Navigating through the Red Sea Crisis:

A New Dimension of Regional Security Complex in the Middle East

<u>By</u>

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Military tensions in the Red Sea have surged to an unprecedented level since October 2023. In retaliation for Israel's ongoing assault in Gaza, Houthi forces in Yemen have conducted several drone and missile attacks, targeting commercial and military ships. The United States and Britain began attacking Houthi targets inside Yemen on January 12, 2024, under the name of Operation Prosperity Guardian, a multinational military alliance designed to defend the Red Sea against Houthi attacks. This alliance was joined by the security forces of Australia, Canada, Bahrain, Denmark, New Zealand, Singapore etc. In addition to potentially having long-term effects on international trade, these hostilities have the potential to turn into a larger regional conflict. As noted scholar Barry Buzan has observed, states' motivations and actions in the realm of international security have a strong regional component. Accordingly, a state's primary neighborhood is the source of its security worries. Interactions exist between a state's security and that of other states in a region. Threats that are region to an actor are likely to be felt the strongest.³ The same can be observed in the Red Sea Crisis and how the assaults in Gaza is actually fueling wider regional tension in the Middle East.

As Washington has acknowledged for decades, the establishment of a military coalition led by the United States in response to the Houthi attacks may indicate greater U.S. ambitions in gaining control of the Red Sea.⁴ The politics within Yemen must also be taken into consideration while analyzing the current tension in the Red Sea, in addition to their effects on the region and the rest of the globe. The foundation for the Houthis' present military prowess was established during their takeover of the Red Sea port of Hudaydah during Yemen's civil war. Considering

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³ Buzan, Barry; Wæver, Ole (2003). Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Society. Cambridge, United Kingdom: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge. pp. 6–20.

⁴ Jon B.Alterman, "What the Red Sea Crisis Reveals About China's Middle East Strategy," *FP*, February 14, 2024. https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/14/red-sea-crisis-china-middle-east-strategy-egypt-yemen/

recent negotiations to formally terminate the conflict with Saudi Arabia, present strikes by Houthis may be part of a plan to further solidify their political control in Yemen. Brigade-General Yahya Saree, the spokesperson for the Yemani Armed Forces, said that they were responding to the calls of the free people of Arab and Islamic countries as well as the people of Yemen to completely support the decisions made by the Palestinian people and their unwavering resistance against Israeli occupation. Until Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip ends, Saree declared, the Yemeni Armed Forces will keep barring Israeli ships from sailing the Red Sea.⁵

Red Sea in the Middle Eastern Geopolitics

The Red Sea, a crucial strategic waterway, is now the scene of continuous conflicts in the region. Its importance stretches across the military, economic, and security spheres, which makes it one of the world's most important international marine navigation routes. This implies that there is a risk to global peace and security since any disagreement can spark conflict. According to some economists, persistent attacks in the area might be a factor in the decline of international commerce.⁶ Long-term operating uncertainty for shipping businesses might result from the cumulative effects, even if the immediate effects would not be noticeable.

While there have sometimes been episodes of piracy stemming from the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea maritime axis—which spans from the Bab al-Mandab strait to the Suez Canal, two strategically important chokepoints for global trade—has historically been characterized by maritime safety. This region has become a hotbed of strife due to the ongoing war in Yemen. From 2015 until the present, the Red Sea and its gateways have been the scene of over 250 documented instances of political violence. But only because of the current Houthi escalation significant shipping route impediments develop. The Red Sea is the transit route for around 12%

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⁵ Tanupriya Singh, "Yemen's armed forces resume attacks against Israel, affirm solidarity with Palestine", Peoples Dispatch, December 4, 2023.

https://peoplesdispatch.org/2023/12/04/yemens-armed-forces-resume-attacks-against-israel-affirm-solidarity-with-palestine/

⁶Jon B.Alterman, "What the Red Sea Crisis Reveals About China's Middle East Strategy," *FP*, February 14, 2024. https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/14/red-sea-crisis-china-middle-east-strategy-egypt-yemen/

of the world's oil and 30% of container traffic.⁷ Companies redirected the majority of the vessels that typically travel this route across Southern Africa due to the threat of Houthi strikes. Extended travel times increased freight costs and decreased the capacity of international shipping, which harmed the regional and global economy.

Western Escalation in the Red Sea

In an attempt to seize control of one of the most significant waterways in the world, the United States has militarized the Red Sea through its reaction to the Houthi strikes. Political analysts and foreign experts fear that if the Houthi attacks continue, the situation will turn into a regional war. Some think we could be in for an economic confrontation between the West and China, which is the world's largest economy together with its allies Russia.⁸

The Houthi commanders said right once that all foreign trade ships would be able to navigate the Red Sea safely, except those that were headed toward occupied Palestine. They justified their assault on Israeli ships by citing their humanitarian obligations to the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip, who had been subjected to ceaseless violence for more than a century. They started conducting active offensives against Israel, initiating drone and missile attacks on the Israeli port of Eilat, going beyond simply attacking ships. The attacks have also highlighted concerns over the Houthi movement's internal policies. Political charges have been made against the Houthis both domestically and internationally, claiming that attacking ships is a means of deflecting attention from their obligations to the Yemeni people. Put another way, they appear to place more importance on the symbolic support of the Arab and Islamic world than on striving for a sense of sustainable peace in Yemen, securing the reimbursement of public employee wages, and building a national administration. However, demonstration by millions in Yemen supporting Palestinians, specifically in Gaza, as well as supporting Houthis attacks against Israeli aggression is a clear

