MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2020/21

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Geography and Strategy in the Red Sea – The Current Situation

Benni Ben Ari and Moshe Terdiman

General

The Red Sea is an intercontinental sea. It is the northwestern extension of the Indian Ocean, which is bordered by the western coast of the Arabian Peninsula and the eastern coast of northeastern Africa. At its northern extreme, the Red Sea splits into two long and narrow gulfs. The eastern one is the Gulf of Aqaba (gulf of Eilat) and the western one is the Gulf of Suez which connects the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean by way of the Suez Canal. On the western shores of the Red Sea are Egypt, Sudan and Eritrea, with Djibouti at its southern tip. On its eastern shores are Saudi Arabia and Yemen and at the northern tip, on the shores of the Gulf of Aqaba, are Jordan and Israel.

The Red Sea has been an important sea route since the dawn of history, primarily for the countries on its shores and for the adjacent regions. It was already a major trade route between Europe and Asia in the time of the Roman Empire (including a land segment by way of Egypt), used by Arab, Indian and even Jewish traders.[1] The Red Sea has been serving as a major route for pilgrims traveling to Mecca. The Western powers had strategic and economic interests in the Red Sea only after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which significantly shortened the route between Europe and Asia.

From the middle of the 19th century until the beginning of the Second World War, only three powers had a significant presence in the Red Sea and its environs: Britain, France and Italy, and they guaranteed economic and military stability. Even after oil began to flow through the Persian Gulf and the trade routes to Asia, there was no increase in strategic interest in the Red Sea, and the blocking of the Suez Canal from 1967 to 1975 did not constitute an insurmountable problem since oil tankers were able to circumvent it by going around southern Africa. Only France maintained a presence in the region, a force that consisted of several thousand troops in Djibouti. The US was primarily concerned with its interests in the Persian Gulf and did not adopt a policy toward the Red Sea nor did it maintain any military forces there; rather it relied primarily on Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Since the mid-1970s, only Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have maintained a military presence in the northern Red Sea while

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1   For further details on trade in the Red Sea, see Aryeh Roneh, *Shipping in the Writings of the Cairo Geniza*, Chaikin Chair for Geostrategy and the Maritime Policy and Strategy Research Center, (September 2020), Haifa University. [Hebrew]

forces of the French navy have protected the trade routes in the southern section, in spite of the—mostly land-based—local conflicts (between Eritrea and Ethiopia, Somalia and Ethiopia, Somalia and Djibouti and Eritrea and Sudan, as well as the civil war in Yemen). Apart from events connected to the Israeli-Arab conflict, maritime traffic in the Red Sea has not been disrupted since the early 1990s, although the Somali pirates started their attacks against international shipping in the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea. When the level of maritime piracy increased to a point that it threatened sea routes to and from the Red Sea, foreign naval forces were sent to the region, primarily to the Gulf of Aden, the Horn of Africa and the coast of Somalia. Since the early 2000s, a number of joint naval task forces have been established (Combined Maritime Forces – CMF) with the participation of 33 countries (some of which operate as part of the task force and others that operate independently), which protect the routes. This has significantly reduced piracy activity, to the point that it was almost eliminated completely in 2017.
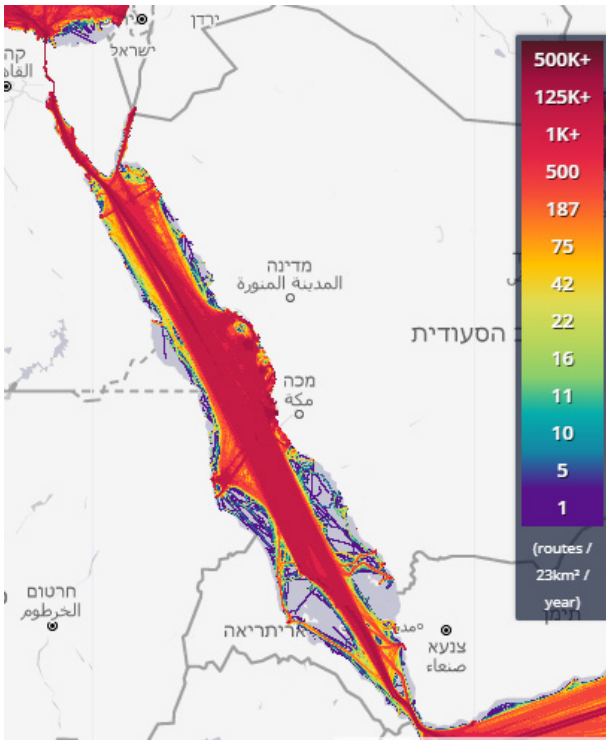

Figure 1: The density of traffic in the Red Sea (aggregate data for 2019). Tens of thousands of ships use the main shipping lanes in the Red Sea[2]

2   Processing of data retrieved from www.marinetraffic.com.

Chokepoints and their importance

Apart from the oil, gas and mineral deposits, the main strategic factor which contributes to the Red Sea's importance is that it is a shipping lane that connects Europe and Asia, which explains the importance of its chokepoints. There are three maritime chokepoints in the Red Sea, one of which connects the Red Sea to the Suez Canal (the Strait of Jubal and the Strait of Milan), another one connects the Red Sea to the ports of Eilat and Aqaba (the Straits of Tiran) and have international significance and a third—the Bab al-Mandeb Straits — which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean .

Bab el Mandeb

Bab el Mandeb is a strait that connects the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea and it is one of the most important strategic chokepoints in the world. It is 20 miles wide and contains a number of islands. The Perim island divides the strait into two routes: the eastern one which is small and narrow with a width of about 2 miles and a depth of 30 meters and the western one which is larger and wider, with a width of about 16 miles and a depth of 300 meters. More than 60 ships pass through the strait each day. It is considered to be a dangerous shipping route which limits the traffic of ships, and in particular tankers, to two lanes whose width is only two miles – one for entry and one for exit from the strait. In addition to the geographic constraints, the straits are located in a politically unstable region where there are threats and challenges to the freedom and security of shipping.

Figure 2: The Bab el Mandeb Strait between Ras Menheli in Yemen and Ras Siyyan in Djibouti[3]

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3   https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Bab-el-Mandeb.png

The factors that have made the Bab el Mandeb Strait dangerous to shipping originate in the political instability in some of the neighboring countries. The war in Yemen between Houthi rebels and the regime has resulted in rebel attacks on shipping and the Houthis' threat to close the strait for Saudi and UAE vessels. The increasing pirate activity in the areas near Somalia and the Horn of Africa has also threatened the international shipping. However, thanks to the activity of the CMF in recent years, the scale of pirate attacks on ships in the region has been reduced to only a few each year.[4] Also Iran's policy, which supports the Houthi rebels against Saudi Arabia, as well as the friction between it and the US and the Somali pirates' activity- all has led to the increased presence of Iranian ships in the area of the strait with the goal of demonstrating presence and project power.
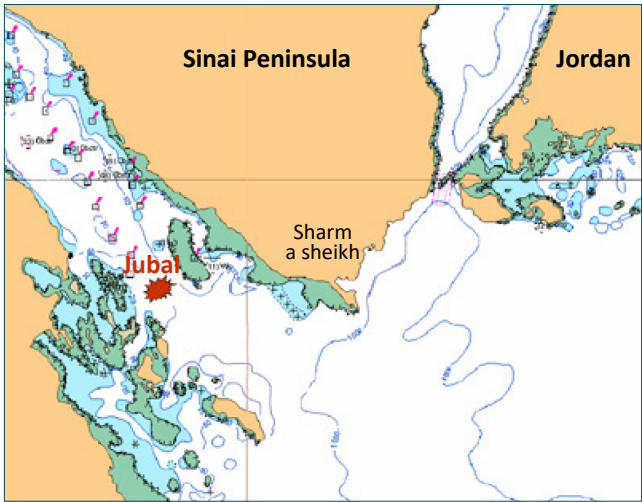
Straits of Jubal and Milan

Figure 3: The Straits of Jubal and Milan at the entrance to the Gulf of Suez[5]

The Strait of Jubal, which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Suez, is only six miles wide at its narrowest point, and it is surrounded by a huge number of sand bars and shoals, as well as being the location of a significant number of ship wrecks. The depth in the center of the strait is about 80 meters and in its southern portionis 500–700 meters; however, it is filled with coral reefs and, as a result, even in the areas of deep water where the shipping lanes are passing, there are sand bars at

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4   ICC International Maritime Bureau; Piracy and armed robbery against ships report, (2020). https://www.icc-ccs.org/reports/2019_Annual_Piracy_Report.pdf

5   http://www.amutayam.org.il/?CategoryID=616&ArticleID=1469

shallow depthsthat constitute a danger to ships. To the east of the Strait of Jubal is the Strait of Milan which is even shallower and narrower and is not used for regular shipping traffic. It does allow for the passage of ships up to a certain size but requires precise and careful navigation.

The Straits of Tiran and the islands of Tiran and Sanafir

These two islands are located at the entrance to the Strait of Tiran between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba. The islands are sandy and barren and sit atop coral reefs. Between the island of Tiran and the Egyptian coast are two shipping lanes that are separated by coral reefs. The eastern lane, called the Grafton Passage, is less than a kilometer wide with a depth of about 80 meters and it is used for northbound shipping. The western lane, called the Enterprise Passage, is about 1200 meters wide and is used for southbound shipping. The depth of the strait ranges between about 250 meters in the western passage and about 70 meters in the eastern passage and its overall width at its narrowest point is about 4 km.
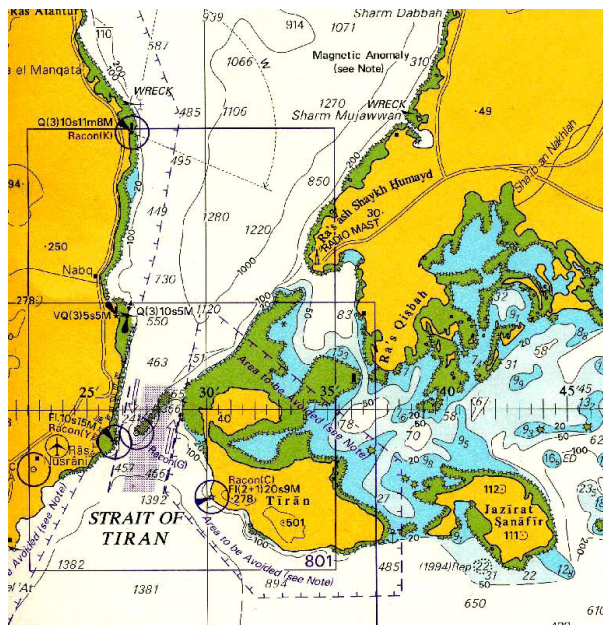

Figure 4: Tiran and Sanafir at the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba[6]

6   https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%9E%D7%A6%D7%A8%D7%99_%D7%98%D7%99%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%9F; https://www.electronicspoint.com/forums/threads/admiralty-chart-with-led-sequences.252299

The islands were ceded by Saudi Arabia to Egypt in 1949 (after the capture of Umm Rashrash [Eilat] by the IDF) and were returned to Saudi Arabia in 2017 with the consent of Israel (since they were part of the Israel- Egypt peace accord signed in 1979).

Only in the last three decades has the Red Sea and its vicinity become a focus of geopolitical and geostrategic conflict, while at the same time the economic activity of the countries in the region—most of whichare poor and undeveloped—has flourished.

The Red Sea – both a source and a conduit for energy

The main route for the transport of oil and gas from the Persian Gulf to Europe is by way of the Suez Canal and the SUMED oil pipeline in Egypt.[7] The oil travels through the Bab el Mandeb Strait, through the Red Sea and then by way of the Strait of Jubal to the Gulf of Suez. Much smaller quantities travel through the Straits of Tiran in the direction of Jordan and Israel. At the same time, oil and gas is transported from the fields in the Red Sea and from the Saudi East-West Pipeline northward to the Suez Canal and southward to Asia, primarily to India, Singapore and China. In 2018, 6.2 million barrels of crude oil and oil distillates passed through the strait each day in the direction of Europe, the US and Asia, accounting for 9 percent of all oil transportation by sea (Figures 5 and 6).[8]
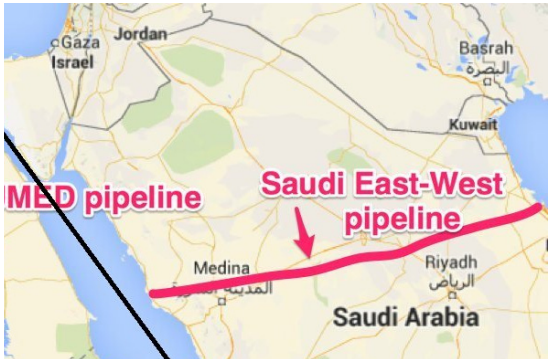

Figure 5: Oil pipelines in the Red Sea region[9]

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7   The SUMED oil pipeline is also known as the Suez Mediterranean pipeline. It is used for the transport of crude oil from the terminal at Ain Sukhna on the coast of the Red Sea to Alexandria on the coast of the Mediterranean. The pipeline's aim is to serve as an alternative for oil tankers travelling from the Persian Gulf to the Suez Canal. It is 320 km long and has been active since 1977.

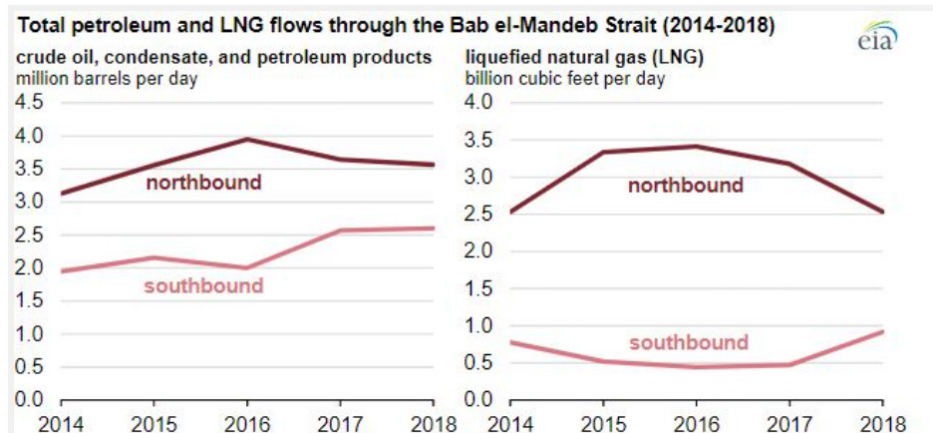8   https://safety4sea.com/bab-el-mandeb-strait-crucial-for-oil-and-natural-gas-shipments

9   https://twitter.com/tankertrackers/status/982167978593599489?lang=da

Total petroleum and LNG flows through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (2014-2018)

crude oil, condensate, and petroleum products
million barrels per day

liquefied natural gas (LNG)
billion cubic feet per day

eia

northbound

southbound

northbound

southbound

Figure 6: Traffic of oil and gas through the Bab el Mandeb Strait[10]

Since the Red Sea is a primary route for the transport of global oil and thanks to the normalization agreements (the Abraham Accords) between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain, it is now possible to use the oil pipeline from Eilat to Ashkelon in order to transport oil from the UAE by a maritime route through the Red Sea and from Ashkelon to the Mediterranean. .

In parallel to the geopolitical developments that have been taking place during the last two years thanks to the discovery of large amounts of natural gas in Saudi Arabia's economic waters, the Red Sea has also become a source of energy in its own right and has not only served as a conduit for energy transportation. On March 10th 2019, the Egyptian Ministry of Petroleum declared a tender to receive price quotes from international companies for oil and gas exploration in ten maritime blocs in the Red Sea, a move that enraged Sudan, since some of the exploration will take place in the economic waters of the Halaib Triangle[11], an area that is under Egyptian control but is contested by Sudan.

Egypt suffers directly from the threats in the Bab el Mandeb Strait due to both the shipping traffic through the Suez Canal and the supply of oil to the SUMED pipeline.

10 "The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a strategic route for oil and natural gas shipments," US Energy Information Administration (27 August 2019). https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=41073#

11 The Halaib triangle is an area on the border between Egypt and Sudan on the coast of the Red Sea. The sovereignty over the area has been contested by the two countries since Sudan's independence in 1956. Starting in the mid-1990s, Egypt has had de facto control of the area. It has issued a tender for oil exploration in the triangle's waters.

In addition, the conflict between Egypt and Sudan has escalated in view of the warming of relations between Sudan and Turkey following the leasing of the Suakin port in Sudan (which is located on an island very close to shore). Turkey leased the port for 99 years on the basis of it being an Ottoman fortification in the past.

This tension passed quickly and on December 29th 2019 Tarek al Mulla, the Egyptian Petroleum Minister, declared that Chevron and the joint Shell - Mubadala consortium from the UAE had won the tender. This helps explain the opening of the Berenice Military Base (Egypt) in January 2020 which is meant to send a clear message to Sudan and to protect the natural resources located in the economic waters of Southern Egypt.

It is still too early to tell whether this change, which symbolizes the entry of the Red Sea into the global energy market, will mean greater importance for the Red Sea or perhaps will create a common energy market between the Eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea, in which Egypt will have the leading role. It is also too early to know whether this change will contribute to the prosperity of the countries in the Red Sea basin or whether it will constitute a source of conflict and struggles for power. Only time will tell.

Blockading and mining of the straits in the Red Sea

The blockading of the Red Sea will prevent the passage of tankers and cargo ships coming from the Persian Gulf or from the Indian Ocean on their way to the Mediterranean Sea and will make it necessary for them to sail around Africa, a much longer and more expensive trip. It will also prevent the passage of ships from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, on their way to Asia and Africa. Since all of the straits in the Red Sea are maritime chokepoints and have geostrategic importance, regional players have exploited the possibility of blocking ship traffic in order to achieve political or strategic goals, in order to impose an economic blockade and as a basis for political negotiations following acts of terror.

The blockading of the Straits of Tiran by the Egyptians in 1956 and 1967 led to Operation 'Kadesh' and the 'Six Day War', respectively. In both of these episodes, the islands of Tiran and Sanafir were captured by Israel. In 2017, sovereignty over the islands was passed back to Saudi Arabiaby Egypt.

The Suez Canal was nationalized by Egypt in 1956, which then prohibited the passage of Israeli ships through it. At the end of the Six Day War (1967), the Canal was blocked

to shipping until 1975[12], when it was cleaned and the debris that had blocked the passage of ships was cleared. After the revolution in Egypt in 2011, a number of incidents were reported in which ISIS linked terrorist organizations threatened to disrupt the traffic of ships through the canal and made attempts to do so.

The Strait of Jubal was mined by the Egyptians in the Yom Kippur War (October 1973) and the Siris oil tanker, which was on its way from Eilat to Abu Rodeis, was sunk as a result. The crew was rescued by Israel Air Force helicopters. A few weeks later, the Sirena tanker was damaged by a mine but managed to continue on to Eilat.

A terror attack was carried out in the Bab el Mandeb Strait on June 11th 1971 by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) against the Coral Sea, an Israeli tanker that was flying a Liberian flag and was on its way to Eilat. The tanker was hit by several RPGs rockets but continued to sail.

Egypt asked Southern Yemen to blockade the straits to Israeli ships during the Yom Kippur War. On October 7th 1973; it was reported that three torpedoes were fired at a tanker called the Samson but missed.

Yemen and the Houthis

The countries bordering the Red Sea are all Muslim, apart from Eritrea and Israel. But this fact has not prevented political and military conflicts over sovereignty and energy sources.

The civil war in Yemen (which began in 2015) made it possible for the Houthi rebels (the Ansar Allah movement) to threaten and carry out various attacks against international shipping through the Bab el Mandeb Strait starting in 2015. The Houthis are supported by Iran which supplies them with modern weaponry, including coast-to-sea missiles, sea mines and remote-controlled explosive boats. They are able to threaten shipping because they control the whole southwestern and western side of Yemen up to the border with Saudi Arabia (including the capital Sana'a) and also the Red Sea coast. Commercial ships, tankers and fishing vessels have been damaged by floating mines (of which there are hundreds) that were laid by the Houthis in the vicinity of the Bab al-Mandeb Strait and the Yemeni coast.

The Houthi rebels held the port city of Al Hudaydah, which is located on the coast of the Red Sea and is where their naval force is stationed. Their vessels have operated

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12   The blockade followed the capture of the Sinai Peninsula by Israel in the Six Day War and continued until the signing of the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Egypt following the Yom Kippur War (1974).

against the navies of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and even the US since 2015. The rebels' naval forces have carried out numerous successful operations against Saudi and Egyptian vessels in the Red Sea. Among others, they fired missiles at vessels of the Egyptian, Saudi and American navies; they have dispatched unmanned suicide boats; and they have used naval commando forces in various missions, including the capture of autonomous underwater vessels belonging to the US Navy.13

In January 2017, the naval forces of a coalition led by Saudi Arabia initiated Operation 'Golden Arrow' in order to recapture the coastal strip under the control of the rebels. Ships of the Saudi navy located and evacuated sea mines, both in the approaches to the Yemenite ports and along the international shipping lanes.
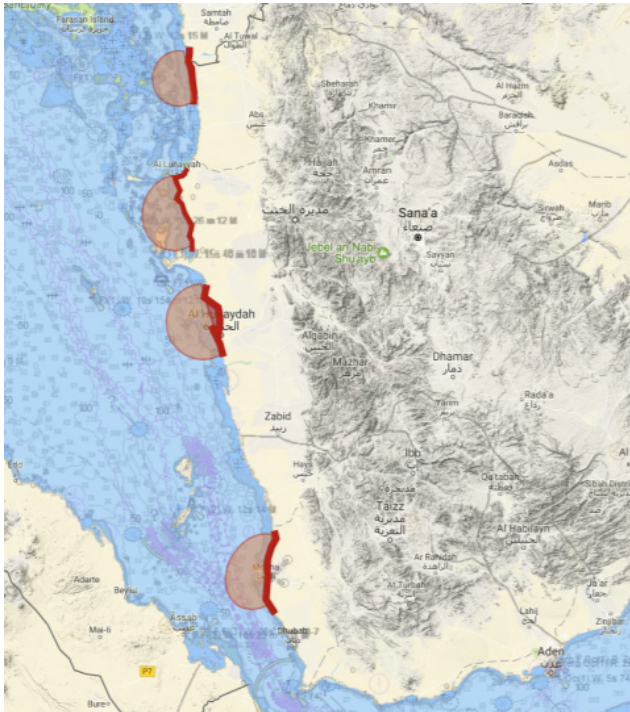

Figure 7: Areas of the Yemenite coast with a high risk of mines as of May 2017[14]

13 For further details on the maritime aspects of the Houthi fighting, see Yoram Laks, "Iran – the Maritime Involvement and Influence in the Red Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean Sea," Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israel 2016, Shaul Horev and Ehud Goren (eds.), p. 95–108, Haifa University https://hms.haifa.ac.il/images/reports/EN_Report201617.pdf

14 UK P&I, Special Advisory: Naval mines and MBIEDs off Yemen (19 May 2017). https://www.ukpandi.com/-/media/files/imports/13108/bulletins/28037---170519_nya_m_special_advisory_yemen.pdf

The war in Yemen, which has been raging for more than five years, has seriously reduced the port activity in Yemen. A number of ports that had ceased functioning have now restored their operations and in particular the largest port in the country located at the city of Aden. Nonetheless, the output of the ports is low due to, among other things, the fear among international companies of working with the ports in Yemen.

The recent attacks against ships in the Gulf of Aden and in the Bab el Mandeb Strait have emphasized the risks in navigating through these waters. Maritime alerts have been issued by various organizations in view of the numerous risks and the large swath of the ocean that is under threat. The CMF has established a Maritime Security Transit Corridor (MSTC)[15] in which its ships patrol, provide protection and search for and remove mines.

Figure 8: The Maritime Security Transit Corridor in the Bab el Mandeb Strait and in the southern Red Sea

Geopolitics in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa

There are a number of basic facts underlying the geopolitical developments in the Red Sea in recent years. From a geopolitical perspective, and apart from the countries along the coast of the Red Sea, the Red Sea basin includes four additional countries:

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15 COMBINED MARITIME FORCES (CMF), Maritime Security Transit Corridor (MSTC). https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/maritime-security-transit-corridor-mstc

Eritrea and South Sudan, which do not have access to the sea, but are dependent on the Red Sea for their import and export needs, and Somalia and Somaliland, which are located on the coast of the Gulf of Aden at the entrance to the Red Sea.

Throughout history the Red Sea has served as an essential trade route between Europe and the West on the one hand and Asia and Africa on the other. As a result, the countries located at the choke points (the Suez Canal and the Bab el Mandeb Strait), i.e. Egypt, Yemen and Djibouti, have great strategic importance. In this context, it is important to recall that geographically the Red Sea is an integral part of three different geographical regions, which meet at the Bab el Mandeb Strait: The Middle East, Africa and the Indian Ocean basin.

During the past two decades, freedom of navigation in the Red Sea has been under threat from three sources that originate from Yemen and Somalia, both of which are failed states without a stable government.

The first is the rise of el Qaida and ISIS in Yemen and Somalia. The el Qaida organization in the Arabian Peninsula has carried out two maritime terror attacks: on October 12th 2000 against the USS Cole while it was anchored in the port of Aden, which killed 17 American sailors and wounded 39; and on October 6th 2002 against the Limburg, a French oil tanker, in which one crew member was killed and 26 wounded.

The second source is the Somali pirates who operate along the coast of Somalia and have disrupted trade in the Gulf of Aden and in the Indian Ocean, starting in the latter half of the 2000s. During this period, Somali pirates have attacked hundreds of vessels, have kidnapped dozens of vessels and have taken hundreds of hostages. However, as a result of the establishment of an international force by the EU and an international maritime policing force, the number of attacks by Somali pirates has been on the decline since 2010, although in recent years they have begun to attack ships in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean with renewed vigor.

The third source is the civil war in Yemen, which began five years ago. A coalition of states under the leadership of Saudi Arabia initiated Operation 'Decisive Storm', with the goal of expelling the Houthis from Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, which they captured earlier that year, and restoring control of the country to the government of Yemen headed by Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. Countries located on the coast of the Red Sea are involved in this war: Sudan, Egypt and Jordan are directly involved; Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia are involved indirectly by providing the coalition with access to their territorial waters, their air space and the bases in their territory. The Houthis have attacked coalition ships using explosive boats, sea mines and anti-ship

missiles, as well as US Navy ships because they provide support to the coalition forces. Subsequently, they also attacked commercial vessels and threatened to block international passage through the Red Sea. As a result, the Houthis currently constitute a very real threat to freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and the international trade that passes through it.

The island of Socotra is located strategically at the approaches to the Red Sea. The group of islands is 'on paper' under the sovereignty of Yemen but since April 2018 the military forces of the UAE have controlled the island, including its port and airport, and have provided humanitarian aid to its inhabitants. The UAE has essentially annexed the island despite the protests of Yemen. In February 2020, units of the Yemenite army rebelled joined the forces supported by the UAE. Administrative control was restored to Yemen in May 2018 despite the flag of the UAE flying over the government buildings in Hadibu, the capital.[16] At the beginning of September 2020, Yemen claimed that the UAE is trying to convert the island into a military base and according to foreign sources it may be serving as a base for Israeli Intelligence in order to gather information in the region, particularly the Bab el Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden, and to track the Iranian navy in these areas.[17]

The Federal Republic of Somalia is a state in eastern Africa whose regime suffers from a lack of stability and is unable to impose its will on the various forces in thecountry. Actual control and authority in the country is in the hands of autonomous entities, such as Puntland or an independent entity that is not recognized internationally, namely Somaliland, as well as rival groups and factions that lead the forces of resistance and opposition.

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16 Socotra is under the control of the Southern Transitional Council which broke off from the government of Yemen. It is recognized by the West and the Council has won the support of the UAE. Therefore, the UAE still has a military presence in Socotra.

17 Yemen Ready to Counter Israeli Military Presence on Occupied Islands: Expert, Tasnim News Agency (19 September 2020). https://bit.ly/34LrUbw; UAE, Saudi Arabia accused of allowing Israel onto Yemen's Socotra, TRTWorld (2 September 2020). https://bit.ly/381WQ9t; UAE, Saudi Arabia let Israel send intelligence agents into Yemen: reports, TheNewsArab (2 September 2020). https://bit.ly/3ee5SRS; "Israel will establish an Intelligence base on the Island of Socotra together with the UAE," nziv (August 26th 2020). https://nziv.net/51459 [Hebrew]

Figure 9: The island of Socotra at the approaches to the Red Sea[18]

Figure10: The new states in Somalia[19]

Processes of peace, reconciliation and normalization in the Horn of Africa

The need to ensure freedom of navigation through the Red Sea and to eliminate the threats to it, forms the background to the struggles over hegemony among the global powers and the regional powers. These struggles—or more correctly the rare convergence of interests between the global powers, the regional powers and the leaders of Eritrea and Ethiopia, which have exploited these struggles in order to further achieve their goals and to promote their status and the status of their countries in the international arena—have directly contributed to the processes of reconciliation and normalization that have characterized the countries of the Horn of Africa during the past two years.

During the first half of 2018, the conditions were ripe to achieve stability in the Horn of Africa, for the first time in the modern history of the region. The achievement of regional stability in the Horn of Africa was a joint interest of the US and China. Saudi Arabia and the UAE played an important role in mediating between the two. Abiy Ahmed, who was elected as the Ethiopian Prime Minister on April 2nd 2018, sought to exploit this rare opportunity in order to strengthen the status of Ethiopia as a regional maritime power with access to the sea. Similarly, Isaias Afwerki, the President of Eritrea also sought to exploit the opportunity in order to improve Eritrea's international status and in order to remove the sanctions imposed by the UN in 2009.

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18   https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Oman_Sea_map-fr.svg

19   https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14115069

These peace processes began to coalesce on July 9th 2018, when Abiy Ahmed and Isaias Afwerki signed a joint declaration for peace and friendship and announced an end to the 20-year-old state of war between their countries and the renewal of diplomatic relations. Already at the end of that month, President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed Farmaajo of Somalia made a historic visit to Asmara, during which the presidents of Somalia and Eritrea declared a resumption of relations between their countries. At the same time, Afwerki played a key role in the reconciliation process between the government of Ethiopia and some of the opposition organizations which were headquartered in Asmara. On September 5th 2018, the presidents of Somalia and Eritrea and the Prime Minister of Ethiopia held their first three-way summit meeting in Asmara, at the end of which they signed a joint declaration for economic, social, cultural and military cooperation and announced that they would work together to promote regional peace and security. The next day, the foreign ministers of Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea arrived in Djibouti where they met with President Ismail Omar Guelleh of Djibouti. As a result of the meeting, Eritrea and Djibouti agreed to renew relations between them. Apparently, Saudi Arabia was also involved in the mediation activity between the two countries. Ten days later, on September 16th, the involvement of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the peace processes in the Horn of Africa became known. This occurred when Afwerki and Abiy Ahmed signed a peace, friendship and cooperation agreement between their two countries in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in the presence of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud; Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the Saudi heir apparent; Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayedbin Sultan Al Nahyan, the Foreign Minister of the UAE; Moussa Faki Maamat, the Chairman of the African Union; and António Guterres, the Director General of the UN. The next day, on September 17th, there was an historic summit meeting in Jeddah between the presidents of Djibouti and Eritrea at the invitation of the Saudi heir apparent, Mohammed bin Salman.

As a result of these developments, the UN Security Council decided unanimously on November 14th 2018 to remove the arms embargo and sanctions that had been imposed on Eritrea in 2009 due to its supplying of weapons to the al- Shabaab terror organization that has been active in Somalia (a claim that Eritrea always denied) and due to its refusal to resolve its border dispute with Djibouti. In addition, Abiy Ahmed won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019.

The regional peace processes are continuing. On the 9th and 10th of November 2018 the leaders of Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea arrived in Bahir Dar in Ethiopia for a second summit meeting. They stressed respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of Somalia. The third summit meeting took

place on the 27th of January 2020, where the leaders adopted a joint plan of action for 2020 and beyond which focused on the stabilization of peace, regional stability and security and the promotion of economic and social development.

Although the peace, reconciliation and normalization processes are attracting investment to the Horn of Africa countries (Djibouti, Somalia, Somaliland, Eritrea and Ethiopia) from all over the world, they are also having an effect on the rivalries between the global powers and the regional powers for hegemony and influence in theRed Sea basin.

The struggle for hegemony among global and regional powers in the Red Sea basin

The guarantee of freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and the activity to eliminate the threats to it, together with the peace, reconciliation and normalization processes taking place in the Horn of Africa exist in the background to the rivalries taking place in recent years among the global powers and the regional powers for hegemony and influence in the Red Sea.

The first rivalry is between the global powers—primarily Japan, China, India, the US, France and Russia—over hegemony and influence in the Indian Ocean and the Horn of Africa, which includes a foothold in the Gulf of Aden, Djibouti and the Horn of Africa countries. The second rivalry is between the key countries located in the region—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Qatar and Turkey—which began in June 2017 when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrein, Egypt and Mauritania cut off relations with Qatar. This rivalry has focused on the western shore of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Due to its strategic location on the Bab el Mandeb Strait and its stable presidential regime, Djibouti is home to the largest number of foreign military bases in the world. Djibouti gained its independence from France in 1977 and until 2002 there was only a single French military base located in the country, which was the largest outside France. In 2001, as a result of the September 11th attack, President Ismail Omar Guelleh invited the global powers to establish military bases on Djibouti's territory in order to fight terror. In 2002, the US established 'Camp Lemonnier' in Djibouti, its largest permanent military base in Africa, for the purpose of fighting terrorism in Somalia and Yemen. Djibouti is also the home for military bases of the EU, Italy, Japan and China. Stationed at the French military base are also German and Spanish soldiers who are there to combat Somali maritime pirates.
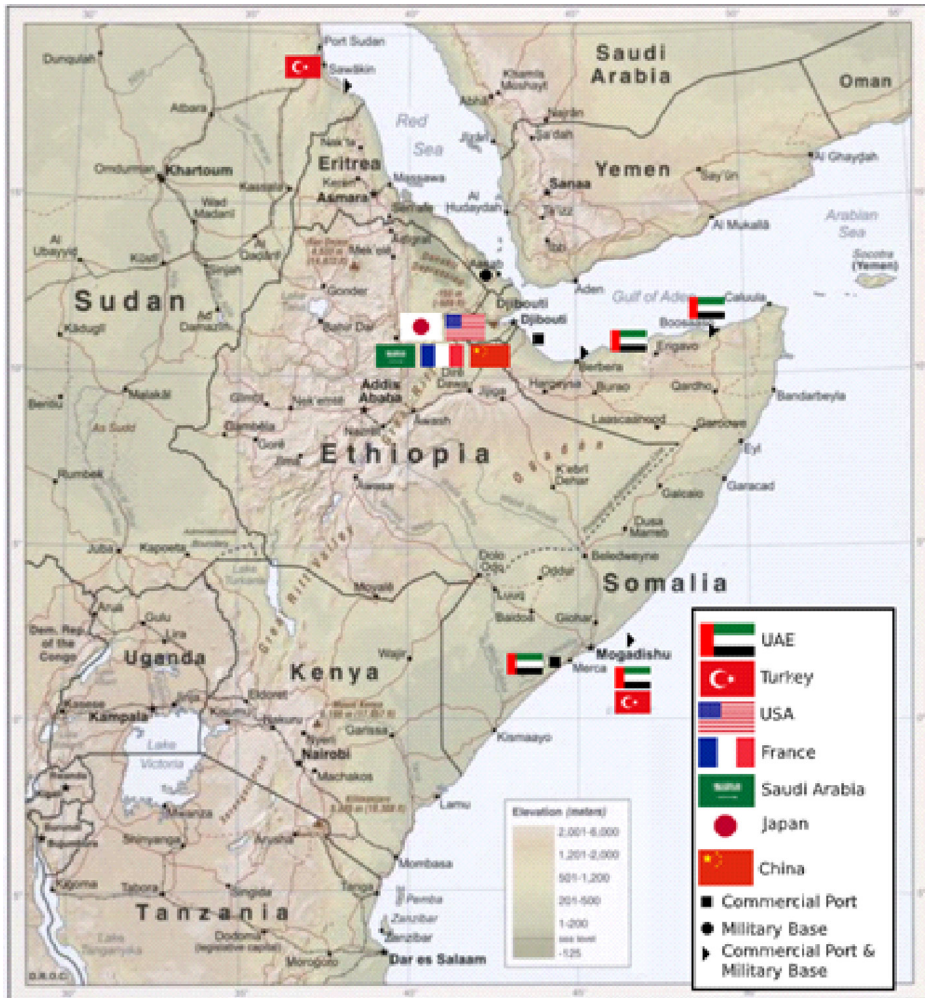
Figure 11: The geopolitical situation in the Horn of Africa and the Bab el Mandeb Strait[20]

The last military base to be established in Djibouti is the first Chinese military base located outside of China, which was inaugurated on August 1st 2017. According to Chinese officials, the purpose of the base is to support peacekeeping activity, Chinese humanitarian activity in the region and maritime missions along the coast of Somalia and Yemen against Somali pirates. However, the establishment of the base should be viewed as part of the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative or the

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20   John Calabrese, The Bab el-Mandeb Strait: Regional and great power rivalries on the shores of the Red Sea, *Middle East institute*, 29 January 2020. https://www.mei.edu/publications/bab-el-mandeb-strait-regional-and-great-power-rivalries-shores-red-sea

Maritime Silk Route Initiative of President Xi Jinping. The goal of this program is to create an economic and political land and sea network along China's important trade routes. The Chinese navy will secure this maritime network by establishing a chain of military bases in strategic locations and thus, China will essentially achieve indirect control of its major maritime trade routes. The scope of infrastructure construction at the Chinese base is on a particularly large scale and hints at broader intentions.

The establishment of the Chinese base in Djibouti is also part of the struggle for hegemony in the Indian Ocean between China on the one hand and India, Japan, Australia and the US on the other. It is not surprising therefore that the establishment of the Chinese base, which China is continuing to expand, is raising concern in Japan, which in response has expanded its own military base in Djibouti in an effort to block the growing Chinese influence.

Against the background of the regional peace processes in the Horn of Africa and Somalia's improved international status, the region has during the last two years become the site of another rivalry – that between China and the US. In August 2018, Somalia officially joined the Chinese Belt and Road project. In December 2018, the President of Somalia declared that his government had granted 31 tuna fishing licenses to China, and a year later, on May 13th 2019, the Chinese Exim Bank declared that it had signed an agreement with the government of Somalia according to which it would lend the government of Somalia $200 million in order to rebuild the port of Mogadishu. In exchange, the bank would have exclusive fishing rights on the coast of Somalia and would become part owner of the port of Mogadishu until the loan is fully repaid.

At the same time, the US took a number of diplomatic steps to strengthen its presence in Somalia, including the reopening in October 2019 of the American embassy in Mogadishu.

During 2018, Russia also penetrated the Red Sea basin, with focus on the sale of arms and the development of trade, and it is seeking to develop good relations with Saudi Arabia in view of its large Muslim population. It is important to mention in this context that in 2008 Russia sent naval vessels into the Gulf of Aden in order to operate against the Somali pirates. According to reports during the last two years, Russia has discussed the construction of military bases with Somaliland and Eritrea. As of now, Russia still has no permanent base in the Red Sea, but Djibouti and Sudan have agreed that ships of the Russian navy can use their ports.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE view the countries located along the Red Sea as their western security belt in the context of the war in Yemen and as guaranteeing freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. In contrast, Turkey and Qatar are doing everything in their power to block the expansion of Saudi Arabia and UAE influence in these countries, including an attempt to gain a stronghold there themselves. These two rivalries are manifested primarily in the establishment of military bases or the leasing and management of ports in strategic locations in the Red Sea basin. The goal is to gain a foothold and influence in the region or alternatively to block the expansion of their rivals' influence. Although Qatar does not have any military or infrastructure presence in the Red Sea basin, it has a substantial influence over the events there. It supported the mediation in 2009 between Sudan and Chad and also between the government of Sudan and some of the rebel groups in Darfur which eventually signed peace agreements; it has invested heavily in Sudan and Ethiopia, primarily in agriculture and development; and it is leasing land in those countries in order to grow food; in 2017, it helped fund the election campaign of the current president of Somalia, Mohamed Farmaajo; and it provides hundreds of millions of dollars in funding to the central government in Somalia for infrastructure, educational and humanitarian assistance.

Also, Turkey, which is an ally of Qatar, is increasing its presence in Somalia, Sudan and Djibouti (in addition to its military presence in Qatar) as part of its plan to expand its traditional sphere of influence. More importantly, it is seeking to guarantee its access to sources of energy, in view of its depressed economic situation. In October 2013, the government of Somalia signed an agreement with the Turkish Bayrak company for the development and management of the port of Mogadishu for a period of 20 years and a new concession was signed in 2020 for an additional 14 years, which includes a terminal and exclusive maritime service in the port of Mogadishu. In September 2017, Turkey opened in Mogadishu its largest military base outside its borders. In January 2020, Somalia invited Turkey to search for oil in its economic waters.

After establishing its presence in Somalia, Turkey then turned to Sudan. On December 24th 2017, President Erdogan made the first official visit by a Turkish president to Sudan. During the visit, an interim agreement was signed, according to which Turkey would rebuild Suakin's port, the ancient Ottoman port city located on the shore of the Red Sea, as a tourist site and as a transit point for pilgrims on their way to Mecca and Medina, and would also build a shipyard there that would service commercial vessels. On March 26th 2018, Qatar and Turkey signed an agreement with Sudan with a value of $4 billion to develop Suakin. It is important to mention that this facilitates

a joint Turkish-Qatari presence in the center of the Red Sea, thus creating a barrier between Egypt and the UAE base in Eritrea.

Furthermore, Turkey is expanding its influence in the Red Sea basin and is strengthening its presence in Djibouti as well. As a result of the maritime cooperation agreement signed between Turkey and Djibouti in January 2015, which was approved by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Turkish Parliament in February 2019, Turkey will set up a free trade zone in Djibouti that will be located near the multi-purpose port of Duralle. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is also strengthening its presence in Djibouti. In February 2020, Saudi Arabia and Djibouti signed a plan for commercial cooperation in which they agreed that Saudi Arabia would set up a free trade zone in Djibouti.

Figure 12: Turkey's geostrategic triangle[21]

The UAE penetrated the Red Sea basin prior to the outbreak of the civil war in Yemen. In 2008, the DP World company signed a contract with Yemen for the development and management of the port of Aden and in that same year the company signed an agreement with the government of Djibouti for the management and development of the container port in Duralle, which would be the largest in Africa, for a period of 20 years. After the outbreak of the civil war in Yemen, the UAE focused on assisting the Yemenite government in taking control of the Red Sea coast and the Gulf of Aden and to neutralize the threat from the Houthis against international shipping

21   http://turknews.ca/turkey-to-restore-suakin-island-and-build-naval-dock

in the Red Sea. In this context, the UAE captured the island of Perim in the Bab el Mandeb Strait from the Houthis and, according to reports, the President of Yemen leased the islands of Socotra and Abd al Kuri to the UAE for a period of 99 years. With the outbreak of the civil war in Yemen, Djibouti granted Saudi Arabia and the UAE use of a facility to support their military activity in Yemen. However, at the end of April 2015, the UAE cut its relations with Djibouti and as a result Saudi Arabia and the UAE transferred the focus of their activity to Eritrea. At the end of April 2015, the UAE signed a 30-year lease for military use of the deep-water port at Assab and the nearby airfield. Since then, this base has served as one of the main bases of the military coalition in the war in Yemen. At the same time, the UAE has strengthened its military presence in Somalia. In May 2015, the UAE opened a military training base in Mogadishu which it funds and began to train Somali soldiers to fight the terror organization Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen which is affiliated with el Qaida. In February 2017, Somaliland signed an agreement with the DP World company to upgrade the port of Berbera and to manage it for a period of 50 years. Furthermore, it allowed the UAE to use the airfield and port at Berbera, which is located about 250 km south of Yemen, as a military facility in support of its activity in Yemen. In April 2017, the autonomous region of Puntland signed an agreement with DP World for the development and management of the Bassasso port for a period of 30 years.

However, during the past two years, the UAE presence in the Horn of Africa has diminished. On February 22nd 2018, Djibouti unilaterally terminated the agreement with DP World to manage the container port at Duralle since it transferred part of the control over the port to China. However, the UAE is not giving up in this matter and has filed suit against Djibouti and even against China for violating the agreement. The UAE has won six cases against Djibouti in the London International Court of Arbitration and the High Court of England and Wales, but Djibouti is ignoring the verdicts. The relations between Somalia and the UAE soured following the call by President Farmaajo of Somalia to cancel the agreement signed by Somaliland with DP World, according to which it will manage the port of Berbera. The UAE closed its training base in Mogadishu in May 2018 and also the one in Puntland which was used for the training of a maritime police force. A year later, the UAE suffered another setback when the President of Somaliland declared in September 2019 that the airfield which the UAE had built in Berbera would be used only for civilian purposes and would no longer be used for military purposes as originally agreed on.

Therefore, the UAE is currently strengthening its presence in South Yemen, where it supports the Southern Transitional Council; in Somaliland, where DP World manages the port of Berbera, and where the UAE is financing the construction of the corridor

leading from it to the border with Ethiopia; and in Eritrea whose government signed an agreement with DP World in February 2020 to upgrade its ports.

Nonetheless, the UAE, which at first successfully expanded its influence among the countries along the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, was in the end left with only a small number of strategic footholds.

Egypt, an ally of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, is demonstrating its military power and its intentions in the Red Sea basin by creating a task force to guarantee freedom of navigation in the northern Red Sea and by opening, in January 2020, the Berenice military base[22] which is located near the border with Sudan. This is the largest Egyptian military base in the region and it is intended to protect Egypt's southern shores and the natural resources located there, as well as ensure international freedom of navigation from the Red Sea to the Suez Canal and to the oil terminal of the SUMED pipeline at Ain Sukha in the Gulf of Suez. The complex includes a naval base, an air base, army units, training facilities and more. The Egyptian navy is increasing its strength in the area and in 2017 established the Southern Fleet whose theater of operations is the Red Sea. The fleet includes a helicopter carrier, corvettes and multipurpose vessels that enable rapid military intervention.[23]

Furthermore, Egypt is interested in strengthening its presence in the southern Red Sea in view of the difficulties in its negotiations with Sudan and Ethiopia with respect to the 'Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam' which Ethiopia is building on the Blue Nile. As a result, Egypt is negotiating with Djibouti in order to create a massive Egyptian free trade zone in Djibouti. In addition, in June and July of 2020 Egypt negotiated with South Sudan and Somaliland in order to establish a military base in their territory; however, Ethiopia was opposed to the idea and as a result the negotiations failed.

Even though Ethiopia does not have access to the sea either, it is transforming itself into a regional maritime power in the Red Sea. Since the election of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister on April 2nd 2018, he has been working to ensure access to the sea for Ethiopia, which it lost when Eritrea became independent in 1993. Although Ethiopia made use of the port at Assab in Eritrea until 1997, since then almost all of its exports and all of its imports have been passing through the port of Djibouti. In March 2018, Ethiopia, Somaliland and DP World signed an agreement according to

22   Dan Arkin, "Sea, Land and Air: The Egyptian army inaugurates a new base", Israel Defense (January 23rd 2020). https://www.israeldefense.co.il/he/node/41665

23   For further detail on the expansion of the Egyptian Navy, see "The Egyptian navy in the modern era: Its past and its future," *Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israel 2020*, Shaul Horev and Ehud Goren (eds.), p. 190–211, Haifa University. [Hebrew]

which Ethiopia will own part of the shares in the Berbera port. In addition, the three sides agreed that the government of Ethiopia would invest in infrastructure in order to develop a corridor in Berbera that would serve as a commercial gateway to the interior of the country. Immediately after being elected Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed made three official visits – to Djibouti, Sudan and Kenya – in order to ensure that Ethiopia would have a foothold in the port of Djibouti, in the port of Port Sudan, which is the largest in Sudan, and in the port of Lamu in Kenya. At the same time Abiy Ahmed is busy rebuilding the Ethiopian navy with the assistance of France and Norway and on the 19th of January 2020, Lema Magersa, the Defense Minister of Ethiopia, declared that Ethiopia had established a navy whose base would be located at Djibouti and whose headquarters would be located at Bahir Dar, on the shores of Lake Tana. The role of the navy is to monitor events in the region, in light of the fact that the only port currently being used by Ethiopia for its imports and exports is located at Djibouti.

