



The Red Sea Policies of the Ottoman Empire (1840–1918)

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Abstract: This study examines the Ottoman Empire's policies toward the Red Sea basin from the second half of the 19th century until the end of World War I, with a focus on geopolitical, strategic, and security dimensions. Following the opening of the Suez Canal and Britain's occupation of Aden, the region emerged as a critical area of contention for the Ottoman Empire in terms of safeguarding the caliphate, securing trade routes, and preserving international influence. The article explores the Empire's efforts to maintain dominance in the region, particularly in response to the attempts of creating a Jewish state, anti-smuggling policies, and geopolitical rivalry with great powers. The research is based primarily on Ottoman archival documents, including telegram, memoranda (*layiha*), press releases as well as local and international literature. Using a content analysis method, the study reveals how the geostrategic significance of the Red Sea directly influenced Ottoman foreign policy. It also highlights the Empire's attempt to position itself not only as a regional actor but also as a stabilizing force in the global balance of power. In this regard, the study offers an original contribution to understanding the late Ottoman geopolitical strategy and the historical background of modern Middle Eastern politics.

Keywords: Red Sea, Ottoman Empire, Jewish State, Domination, Great Power

Introduction

The Red Sea, which separates Asia (the Arabian Peninsula) from Africa, is an extension of the Indian Ocean. In Greek it appears as *Erythra Thalassa* and in Latin as *Erythraeum/Rubrum mare* (red sea), and in all languages it has been translated with this meaning (*Bahr-i Ahmer*, *Kızıldeniz*, Red Sea, etc.) (Bilge, 2024). After bringing the Mamluk state to an end in 1517 and taking possession of Egypt, the Ottomans established dominion along the coasts of the Red Sea (Orhonlu, 1974, p.1). Until 1869, the Red Sea functioned essentially as a gulf. However, the British transformation of Aden into a logistical center and the opening of the Suez Canal turned it into a stage of international rivalry (Odle, 1997, p.31). The latter was impacted by the policies of the great powers and the Ottoman Empire. This study covers the Ottoman Empire's policies toward the Red Sea from the transformation

of Aden, a port of the Ottoman province of Yemen, into a British logistical center, up to the end of World War I.

One of the main objectives of this study is to reveal how the Ottoman Empire's policies toward the Red Sea region were formed, shaped, and transformed over time. Existing studies show that the Red Sea region has been addressed in a fragmented and insufficient manner rather than being holistically tackled. Yet, the events occurring in different parts of the Red Sea and the policies formulated in response to these events were closely interconnected. Accordingly, this study examines the formation and transformation of Ottoman policies toward the Red Sea and argues that these shifts shaped the Empire's regional strategy. In doing so, the study asks how imperial rivalry, security concerns, and local dynamics interacted in order to inform Ottoman policy in the Red Sea basin.

The significance of this study lies in its endeavor to better understand the foreign policy and geopolitical challenges of the late Ottoman Empire. Moreover, understanding how Ottoman interest in the Red Sea contributed to regional balance and security dynamics can shed light on how to address similar issues in today's Middle East and Africa.

This study is based primarily on archival sources, including telegrams, memoranda (*layiha*), and petitions (*ariza*), as well as newspapers of the period. In addition, both Turkish and international research studies have been consulted, and the collected data were analyzed through content analysis. The findings highlight the region's strategic importance, efforts to establish a Jewish state, smuggling activities in the Red Sea, and the struggle for supremacy among great powers including the Ottoman Empire. Accordingly, the study focuses on these dynamics and the policies pursued by the Ottoman Empire in the Red Sea.

The Strategic Importance of the Red Sea During the Ottoman Period

Due to its strategic location, the Red Sea occupied a significant place in both the Ottoman Empire and international politics. Until the second half of the 19th century, the region, a gulf situated between the continents of Asia and Africa, which Ottoman administrators likened to Russia's Siberia (Dahiliye Nezâreti Mektubî Kalemi, 2615/101, 1908), subsequently rose - through key developments - to geostrategic, geoeconomic, and political prominence. This prominence stemmed from major historical developments that affected the entire region in the 19th century (Vertin, 2020).

One of the most important routes of Eastern trade passed through the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea (Orhonlu, 1974, p. 1). With the opening of the Suez Canal, the

course of maritime traffic shifted, adding new dimensions to commercial and political activities. For example, Aden, once a small way station, became a coaling station on one of the world's major routes and a logistical base. The British presence in Aden drew the attention of France and Italy (Yol & Gençoğlu, 2023, pp. 1-12). The territory of Sheikh Said was seized by the French and Assab by the Italians (Mehra, 1988, p. 18). The opening of the Suez Canal, the key to India and other region (Wilson, 1939, p. 5), also fueled Ottoman interest in the Red Sea, which eventually led to the occupation of the Yemen Province (Mehra, 1988, p. 18). These developments prompted a reassessment of many strategic positions in the region.

Another factor adding to the Red Sea's strategic importance was the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Closely linked points of geopolitical significance included Perim Island, Sheikh Said, and Djibouti (Akalin, 2015, p. 652). A French professor described the strait due to its political, military, and commercial value, as follows: "If Suez is the key of the Red Sea, then Bab el-Mandeb is its door" (Sırma, 2015, p. 58). The Emir of Najd, in describing British policy toward the Arabian Peninsula, referred to Aden in the west as one of its four Gates (Varisco, 2007, pp. 212-234). Aden was called the sleepless guardian of Britain at the gate of the Red Sea (Şahabettin, 2002, pp. 11-16). It was regarded as the link and key of world trade between the Far East, Europe, and Asia. For this reason, the Portuguese and British competed to seize it (Stambolski, 2020, p. 134). To secure dominance over the Indian trade route and the Red Sea basin, Britain, France, Italy, Germany, and Spain established coal depots, supply stations, military bases, and telegraph lines across the region (Yol & Gençoğlu, 2023, p. 1).

The Ottoman Empire, considering the influence of European states in the region, sought to strengthen its ties and attract European capital. These policies were also supported by the reforms promised in the Imperial Reform Edict (*Islahat Fermanı*). The regulation of public works and the emphasis on transportation were among these promises. In this context, the Ottoman Empire also aimed to benefit from Europe's expertise, technology, and capital including from European advisers and European investment in railways (İrade Meclis-i Mahsûs, 6/245/1, 1856). With this edict, Ottoman lands became promised lands for Europeans. This situation led to the increasing presence of European states' expertise, capital, and technology in Ottoman territories.

After the edict of reform, the construction and establishment of the telegraph line from the Mediterranean to India (Hariciye Nezareti Tercüme Odası, 422/66, 1856) and the concession granted to English engineer Gisburon to operate the planned Red Sea line, rendered the Red Sea not only a transit route but also a strategic hub

in intercontinental communication (Sadaret Âmedî Kalemî Defterleri, 75/38, 1857). The Suez Canal, built by a French company, further elevated the Red Sea onto the stage of world politics. In 1854, Ferdinand de Lesseps proposed a canal from Port Said to Suez to shorten Europe's route to India and avoid the Cape of Good Hope (Mısır, 1889). The opening of the Suez Canal reduced maritime trade costs and intensified the struggle for supremacy in the Red Sea.

Britain sought to secure control over strategic points at Bab el-Mandeb. In Yemen, the coastal land of Sheikh Said opposite of Perim Island oversaw the Red Sea-Indian Ocean traffic. Two frenchmen purchased it for eighty thousand riyals from Sheikh Ali Sabit of the Hakem tribe.¹ Due to its location, the region became less a place of fertility and productivity than a stage for struggles over supremacy.

Italy requested Spain's permission to temporarily operate a coal depot in Assab on the Red Sea coast, which Spain accepted (Yıldız Sadâret Hususî Maruzât Evrakı, 205/40, 1887). Meanwhile, Spain sought to retain sovereignty over the islands of Jebel-i Secan and Jebel-i Sukur on the African coast. Jebel-i Secan had already been a source of disputes between the French government and the Sheikh of Rahida. To prevent Spain from positioning itself between France and Italy, the French concluded an agreement with the Sheikh. Britain's dispatch of about one thousand soldiers to the region, combined with Baker Pasha's defeat in Sudan. This raised concerns in London and pushed Britain to encourage a more active Ottoman policy toward Egypt (Hariciye Nezareti Siyasi Kısım, 991/81, 1884). Recognizing the growing importance of the Red Sea and the Ottoman inability to control its coasts, Britain pursued military and political measures to secure the area (Yıldızeli, 2019, pp. 114 – 134).

The policies of European states in the region largely followed British activities. In this context, Italy's peaceful withdrawal from the Red Sea was tied to the resolution of the Egyptian question. However, Italy's occupation of Beylül and Massawa deeply concerned the British, who dominated trade along the Arab shores of the Red Sea (Bury, 1998, p. 17). Linked to the Egyptian issue that began with Britain's occupation of Egypt, the Ottoman Empire sought to strengthen its Red Sea fleet with two corvettes and several additional vessels to safeguard Hejaz and Yemen (Orhonlu, 1974, p. 153). These military and political moves reflected the fact that much of the world's trade passed through this route. The Red Sea's position on the Indian trade route, its key cities and ports, and its coal depots for energy supply continually increased its strategic importance.

Efforts to Establish a Jewish State in the Red Sea and Ottoman Policies

“For some time now, I have been engaged in a work of indescribable greatness. I do not know yet whether I shall carry it through. It has assumed the aspect of some mighty dream. ...” Between 1895 and 1904, Theodor Herzl repeatedly met with Sultan Abdülhamid II to discuss his project of founding a Jewish state in the promised land (*Arz-ı Mev’ûd*). Seeking territory, Herzl visited several countries—including England, Italy, Germany, and the Ottoman Empire—and appealed to many sovereigns. Sultan Abdülhamid, however, rejected his request for land in Palestine, declaring: *“It is out of the question for me to cede even a span of land, for it does not belong to me but to my nation—the nation that founded this state and nourished it with its blood...”* (Göze, 2002, pp. 15, 81). Historically, Herzl was not the only one with such aspirations. Under the leadership of the German Friedmann, the Israelite Company attempted to establish a Jewish state along the Red Sea coast, from the Gulf of Aqaba to al-Wajh, in the region known as Midian.

Within this context, Ahmed Muhtar Pasha, the extraordinary commissioner of Egypt, reported that certain European Jews sought to settle in Midian. Representing a company, Friedmann arrived with seventeen people, purchased land, and began activities without even informing the government. He acquired construction materials to establish villages and towns in cooperation with local Arabs, and made public statements about his plans during visits to Egypt (Yıldız Esas Evrakı, 129/5, 1892). In shaping their Red Sea policies, European states considered the region’s strategic, religious, and ethnic features. Within this framework, proposals were made to settle Jews in areas historically linked to Judaism. Friedmann not only bought land but also built ties with the local population and secured materials for settlement, thereby elevating his initiatives to the political level.

Friedmann approached to the President of the Egyptian Council of Ministers and secured permission to settle Jewish immigrants in Midian. To gain the favor of the ‘Urban (Bedouin Arabs), he brought armed Russian Jewish immigrants to the port of Sharm on the southern side of Mount Sinai (Yıldız Sadâret Hususî Maruzât Evrakı, 256/73, 1892), intending to make it the center of a future Jewish state. More significantly, he also obtained authorization for the settlement of the lands stretching from Mount Sinai to Midian—territories allocated since the era of Mehmed Ali Pasha to the Egyptian *mahmal* (Devellioğlu, 2013). Yet the region, chosen for the Jewish state, was at the heart of the Ottoman Empire’s policy of domination over the Red Sea and a key pillar of the Islamic Caliphate.

Among the Red Sea’s strategic locations, the Suez stood in contrast to Aqaba, where efforts to establish a Jewish state were undertaken. Administratively part of the Province of Syria, Aqaba functioned as a military district attached to the Province

of the Hijaz (Doğru Söz, 1906). Ottoman authorities regarded Friedmann's initiatives as lacking a solid foundation. They also determined that he had no official support from Germany and deemed Jewish settlement in the region inappropriate. Consequently, officials reported that while the areas of Aqaba and al-'Arish would be considered later, it was necessary for the state to occupy Duba and Muweilih (Yıldız Esas Evrakı, 129/5, 1892). Viewing these developments, the Ottoman Empire shaped its policies accordingly.

The Ottoman policy of controlling the Red Sea coasts aimed at defending the Provinces of the Hejaz and Yemen, a strategy of vital importance for the Empire. Ottoman authorities regarded the Khedive of Egypt as an Ottoman governor and considered Egyptian soldiers stationed along the Red Sea equivalent to Ottoman forces. Yet, with Egypt under British occupation, regions once tied to the Khedivate—such as Massawa (Musawwa) and Suakin—had already fallen under foreign control. Thus, the transfer of Red Sea territories like Duba, Muweilih, and Beylül to foreign administration similarly threatened the Hejaz and Yemen, lands linked to the Islamic Caliphate (Yıldız Esas Evrakı, 119/78, 1892). The loss of the Gulf of Aqaba, in particular, signified the loss of the gateway to the Red Sea through the Province of Syria, and with it, bases of religious and political support essential to the Caliphate. Meanwhile, the Egyptian administration stationed troops in fortresses at al-Wajh, Muweilih, Duba, and Aqaba, as well as on the Sinai Peninsula (Yıldız Esas Evrakı, 119/77, 1892).

One reason for permitting the presence of Egyptian soldiers in these regions was that Mehmet Ali Pasha, who assumed control of Egypt in 1805, had, at the request of the Ottoman state, successfully suppressed the Wahhabi movement in the Hejaz. As a result, his son Ibrahim Pasha was granted authority over the Hejaz and Jeddah. Control of the Red Sea coasts was therefore associated with the duty of safeguarding the Holy Cities (*Haremeyn*) and overseeing pilgrimage traffic (Hill, 1959, p. 8). Another reason was the need to protect the Egyptian *mahmal* sent annually to the Hejaz, as well as Muslim pilgrims, from Bedouin attacks (Yıldız Esas Evrakı, 119/77, 1892). In this context, during meetings between the Khedive and Egypt's extraordinary commissioner, Ahmed Muhtar Pasha, it was stated that the administration of the relevant coastal regions of the Red Sea should be discussed with the Council of Ministers (İrade Eyalet-i Mümtaze (05), 28/1450, 1890).

Although it was deemed appropriate that the areas not included in the map given to Mehmed Ali Pasha in 1257 be left to the Province of the Hejaz—while preserving the existing status of Mount Sinai under the Khedives Ismail and Tewfik (Yıldız Esas Evrakı, 49/37, 1892). The Ottoman government later informed the Khedive of

Egypt that Aqaba in the Sinai Peninsula, along with Duba (Zuba) and Muweilih in the region of Midian, should also be placed under the authority of the Hejaz Province. Referring to earlier maps (see map below), the government emphasized that these regions rightfully belonged to the Hejaz Province and would be occupied by its troops (Yıldız Esas Evrakı, 119/78, 1892). Meanwhile, the German Friedmann went so far as to assume the title “King of the Jews” and even had a uniform made. In effect, he proclaimed himself ruler of the Jewish state he envisioned in Midian, on the opposite shore of this region. He left some of his companions in the port of Sharm, designated as the center of activity, while taking others to visit Muweilih, Duba, and Aqaba. According to available reports, this plan emerged after it became clear that the Ottoman state intended to bring the coast under its administration (Yıldız Sadâret Hususî Maruzât Evrakı, 256/73, 1892).

A group of soldiers led by an officer from the Hejaz demanded that the fortresses of Aqaba, Muweilih, and Duba be transferred to the Khedivate of Egypt, and a steamship was dispatched to secure these claims. However, the President of the Egyptian Council of Ministers ordered the demand to be withdrawn, noting reports from the Hejaz that the arrival of British warships on the coast and the resulting unrest could provoke a negative reaction among the Bedouin Arabs. The matter was therefore referred to Ahmed Muhtar Pasha. It was further emphasized that, since these locations were directly under the administration of the Sublime State (*Devlet-i ‘Aliyye*), the issue required careful handling (Yıldız Perakende Evrakı – Mâbeyn Başkitâbeti, 24/97, 1892).

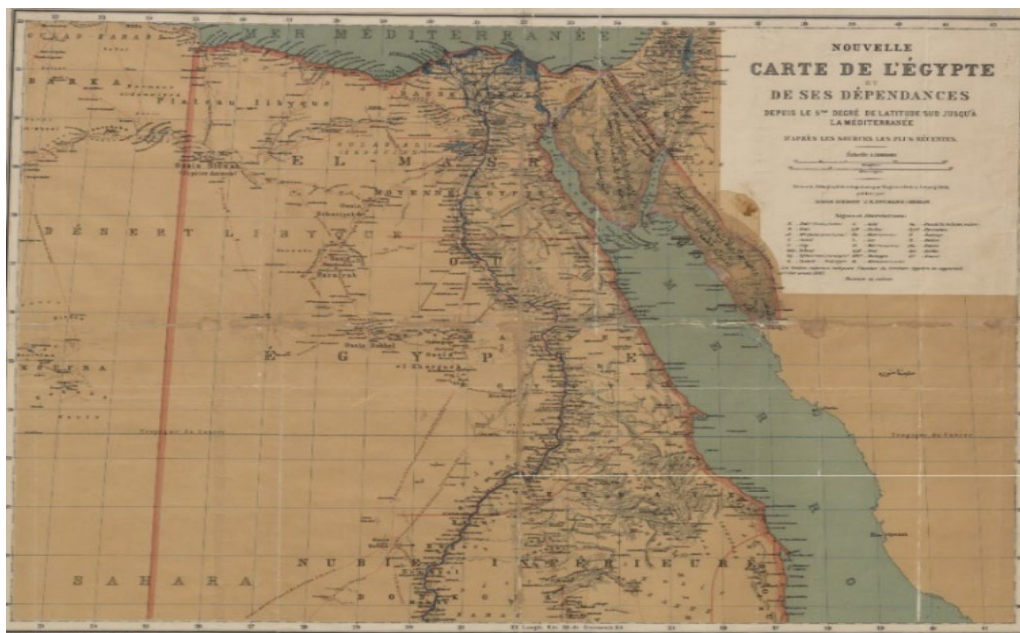
According to instructions from London, the British consul appointed to resolve the Red Sea question argued that Muweilih and Duba, where the Ottomans sought direct control, were within Egypt’s borders. Ahmed Muhtar Pasha, however, stated that these regions had been entrusted to Egypt by the Ottoman state only for the passage to the Hejaz, and since the sea route was now in use, that necessity had ended (Yıldız Esas Evrakı, 119/77, 1892). The Cairo newspaper *Doğru Söz* reported that these areas had previously lacked administration, but Egyptian garrisons had been stationed there during the period when the Egyptian *mahmal* traveled overland. These posts, allowed by the state for the *mahmal*, were later replaced by Ottoman garrisons and civil officials once the land route was abandoned. This arrangement, it noted, had been in place for nearly fifteen years before the current dispute (Doğru Söz, 1906). Furthermore, a firman of 1889 had placed under the Province of the Hejaz the territory stretching from Midian, on the western Sinai border, to al-Wajh. Egypt likewise raised no objection to transferring Duba and Muweilih (Yıldız Esas Evrakı, 119/77, 1892). These regions, contested between the Ottomans and the Khedivate of Egypt under British influence, also became

entangled in political and military struggles linked to attempts to establish a Jewish state. The British, rejecting direct Ottoman intervention without Egyptian consultation, instead sought to impose their own hegemony in the area.

Reports of European Jews in the region coincided with the Ottoman state's policy of prohibiting foreigners from purchasing property in the Province of the Hejaz. In a meeting with the British consul, Ahmed Muhtar Pasha emphasized that this policy was vital for the future of the Hejaz and argued that the Khedivate of Egypt should return to its former borders, showing the consul a relevant map. The consul rejected this claim, insisting that the territory had long belonged to Egypt and that firmans granted to Mehmed Ali Pasha confirmed this. He added that, even when the language of temporary grants was used, he regarded the area as Egyptian, and that both he and the Egyptian government denied knowledge of such a map.

Image 1

Map given to Mehmed Ali Pasha, a copy of which is kept in the Imperial Council Chancery



Source: *Yıldız Esas Evrakı*, 119/77, 1892

When Ahmed Muhtar Pasha asked whether Britain was involved in these activities, the consul replied that Friedmann, who was operating in the region, acted without British approval. Ahmed Muhtar Pasha also reported that Germany did not officially recognize Friedmann, and that his activities carried no political or strategic weight. The Ottomans therefore concluded that neither Britain nor Germany supported him (*Yıldız Sadâret Hususî Maruzât Evrakı*, 256/73, 1892). For

the security of the Hejaz, the Ottomans deemed it necessary to establish direct control over the region. Although evidence and earlier maps were presented to prove that the land belonged to the Sublime State (*Devlet-i 'Aliyye*), the consul later accepted a compromise. The eastern side of a line from Aqaba to al-'Arish would remain under Ottoman administration, while areas deemed essential for Egypt but not harmful to Ottoman interests could be left to Egypt. Ahmed Muhtar Pasha further stressed the importance of protecting the port of Sharm at the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba. He proposed that if a line were drawn from Ra's Muḥammad, between the gulfs of Aqaba and Suez, to al-'Arish, the lands west of this line should also be under Ottoman authority (Yıldız Sadâret Hususî Maruzât Evrakı, 256/73, 1892). The consul agreed, marking an Ottoman success achieved through persistent diplomacy.

The Struggle for Supremacy Between the Ottoman Empire and the Great Powers in the Red Sea Basin

With the British settlement in Aden in 1840, the gateway to British domination of the Far East and Asia (Şahabettin, 2002, p. 30), and the subsequent opening of the Suez Canal, the Red Sea assumed a central role in world politics. Its importance derived from its position on both the Indian trade route and in the Middle East. This strategic region became a major arena of rivalry between the great powers (*Düvel-i Muazzama*) and the Ottoman Empire.

England, France, Italy, Germany, and Spain clashed with the Ottomans over shaping diverging policies toward Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Indian trade route. Their struggles took the form of establishing military and logistical bases on the Red Sea coasts and islands, stationing troops at key points, purchasing land, and setting up coal depots as refueling stations. At the same time, these rivalries revealed the contested boundaries of Ottoman sovereignty.

In the Red Sea, where imperial rivalry was intense, Italy and France operated along the African coasts, while Britain was active in Egypt, the Suez, Yemen, on the Perim Island, and Aden. The French held influence in Djibouti, and the Italians in Assab, Massawa, and the surrounding islands. Ottoman sovereignty prevailed on the Kamaran Island, which functioned as a quarantine station, and on the Farasan Islands, which were rumored to have been requested by Germany as a coal depot. Britain, Germany, and France competed over coal depot projects. In 1840, the French even occupied the strategic Sheikh Said promontory, overlooking the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. This area, controlling the gateway to the Red Sea, remained under their control until 1871, when it was ceded to the Ottoman state (Yıldız Perakende

Evrakı – Yaverân ve Maiyyet-i Seniyye Erkân-ı Harbiye Dairesi, 21/42, 1898; Zühdü Efendi, 2013, p. 38; Rüştü Paşa, 2017, p. 114)

From this strategic point, France sought to control Red Sea traffic and sought to challenge Britain's dominance over the Perim Island, aiming to weaken British power in the region. In the broader rivalry between the great powers and the Ottoman Empire, Germany, having abandoned Bismarck's *Realpolitik* in 1890 in favor of Wilhelm's *Weltpolitik* (*Drang nach Osten*), established a presence in Mocha and Hudaydah. In the context of Anglo-German rivalry, Germany also participated in the Red Sea struggle through the Hejaz Railway project (Mehra, 1988, p. 58). For the Ottomans, the railway was intended to consolidate control over southern Syria and the Hejaz. It functioned as a secure internal line of communication against potential British threats from Egypt and the Mediterranean and provided the capacity to strike the Suez Canal as an alternative (Ochsenwald, 1998, p. 194). At the same time, Germany sought to acquire a coal depot in the Red Sea to serve its fleet en route to the Indian and Pacific Oceans (İrtem, 1999, p. 131). Reports even indicate that Germany requested the Farasan Islands from the Ottomans for this purpose (Rüştü Paşa, 2017, pp. 49–52).

The Italians seized several territories along the Red Sea. In 1882, the Italian government took control of Assab, which had been purchased from the Emperor of Abyssinia by Italian merchants (Mehra, 1988, p. 55), and in 1885 occupied Massawa, the key port for trade with Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan (Farah, 2002, p. 196). Soon after, by also seizing Raheita near Assab, the Italians created out of these ports a small Somaliland, which they named Eritrea—derived from the Latin term for the Red Sea—in order to emphasize historical ties to Rome (Mehra, 1988, p. 55). The Italians also roamed freely among nearby islands, importing marine products. By establishing a protectorate on the Abyssinian coasts in 1901, Italy extended its authority over local rulers from the Red Sea to Ra's 'Asîr, thereby creating a chain of protectorates stretching from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean (Orhonlu, 1974, p. 160). In response to these occupations, no decision was taken by the Ottoman Council of Ministers, nor did the Ministry of Foreign Affairs conduct any investigation. Local administrators warned that, unless protective measures were adopted, Ottoman law on the Red Sea coasts would steadily erode, leaving the territories vulnerable to occupation (İrade Eyalet-i Mümtaze (05), 34/970, 1894).

In 1884, the British, who had already taken under their administration ports such as Berbera on the Red Sea coast (Orhonlu, 1974, p. 153), sought to extend their influence by fomenting discord among local rulers. At the same time, the dispatch of about one thousand naval troops to defend the Red Sea coasts (Yıldız Sadaret

Resmî Maruzât Evrakı, 14/59, 1882), together with Baker Pasha's defeat in Sudan during the rebellion against Egyptian rule, raised concerns in London. The British embassy telegraphed the Sublime Porte, indicating that Britain was likely to adopt a more active policy toward Egypt (Hariciye Nezareti Siyasi Kısım, 991/81, 1884). Confronted with rival powers in the Red Sea, Britain both took military measures to preserve the existing status quo and encouraged the Ottoman Empire to pursue more active policies in the region.

The Ottoman Embassy in London reported that Britain had stationed troops in Suakin, which was under Egyptian administration (Hariciye Nezareti Siyasi Kısım, 991/75, 1883). Hasan Fehmi Pasha, appointed as extraordinary envoy, inquired whether Britain would withdraw its troops if the Ottomans deployed forces there and what policy they intended to follow. The British replied that they would not conduct military operations but opposed Ottoman deployment on grounds of public order. Hasan Fehmi Pasha, however, observed that Britain had turned Suakin into a military base and would not evacuate it if Ottoman troops arrived (Hariciye Nezareti Siyasi Kısım, 968/66, 1885).

After deliberations between the Grand Vizier, the Foreign Minister, and the President of the Council of State, it was resolved that no definitive step should be taken without prior agreement with Russia and France, and that Britain should be warned regarding its claim that the troop presence was temporary. Meanwhile, former Khedive Ismail Pasha requested that Suakin and Massawa be annexed to the Khedivate of Egypt. The Sublime Porte accepted this arrangement in return for an annual tax (İrade Hariciye, 436-77, 1896). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs advised the Sultan that, since Egypt was legally bound to the Ottoman Empire, a formal protest would suffice (İrade Hariciye, 436-77, 1896). Yet Britain, having initially declared its presence temporary, announced in 1896 that it would continue to occupy Suakin, which was confirmed by the Ottoman Foreign Minister. To preserve its legal sovereignty, the Ottoman government decided to notify Lord Salisbury that the British deployment contravened Ottoman rights. The Ministry further recommended verbally informing the Russian and French embassies and noted that, if necessary, Ottoman troops could be dispatched for the defense of Egypt and Suakin (İrade Hariciye, 436-77, 1896).

The stationing of British troops in Suakin constituted a violation of Ottoman sovereignty and undermined the Empire's authority over Egypt, effectively ending diplomatic exchanges on the issue (Yıldız Esas Evrakı, 50/17, 1896). Meanwhile, France, which threatened the port of Obock, landed troops on the coast of the district of Zabid (Yıldız Sadaret Resmî Maruzât Evrakı, 14/59, 1882). Competing

with Britain in India, France responded to Britain's control of Aden by occupying Djibouti, where it established present-day Djibouti in 1880 (Kavas, 2001, p. 118). The French turned the port into an arms depot that fueled regional smuggling. To safeguard its commercial domains, the Ottoman Empire adopted preventive measures, relying on intelligence and diplomatic initiatives to block the entry of arms from French-controlled Djibouti and other European settlements.

France notified the Ottoman Empire that Britain should be protested (İrade Hariciye, 436/77, 1896) if Suakin were occupied by British and Indian troops. In response to great power activity in the Red Sea, the Ottoman government adopted security measures along the Arabian Peninsula's coasts. It was decided to divide the naval force for coastal defense into three parts: one for the Persian Gulf; another for the southern Arabian coast under the Province of Yemen—including Zafar, Hadramawt, Somalia, Zanzibar, and Assab; and the third for the Red Sea. These units were placed under the Ministry of the Navy, with the aim of protecting the Red Sea, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Persian Gulf from attack and foreign intervention. Implementation of this policy required administrative, political, and military measures (Yıldız Sadaret Resmî Maruzât Evrakı, 14/59, 1882). While the Council of Ministers debated coastal security and the formation of a naval force, the Ottoman Empire simultaneously assessed Britain's position in Egypt and pursued cooperation (Hariciye Nezareti Siyasi Kısım (HR.SYS), 1007/13, 1882).

Britain welcomed this policy and decided to dispatch troops to Suakin to protect Red Sea ports from Sudanese tribal attacks (Hariciye Nezareti Siyasi Kısım, 992/8, 1884). Ottoman local administrators outlined the Empire's regional policy as follows: a state steamer should be stationed at Jeddah to patrol and secure the Arabian Peninsula's coasts continuously. In addition, Ottoman vessels based at Sheikh Said and Basra would periodically conduct surveillance and protection missions along the coasts as far as Zafâr before returning to their ports. Through these patrols, Ottoman steamers were expected to maintain security and order (Yıldız Esas Evrakı, 12/27, 1883). However, these Ottoman decisions and measures proved inadequate in the face of foreign activities.

A major aspect of the rivalry between the Ottoman Empire and the great powers centered on Egypt and the Gulf of Aqaba. To protect the fortresses of Aqaba, Muweilih, and Duba, the Ottomans, with officers from the Hejaz, dispatched a steamer and incorporated Muweilih and Duba into the Hejaz administration to safeguard the province. By a firman in 1889, the Midian region up to al-Wajh was formally attached to the Hejaz, a step Egypt did not oppose. The Khedivate, however, insisted that the Aqaba-al-'Arish line remain unchanged, thereby

confirming the Sinai as Egyptian territory. This condition aimed to block any future Ottoman claims over Egypt. Two strategic options followed. Either the Ottomans would accept the immutability of the line from al-‘Arish to Ra’s Muhammad, or, if compelled, they would also recognize both Egypt’s proposed line from northern Aqaba to al-‘Arish and the Ra’s Muhammad–al-‘Arish line. In either case, the immutability of the Aqaba–al-‘Arish line had to be conditionally accepted. For the Ottomans, this fixed boundary was to lie as near as possible to the Suez Canal and to include the port of Sharm within the Hejaz province (Yıldız Esas Evrakı, 119–77, 1883).

The Ottoman central government, interpreting the stationing of Egyptian troops between al-‘Arish and Suez, beginning from the Bahr-i Sefid, the Khedivate’s concessionary zone, as evidence that these areas would not be ceded to Egypt. The Ottomans were determined to strengthen their position in the Gulf of Aqaba. They ordered the repair of the fortresses, the remedying of deficiencies, and the transformation of Aqaba into a naval shipyard under the Ministry of the Navy, to be linked by a light railway to Damascus, the center of the Fifth Army (İrade Eyalet-i Mümtaze(05), 33/1927, 1883). These resolute policies aimed to maintain Ottoman presence in the Red Sea, preserve the Hejaz as the Caliphate’s stronghold, limit great power influence, and prevent the possible detachment of frontier regions.

The opening of the Suez Canal alongside Aqaba in the northern Red Sea reshaped the region’s political landscape. Britain, determined to prevent rival control over the Red Sea and Aden (Orhonlu, 1974, p. 149), employed all economic and political means to limit the canal’s impact (İrtem, 1999, p. 37). British unease was further heightened by the failure to secure the Baghdad Railway concession and by the progress of the Hejaz line. Consequently, the British accused the Ottoman government of encroaching upon Egypt, claiming that while Egypt belonged to the Ottoman Empire, its tutelage and suzerainty rested with Britain. Articles in the Egyptian press, however, noted that Egyptian loyalty to the Ottoman state had grown after the British occupation. Beforehand, attachment was weaker due to Egypt’s privileged status in internal administration, which effectively set it apart from the empire. Britain’s attempt to influence Egypt through appeals to national sentiment revealed its ignorance of the Islamic spirit, despite ruling a Muslim population and Islam’s rejection of tribalism. Ultimately, the Aqaba question stemmed from British concerns over delays in railway construction. However, the Ottoman stance on this matter was adamant (Doğru Söz, 1906).

