MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2021/22

Chief Editor: **Prof. Shaul Chorev**

Editor: **Dr. Ziv Rubinovitz**

אוניברסיטת חיפה
University of Haifa
جامعة حيفا

HMS

Maritime Policy & Strategy Research Cente
המרכז לחקר מדיניות ואסטרטגיה ימית

Maritime Security in the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea: The Role of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

Stephen Blackwell

Piracy and other interdictions of shipping remain a serious concern in the strategically vital shipping lanes in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. In response to this threat, members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have expanded and deepened their cooperation with regional littoral states in recent years. In the Horn of Africa, these countries include Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and the self-declared but internationally unrecognized state of Somaliland. Although pirate activity originating in Somali territory has abated in recent years, the danger to regional maritime security from the ongoing conflict in Yemen must also be considered.

This article first outlines the nature of the threats to maritime activity in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea from littoral states. It then examines the policies pursued by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as the two most active Arabian Gulf states in the area. The article will conclude with a discussion of how interregional cooperation between key GCC nations and regional states might help to stabilize the Arabian Peninsula's and the Horn of Africa's adjacent seas in the future.

Local Maritime Security Priorities

Protecting maritime traffic in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea is an issue of growing importance, given that shipping routed from the south to the Suez Canal must transit the Gulf of Aden and the critical chokepoint of the Bab el-Mandab Strait. The strait consists of a waterway that is only eighteen miles wide at its narrowest point between Yemen and Djibouti, with the route being further narrowed into two navigable channels separated by Perim Island. In 2018, a total of 6.2 million b/d of crude oil shipments passed through the strait according to the US Energy Administration.[1]

The security of the waters in this region is tied to the broader global and strategic importance of the Indian Ocean and east-west and north-south trading links. Within this broader regional context, the political and economic instability that has affected the states on both sides of the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea presents an ongoing threat that requires concerted international and regional countermeasures.

---

[1]   "The Bab el-Mandeb Strait Is a Strategic Route for Oil and Natural Gas Shipments", *US EIA*, August 27, 2019.

This is particularly the case with Somalia, which has lacked an effective central government since 1991. The fragmentation of local authority, absence of security governance, and persistent economic deprivation have created the circumstances whereby piracy has increasingly threatened shipping. The onset of an insurgency against the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and subsequently the Federal Government of Somalia since 2006 led to increased attacks on shipping, which in turn provoked the creation of the Combined Task Force 150 anti-piracy coalition tasked with the mission to protect commercial shipping in the Gulf of Aden.[2]

There remains concern that international shipping in the Gulf of Aden is at risk of terrorist attacks stemming from the ongoing conflicts and instability in Yemen. On 3 March 2020, it was reported that three skiffs, one of which might have been an unmanned water-borne improvised explosive device (WBIED), attempted to attack a Saudi-flagged vessel sailing ninety nautical miles off the Yemeni port of Nishtun. On May 17, in a similar incident, two skiffs fired on a British-flagged chemical tanker en route from Al Jubail to the Red Sea. Security forces on the tanker responded by destroying one of the skiffs, which was suspected to be carrying explosive substances.[3]

The location of the attack ruled out activity by Houthi rebels, though the Houthis have also previously used WBIEDs in the Bab-El-Mandeb strait to specifically target Saudi vessels. Nevertheless, there are doubts over the presence of local terrorists with the capabilities to launch attacks such as those allegedly recorded in March and May 2020. Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) is notorious for its attack on the USS Cole in 2000 and two attacks near the port of Mukalah on the Southern Yemen coast in 2016. However, AQAP was effectively neutralized and broken up by UAE- and US-led counterterrorism operations when the port of Mukalah was pacified in 2016. Whether the Gulf of Aden skiff attacks were launched by residual terrorist cells or organized by an external power remains a matter of speculation at present.

Although instances of piracy have declined markedly in recent years, potential threats remain from both opportunistic raiders and terrorist and insurgent groups. Piracy has been largely suppressed by international initiatives such as the US-led Combined Task Forces and the EU's Operation Atalanta. Nevertheless, the United

---

2   Robert M. Shelala II, "Maritime Security in the Middle East and North Africa: A Strategic Assessment", *Burke Chair in Strategy, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, February 6, 2014.

3   "A Gulf Between Narratives: Maritime Security in the Gulf of Aden in 2020", *Hellenic Shipping News*, June 26, 2020.

States Maritime Administration (MARAD) has continued to warn of the risk of pirate activity in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. In the first eight months of 2021, seven instances of attempted or suspected piracy against shipping were recorded in the international recommended transit corridor (IRTC) in the region. MARAD also warned that merchant shipping remained vulnerable to unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), limpet mine, and small boat attacks as well as military activity that might spill over from the ongoing civil conflict in Yemen.[4]

GCC Intervention

As well as protecting vital interests, increased involvement of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the region adjacent to the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea indicates a new assertiveness spurred by intensified geopolitical rivalries in the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. In addition, the growing involvement of both countries in the region is a reactive response to Iranian support for the Houthi rebels in Yemen.[5] In this context, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are seeking to balance their traditional security and military relationship with the United States with growing energy and commercial links with China. The UAE in particular is seeking to position its expanding global logistics and shipping industry as an important link within China's Belt and Road project and the increased trade volumes anticipated between East Asia, Europe, and Africa.