In sum, the outcome of this maneuvering for power is that Turkey is strengthening its presence in the Red Sea in Sudan and in Somalia, while the UAE is strengthening its presence in Eritrea, Somaliland and South Yemen. Meanwhile Egypt and Saudi Arabia, in addition to Turkey, will have a presence in Djibouti.

The security alliances in the Red Sea

In parallel to the struggles for power among the global powers and the regional powers, Saudi Arabia has during the past two years initiated a regional alliance made up of most of the countries located along the Red Sea. Its goal is to secure the international shipping lanes in the Red Sea and to halt the Iranian penetration into the region. On December 12th 2018, the representatives of Egypt, Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen and Jordan met in Riyadh to discuss the creation of the alliance. On January 6th, 2020, the foreign ministers of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen, Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia and Eritrea gathered in Riyadh to sign the charter of the Council of Arab and African Countries Bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The goal of the charter is to encourage cooperation in securing international shipping in the Red Sea and economic cooperation between the member states. As of now, the Council is not yet active since the declaration is waiting for ratification by the parliaments of its members. However, it is already clear that there will not be any military force at the disposal of the Council since each of the member states has its own military and therefore its security activities will be carried out through bilateral or collective coordination. The core of this alliance is made up of Saudi Arabia and Egypt who have been holding joint military exercises and maneuvers in the Red Sea

with the participation of representatives of some or all of the Council's members. It is important to mention that among the countries located in the Red Sea basin, three are not members of the Council, namely Ethiopia, apparently as a result of the tension between it and Egypt over the Renaissance Dam; Somaliland whose inclusion would imply recognition of its independence; and Israel.

The Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a bloc of eight countries in East Africa and the Horn of Africa, has also joined the effort to protect freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and on April 4th 2019 established a special task force of experts with the goal of formulating a joint regional plan of action with a clear timetable with the goal of protecting the security and economic interests of the region.

It is possible that in the future, these two bodies will join forces, particularly in light of the fact that some of the countries located along the African coast of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden are members of both organizations and efforts are being made to consolidate them.

Israel's' policy in the Red Sea basin

Since its independence, Israel's foremost strategic interest in the Red Sea has been to protect its freedom of navigation and to foil efforts to interfere with it. In this context, the Straits of Tiran, which serve as Israel's only maritime route of access to the Red Sea and Africa, are of particular importance. Therefore, the closing of the straits to Israeli ships by Egypt in 1956 and 1967 constituted a "casus belli" – a pretext for war. At the end of the day, the peace agreements between Israel and Egypt (1979) and between Israel and Jordan (1994) provided an anchor for Israel's freedom of navigation (at sea and also in the air) through the Suez Canal, in the Straits of Tiran and in the Gulf of Eilat.Therefore, Israel was involved in and consented to the transfer of the islands of Tiran and Sanafir from Egypt to Saudi Arabia as part of the development of the future city of Neom in northeastern Saudi Arabia, which will stretch over the territories of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the Sinai Peninsula. In the southern Red Sea, Israel has worked to reinforce freedom of navigation through diplomatic contacts with Ethiopia. Starting from May 1993, when Eritrea won its independence and Ethiopia lost its access to the sea, Israel has strengthened relations with Eritrea and used them in order to create an expanded military presence in Eritrea.[24] It has also informal relations with Djibouti and Somalia.

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24 An American company: "Israel has a military base in Eritrea," *Globes* (December 12th 2012). https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1000805648 [Hebrew]

In addition, according to foreign media reports, Israel has been involved in the war in Yemen and until January 2016, when Sudan cut off relations with Iran, Israel was also involved in the effort to halt the smuggling of arms by way of Sudan to Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Starting in January 2016, Israeli interests have been to prevent the smuggling by sea of arms from Iran to the Gaza Strip which are meant to be used against Israel.

The geopolitical developments described above provide Israel with a number of opportunities. From a security perspective, the signing of the Abraham Accords with the UAE on September 15th 2020 creates the possibility of security and military cooperation with the UAE in order to ensure freedom of navigation and to prevent smuggling of Iranian arms to the Houthis in Yemen, as well as the possibility of an increased presence in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Recall that the UAE has a presence in South Yemen, in Somaliland and in Eritrea. In July 2020, Ishmael Khaldi was appointed as Israel's ambassador in Eritrea, the first Israeli diplomatic presence in the country for many years. This appointment creates a rare opportunity for cooperation with the UAE on the military-security level and in order to create an Israeli presence in this important country. In addition, already in August 2020, there were unconfirmed reports of an Israeli presence on the island of Socotra and the construction of an Intelligence base (according to the report) on the island which is operated jointly by Israel and the UAE.

On the political level, Saudi Arabia is interested in creating a regional alliance to block Iranian expansion and Israel's important place in this coalition constitutes the basis for the warming of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia and the signing of the Abraham Accords with the UAE and Bahrain (2020). As a result, and also in view of the Sudanese understanding that the way to the US and removal from the list of countries that support terror passes through Israel, Israel and Sudan announcedon October 23rd 2020 an agreement for normalization, which would begin with the establishment of economic and trade relations, with emphasis on agriculture.[25] This followed a telephone conversation between US President Donald Trump, Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu, Sudanese President Abdallah Hamdok and Chairman of the Supreme Military Council Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. However, and even though Israel's situation in the Red Sea basin has never been better—it has relations with all of the countries in the region—without full diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and subsequently with the rest of the countries in the region which may will follow soon, it cannot participate in the Council of Arab and African

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25 "Israel and Sudan have declared a normalization agreement between the countries, mediated by the US,"*Haaretz* and *Reuters* (October 23, 2020). https://bit.ly/382iECe [Hebrew]

Countries Bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and cannot take an active part in economic cooperation in the region.

Moreover, the establishment of the EastMed Gas Forum, whose members include three countries located on the Red Sea basin, namely Jordan, Israel and Egypt, can constitute a basis for the creation of a joint gas forum for the Eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea. This is especially the case if natural gas or oil deposits are found in Egypt's economic waters in the Red Sea. In this case, Israel will be able to integrate economically also in that region.

Conclusion

Israel's strategic goals are directly and closely connected to its economic goals. Israel's main goal is to prevent a blockade of the Bab el Mandeb Strait to maritime traffic between Eilat, the Suez Canal and the Indian Ocean – to and from Asia and Africa.

In recent years, there has been a real danger to maritime navigation in the Red Sea. The Houthi rebels who are supported by Iran have planted hundreds of sea mines along the shipping routes that pass through the Red Sea. Neutralizing these mines will require a period of five to six years. Various countries have been called on to join the effort to remove the threat of sea mines in the Red Sea.

The security, political and economic developments in the Red Sea basin in recent years have transformed it into a dynamic and changing landscape, but one that is highly explosive. Therefore, Israel needs to exploit the regional opportunities that have recently emerged and to expand its integration within the region.

However, in order for Israel to integrate within this region it must first decide on its policy, based on a continuous monitoring of regional developments. These developments are occurring at a fast pace and the interests that determine the actions of the global powers, the regional powers and the states in the region are highly complex. If Israel is interested in integrating within this landscape or at least protecting its essential interests, it must have a deep understanding of the interests of all the players and of the resulting opportunities and challenges.