Ottoman Policies to Counter Smuggling Activities in the Red Sea

Smuggling along the Arabian coasts dated back to ancient times, but it became a serious problem for the Ottoman Empire during the era of colonial expansion (Farah, 2002, p. 192). The Red Sea coasts were not always effectively monitored, making the presence of officials at ports vital for internal security. For the provinces, coastal security was crucial not only to the economy but also to maintaining order. Ottoman ports on the Red Sea held strategic value for trade with East Africa, India, and the Far East, and were essential to maritime commerce, shipping traffic, and provincial stability (Sadâret Mektubî Kalemi Mühimme Kalemi, 674/7, 1893). The Red Sea coasts were vital to the province's governance, security, and economic prosperity, and the measures taken there carried both regional and international implications.

By linking the Mediterranean to the Red Sea, the Suez Canal shortened the route to India and opened a new path for global trade (Stambolski, 2020, p. 46), thereby enhancing the Red Sea's strategic, commercial, and political significance. This development also fueled smuggling. Most ships operating along the eastern Red Sea coasts were foreign, and contraband was widespread (Nedim Bey, 2001, p. 90). The Bedouins of the Hejaz, for instance, acquired thousands of smuggled pistols and rifles (Emrence, 2016, p. 82). The influx of illicit firearms sustained local unrest and conflicts, compelling the Ottoman state to maintain large military forces in its Red Sea provinces to preserve peace and security (Yıldız Esas Evrakı, 7/19, 1909). The supply of arms to rebels along the Red Sea coasts fostered smuggling. While the Ottoman Empire focused on Egypt, the Suez Canal, and Aqaba in the north, it confronted arms and goods smuggling in the south. The concentration of the depots of great powers in Djibouti and Aden intensified political and military activity in Yemen and on the Arabian Peninsula.

Smuggling in the Red Sea, stemming from inadequate coastal protection, enabled the supply of arms and ammunition—particularly by English, French, and Italian smugglers—and fueled uprisings in provinces such as Yemen (Yıldız Esas Evrakı-Yaverân ve Maiyyet-i Seniyye Erkân-ı Harbiye Dairesi, 26/44, 1906). To counter this, several measures were proposed. Ferik Osman Pasha recommended the dispatch of three to five steamers (Yıldız Mütenevvi Maruzât Evrakı, 46/119, 1890), while Mushir Osman Pasha suggested a company of soldiers and two steamers. Security plans emphasized rapid coastal patrols, provision of maritime transport, and the establishment of surveillance either through armed ships or military outposts (Yıldız Esas Evrakı-Yaverân ve Maiyyet-i Seniyye Erkân-ı Harbiye Dairesi,

26/44, 1906). These measures were directly linked to reforms aimed at containing and preventing uprisings in Yemen.

The rise in arms smuggling along the coasts was reflected in the duties of the Yemen Provincial Inspection Commission. Its instructions required monitoring Ottoman troops and ships, preventing the maritime introduction of prohibited arms, identifying deficiencies, and reporting them to the relevant authorities (Yıldız Esas Evrakı, 6/46, 1909). To secure the coast, the construction of guard posts and the deployment of a battalion were also deemed necessary. In this way, arms and goods smuggling could be curbed (İrade Şûra-yı Devlet, 2261/17-19, 1892). A memorandum of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasized that, under the Brussels Act of 1890, the Ottoman Empire was authorized to inspect all ships in the Red Sea, regardless of nationality, in order to suppress the slave trade. In case of violation, Ottoman naval officers were entitled to inspect small vessels within territorial waters. As on other Ottoman coasts, no objection could be raised against the enforcement of these provisions in Arabian waters to prevent arms smuggling. Although the Brussels Act also contained indirect provisions on arms trafficking, which were linked to measures against the slave trade in Africa, its enforcement was confined to land. Nonetheless, within its territorial waters, the Ottoman Empire had full authority to inspect foreign ships, their documents, and cargo (Bâbîâli Evrak Odası, 3617/271228, 1909). Since many strategic points along the Red Sea were unoccupied, local tribal leaders attempted to bring arms and materials into Yemen, disturbing public order (Yıldız Mütenevî Maruzât Evrakı, 46/119, 1890). Their role in smuggling reflected the influence exerted by foreign states seeking to win their allegiance.

The British smuggled arms into the province through the Red Sea and the Aden frontier, often via local tribes, while Italy, settled in Massawa and Assab, regularly patrolled the Red Sea with warships. Both powers encouraged the spread of firearms in the region (İrade Şûra-yı Devlet, 2261/17-19, 1892). Smuggling was particularly intense along the Red Sea coasts, especially at the port of Midi, north of Luhayyah (Yıldız Esas Evrakı, 7/20-4, 1907). Ottoman investigations revealed that arms and ammunition shipped from Europe and from French and Italian colonies to Djibouti, the Gulf of Assab, and Massawa. These weapons were transported by sambuks (*sanbūq*) and landed at ports such as Wajh, Midi, and Qah, as well as other uncontrolled points along the Yemeni coast. They were then distributed through rebellious tribes, including the Banu Marwān, Banu Aslam, and Zaranîq, to the urban and rural inhabitants of Yemen (Tandoğan, 2013, pp. 154–155). The strategic importance of ports and checkpoints lay in their role in detecting and preventing smuggling. To stop the influx of arms, it was proposed that the Red Sea

coasts be swiftly patrolled, adequate maritime transport ensured, and surveillance established either through armed ships or by creating military outposts. These security measures were directly tied to reforms aimed at addressing and preventing uprisings in Yemen.