In recent years, the expanding influence of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Horn of Africa has been manifested through a range of political initiatives, diplomacy, aid, and investment. In its bilateral relations with regional governments, the UAE in particular has sought political and security partnerships to build on traditional commercial ties symbolized by the Dubai-based DP World's development of the Doraleh port in Djibouti after 2006. In addition, Emirati diplomats mediated in the 2018 agreement that ended a twenty-year conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Saudi and UAE aid was offered as an inducement for both sides to reach an accord.

---

4   "MSCI Advisory 2021-009-Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden, Bab al Mandeb Strait, Red Sea, and Western Indian Ocean-Threats to Commercial Vessels", *US Department of Transportation, Marine Administration (MARAD)*, September 9, 2021.

5   Shady Ahmed Mansour and Yara Yehia Ahmed, "Saudi Arabia and UAE in the Horn of Africa: Containing Security Threats from Regional Rivals", *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 12, no. 3 (2019): 99–118.

Both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have also intervened to ease tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia.[6]

However, relations between the Arabian Gulf states and the Somali government have been affected by rivalries between Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the one hand and Qatar on the other. The Somali government led by acting president Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed ("Farmaajo") has been seen as being too dependent on Qatari investment and influence, with the result that the Saudis and Emiratis have instead sought to build security and trading relations directly with local authorities in Somalia's federal states. Following a contested election in Somalia in December 2020, there is a risk that renewed tensions could lead to further fragmentation of the state.

Prospects for Increased Interstate Cooperation

Given ongoing concerns over piracy, terrorism, and maritime security, there have been a number of initiatives to address these interrelated issues through regional cooperation. In particular, there have been calls for regional mechanisms to take the lead in neutralizing the threats posed by sub-state groups in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. The challenge now is for those states concerned to facilitate the security of their adjacent seas as a key requirement for their economic development.

One important development for regional security has been the recent move to create a "Red Sea Forum" that has the potential to mediate disputes and address ongoing and emerging threats. However, a key question is the extent to which external powers should be permitted to shape a regime at the expense of the interests of the littoral states of the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. While the EU and China have suggested their support for a forum, there is skepticism over the extent to which the United States might become involved, a significant factor that indicates Washington's waning interest in acting as a security guarantor in sub-regions such as the Horn.[7]

Such a multilateral framework could offer a means of managing a range of issues including security, conflict management, trade flows, and migration. It could also provide a mechanism to enable African states to engage with Arabian Gulf actors to their mutual advantage. However, the efforts made to date suggest there are

---

[6]   International Crisis Group, "The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa", *Crisis Group Middle East Briefing*, No. 65, Abu Dhabi/Washington/Brussels, November 6, 2018.

[7]   Zach Vertin, "Toward a Red Sea Forum: The Gulf, the Horn of Africa, & Architecture for a New Regional Order", Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, No. 27, November 2019.

clear conflicts of interest between some of the potential main players in a projected regional forum. A joint Saudi Arabian-Egyptian initiative launched in 2017 led to a series of high-level meetings and ongoing engagement, though differences between the two governments also soon became apparent. By virtue of its geographic location, Egypt naturally sees itself as a pivotal regional actor through its links with both the Arab and African worlds and custodianship of the Suez Canal.

However, Egypt's move to create a regional forum reflects a defensive mindset in terms of safeguarding the country's position. Although the Sisi regime has cultivated a close relationship with and received significant funding from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Egyptian policy suggests that Cairo is jealous about protecting its regional prerogatives from its Gulf allies. To this end, Egyptian diplomats have stressed that a Red Sea Forum's members should only include those states bordering the sea itself.[8]

In a fluid strategic context, multilateral security structures could secure shipping lanes from piracy and other threats. But it is arguable that the principle of "subsidiary" should be followed as much as possible in empowering local governments, institutions, and militaries to take responsibility for the region's security.[9] Given these concerns, key GCC actors such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE must tread a fine line in terms of encouraging regional cooperation without taking an overtly interventionist approach that might negate the progress already made.

Conclusion

Given the ongoing instability and economic dislocation in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, there is a growing imperative for improved multilateral governance mechanisms to manage the full spectrum of risks that persist in the region.

The Gulf states' engagement in the Horn of Africa and its adjacent seas therefore derives from evident security, political, and economic imperatives. While a supranational "regime" could emerge given initiatives such as the Saudi-Egyptian Red Sea Forum, the precise shape of security governance in the region is still in a state of flux. Through measures to build multilateral cooperation on local maritime issues, the Arabian Gulf states could play an enhanced role in underpinning the security of the maritime routes through these strategically vital waters. The mediation with

---

8   Gerald M. Feierstein, "The Impact of Middle East Regional Competition on Security and Stability in the Horn of Africa", Policy Paper, Middle East Institute, August 2020.

9   Demessie Fantaye, "Regional Approaches to Maritime Security in the Horn of Africa", *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*, 2014.

Egypt, Ethiopia, and Eritrea has demonstrated the potential of Gulf involvement in this respect.

As a partial rapprochement between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar is now in place, there is potential for the Gulf states to adopt a more coordinated approach to a range of regional security issues, including a resolution of the Yemen conflict, maintenance of the Ethiopia-Eritrea peace, and strengthening the authority of the Somali government as essential elements in securing the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea.