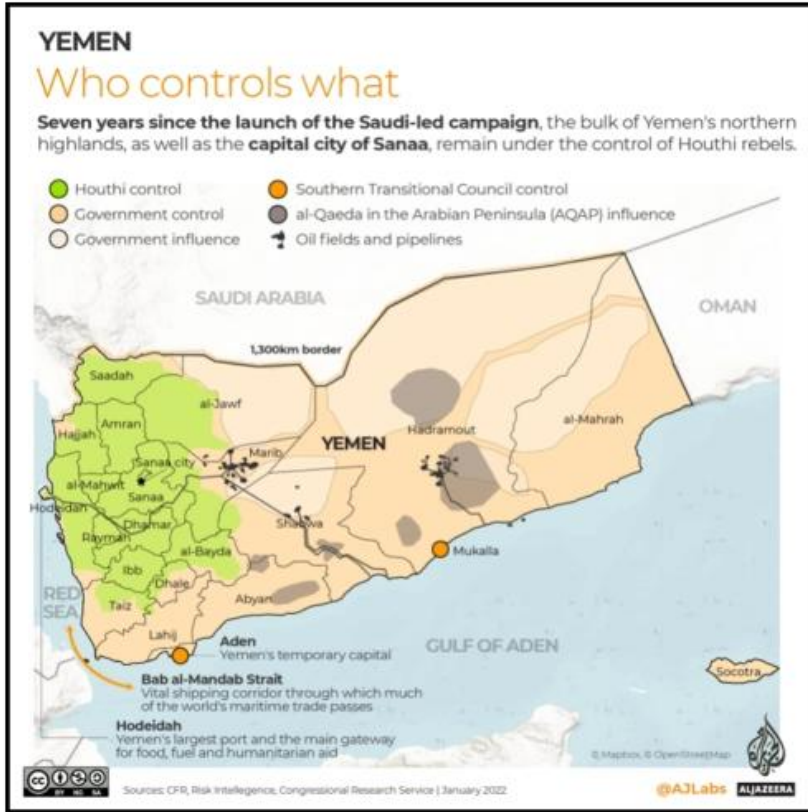
Geopolitical competition in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa has escalated as global and regional powers vie for control over key ports and trade routes, driving instability.

October 7, 2023, and the “Sea Denial “of Bab AL-Mandib”

The Houthis²⁶, controlling Yemen's western coastline, have disrupted Bab al-Mandeb shipping using naval mines, missiles, and drones. Linked to the Hamas-Israel war, recent Houthi attacks have raised global concerns

²⁶ The Houthis group possess a range of capabilities and tactics to disrupt freedom of navigation around the Bab al-Mandeb. These include the use of antiship ballistic missiles, with a long reach of up to 300 km and require timely targeting intelligence provided by drones, vessels. Additionally, the Houthis have claimed to possess an antiship ballistic missile called “Tankil” with a range approaching 500 km, resembling Iran's Raad-500 missile.

(Childs, 2023). Major shipping operators are avoiding the area, increasing costs and trade disruptions. The blockade has severely impacted Israel's economy, extending shipping routes by 14 days. Since December 2023, ship traffic through the strait has dropped by 59%.²⁷



Source: Kalfoud (2022)

The U.S. and international actors remain wary of a potential Houthi-enforced blockade in the Red Sea. Since October 7, the U.S. has reinforced its military presence, issuing warnings against disruptions in Bab al-

²⁷ Ship crossings through the Suez Canal and the Bab-Al Mandab Strait began to decline from mid-December 2023, with the Suez Canal experiencing a decrease in crossings by 66% by the first week of April 2024 compared with the corresponding week of the previous year, and the Bab-Al Mandab Strait showing a 59% decrease in crossings over the same period. (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/internationaltrade/bulletins/shippingcrossingsthroughglobalmaritimepassages/january2022toapril2024>)

Mandeb. Regional allies, particularly Oman, have been engaged in diplomatic efforts to mediate the Yemeni conflict and reduce Houthi support for Gaza. However, the Houthis persist in targeting Israeli and Israel-bound vessels, escalating tensions and impacting global trade routes.



Source: Cafiero (2024) and Race (2024)

The Bab al-Mandeb Strait is a vital maritime chokepoint for global trade, energy flows, and undersea internet cables connecting Asia, Africa, and beyond. Despite its strategic significance, it remains largely overlooked by both the East and the West, even amid the ongoing Gaza war.

Conclusion

The book's conclusion assesses the Red Sea's future, highlighting challenges and opportunities in maritime security, energy flow, and regional cooperation. It underscores the sea's enduring geopolitical importance as a key trade route linking Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Reflecting on historical perspectives, including Herodotus' 5th-century BCE references, the authors emphasize the Red Sea's evolving strategic role. The ongoing conflicts in Gaza and the broader region further

reinforce its centrality in global politics, with recent Houthi attacks on Israel drawing renewed international attention to this vital maritime corridor.

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