Around 1909, when firearms could be purchased by Arabs for fifty *kuruş*, it was estimated that nearly 200,000 weapons had entered Hudaydah. Ottoman investigations revealed that 80 percent of these were of French manufacture, although British Martin and old Italian rifles were also widespread. The French used Djibouti as a depot for selling outdated weapons. Overall, the uncontrolled influx into Ottoman territory stemmed from weak coastal security (Yıldız Perakende Evrakı – Yaverân ve Maiyyet-i Seniyye Erkân-ı Harbiye Dairesi, 21/42, 1898). The British distributed Martin rifles and other firearms to be used against the Ottomans, and reports documented large-scale arms smuggling during uprisings. Around Aden, most inhabitants carried British weapons, and the presence of foreign arms among rebels confirmed this situation (İrade Şûra-yı Devlet, 2261/17-6, 1892). To counter smuggling, Kaymakam İbrahim Rüştü proposed strengthening coastal patrols with steamships, purchasing two small vessels for customs control, and stationing a warship off Midi (Yıldız Perakende Evrakı – Yaverân ve Maiyyet-i Seniyye Erkân-ı Harbiye Dairesi, 21/42, 1898). Regional governors likewise urged that three to five steamships patrol the coasts, and that gendarmerie units be established on unoccupied islands. They also recommended policies to gradually civilize the local population (Yıldız Mütenevvî Maruzât Evrakı, 46/119, 1890). A comparative review of the governors' reports showed that smuggling was largely conducted through Bedouin tribal shaykhs, often tied to British political activities in the Arabian Peninsula. Weakly defended coastal areas were targeted, highlighting the urgent need to reinforce coastal security and limit the influence of tribal leaders allied with the British.

The existing gendarmerie battalion—illiterate, undisciplined, and largely nominal—was incapable of preventing coastal smuggling, maintaining public order, or safeguarding lives and property. Yet, given its potential role in the reform era, it was considered necessary to retain these forces. To secure the 1,100-kilometer coastline from Bab el-Mandeb to the northern tip of Yemen, military posts forming a cordon at key points had to be established. Such measures would curb large-scale smuggling of arms, tobacco, and salt, ensure coastal security, and generate benefits for the state (Yıldız Perakende Evrakı – Umum Vilayetler Tahrirâtı, 22/93, 1891). Given that collecting existing weapons was impossible, the reports proposed extending the customs cordon to prevent the circulation of arms among the population and block the entry of ammunition. This measure was

expected to prove effective over time, serving as a precaution against both smuggling and uprisings. It was noted, however, that difficulties might arise from the English. In such a case, the issue could be resolved diplomatically between Istanbul and London. If necessary, the Ottomans could also establish small military posts along the cordon in cooperation with Britain, justifying the measure as essential for domestic security and the protection of trade. The cordon could be extended from Beyhan or Harib, or further from Marib, to the saltworks of al-Eyadim or Safer. Al-Eyadim lay east of Beyhan and Harib, while Safer was three days' journey afar to the east of Marib. Operating these saltworks could serve as a pretext for negotiations with Britain, though great caution was advised. The saltworks had long provided revenue not only for Bedouin tribes but also for local elites, including the Emir of Marib. Though of little financial value to the Ottoman administration, their military importance was considerable. A post established nearby would secure and control the routes linking Hadramaut and Yemen. Even if the cordon did not reach Marib or Safer but stopped at Harib and al-Eyadim, Marib itself remained strategically significant for Ottoman policy (Yıldız Esas Evrakı, 7/20/4, 1907). In the reform memorandum on the Province of Yemen, prepared by the order of the Ministry of the Interior, measures against arms and goods smuggling caused by weak coastal security were outlined. It was decided to dispatch ships to operate between Bab el-Mandeb and Jeddah to block the entry of prohibited arms and harmful materials (Yıldız Esas Evrakı, 6/46, 1909).

The Ottoman administration sought to ensure maritime security by deploying troops and establishing coastal watchtowers. Yet the smuggling of goods and weapons, sectarian disputes, and the vulnerability of coastal security to foreign intervention created unrest in Yemen. These challenges compelled the state to adopt precautionary measures and reforms. Over time, however, economic, political, and military transformations limited the effectiveness of Ottoman rule.

Conclusion

During the Ottoman period, the Red Sea gained strategic significance in geopolitical, geostrategic, and geoeconomic terms. With the British settlement in Aden and the opening of the Suez Canal, the importance of key points—such as the islands of the Red Sea, the coasts of Yemen and the Hejaz, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the African coasts, and the Gulf of Aqaba—steadily increased. The Ottomans sought to safeguard their rights in these areas, preserve territorial and maritime domains, and, where direct sovereignty was not possible, establish spheres of influence through military presence. By avoiding direct conflict with the great powers (*Düvel-*

i Muazzama), they attempted instead to define borders and conclude agreements to reduce uncertainty and manage escalation risks.

Efforts to establish a Jewish state also shaped the regional balance. The Ottoman Empire, however, preserved its sovereignty through strategic maneuvering and pursued effective policies against Jewish settlement activities, thereby strengthening its position in the Red Sea. At the same time, the broader struggle for dominance in the basin limited Ottoman influence while enhancing that of Britain, France, Italy, and Germany. This rivalry not only reshaped the political and economic structure of the region but also paved the way for the eventual collapse of Ottoman rule and the partition of the Red Sea basin among international powers.

Another important dimension of Ottoman policy was the fight against smuggling. The influx of European firearms from Aden and Djibouti into Yemen, Muscat, and the Arabian Peninsula generated instability and serious security challenges. The Ottoman state treated these developments primarily as a matter of public order and introduced preventive measures; however, due to the influence of tribal leaders and foreign powers, these policies failed to produce lasting results. Taken together, these findings show that Ottoman Red Sea policies were shaped by the interaction of imperial rivalry, security concerns, and local dynamics.

Notes

¹ For the report on the Sheikh Said question, see (Kurşun–Akyıldız, 2014, pp. 319–321).

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