⁷Jocelyn Fernandes, "The Red Sea's importance and its economic impact," *Mint*, December 20, 2023. https://www.livemint.com/economy/mint-explainer-the-red-seas-importance-and-its-economic-impact-117030 62868545.html

⁸ Richard Partington,"What is the Red Sea crisis, and what does it mean for global trade?" *The Guardian*, January 3, 2024.

https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/03/what-is-the-red-sea-crisis-and-what-does-it-mean-for-global-trade ⁹"What are the impacts of the Red Sea shipping crisis?" *JP Morgan*, February 8, 2024 https://www.jpmorgan.com/insights/global-research/supply-chain/red-sea-shipping

indication that the internal issue has not superseded the Houthis operations. It also shows that Yemenis are establishing their strategic role in the region.

As mentioned, Washington declared in December 2023 that it was forming a multinational alliance to defend the Red Sea's security by thwarting Houthi attacks. Despite this stated purpose, some specialists think there are unstated goals. Since the conflict in October 1973, the United States has acknowledged the Red Sea's strategic importance. Therefore, the recent Houthi attacks may be used as a justification by the US to establish military might in the Red Sea, gain control of the Bab al-Mandab Strait, and send a sizable contingent of US Marines to the area. By constructing an imaginary enemy, as it did in Afghanistan and Iraq, this strategic approach might protect Israel's security interests while extending the reach of the United States. Given the eleven military sites that numerous contending nations have in the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea would undoubtedly become the center of gravity for international conflict in this setting. In the Red Sea, which Washington views as a strategic priority, hostilities could easily turn into an international conflict and result in the imposition of additional restrictions on international shipping.¹⁰

Geostrategic Vulnerability Choke Points

The Bab el-Mandab Strait, which separates Yemen and Djibouti, is crucial to the Red Sea's strategic importance for world trade. Nearly 12% of global traffic in goods passes through it, making it one of the busiest cargo and oil transit hubs in the world. Choke points are constricted areas along critical trade routes, typically canals or straits. Supply networks are becoming more and more vulnerable as a component of economic statecraft due to their geopolitical weaponization. As demonstrated by the Houthis, significant military might is not necessary to obstruct international trade at one of these choke points. Eliminating the main choke points may have dire ramifications for the entire world. Because choke spots influence transportation to and from many different nations, they have the potential to have considerably bigger consequences globally. Operation Prosperity Guardian was the fitting name for the first military operation in

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¹⁰ Richard Partington,"What is the Red Sea crisis, and what does it mean for global trade?" *The Guardian*, January 3, 2024.

https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/03/what-is-the-red-sea-crisis-and-what-does-it-mean-for-global-trade

the Red Sea. Major exporters including Germany, South Korea, Denmark, Australia, and Canada are among the nations that were included in the White House statement addressing the strikes on Yemen. This demonstrates the significant consequences this disruption is having on the entire world.¹¹ The military's response to the Houthi strikes, which persisted despite warnings, is a statement that unrestricted maritime travel will be safeguarded at great expense. They may also be seen as an indication that nations are prepared to defend further choke spots.

Power Dynamics within Yemen

Disputes with the West have been aroused by Houthi strikes in the Red Sea, which are a result of the almost ten-year struggle between the Iran-backed militia and Saudi-led government troops in Yemen. As the Hothis intensify their attacks on cargo vessels in reaction to Israel's assault on Gaza, leading shipping firms have chosen to postpone their trips in the Red Sea. Yemen is still divided into three spheres of influence: the Houthis, who are backed by Iran, the government legitimized by Saudi Arabia, and the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which is backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Since the Saudi-led Arab coalition's military involvement in March 2015 in response to the Houthi's capture of Yemen's capital, Sanaa, the country has been engulfed in violence. In the ten years that have passed, the Yemeni government has not succeeded in taking control of the entire nation, even with the backing of the coalition troops commanded by Saudi Arabia. Yemen, a battleground for years between rival groups, is now broken and in ruins as a result of a continuing civil war.¹²

Despite the UN mediating a six-month cease-fire between April 2, 2022, and October 2, 2022, hostilities returned between the Houthis and the Yemeni government when the cease-fire expired. The vital maritime port of Al Hudaydah and the gas and oil-rich Marib region of Yemen are among the hotspots for war. Attempts by coalition forces to retake Al Hudaydah, which has been ruled by the Houthis for more than nine years, have failed. The Houthis still dominate the city

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¹¹ Sarah Schiffling, Matthew Tickle, "Red Sea crisis: Suez Canal is not the only 'choke point' that threatens to disrupt global supply chains", 17 January 2024.

 $[\]frac{https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/economy/red-sea-crisis-suez-canal-is-not-the-only-choke-point-that-threatens-to-disrupt-global-supply-chains-93932$

¹² Kali Robinson, "Yemen's Tragedy: War, Stalemate, and Suffering," *Council on Foreign Relation*, May 1, 2023. https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/yemen-crisis

and vital ports, although government troops continue to rule over other districts and territories related to Al Hudaydah.¹³

Except for some sporadic Houthi strikes in Marib's rural districts, where they have occasionally gained ground, they have not achieved much headway in key strategic locations. There are certain cities in the nation with varying degrees of influence. Some provinces are under government control, while Houthi hold the remaining areas. The vast majority of the abundantly gas and oil-rich Marib province is under government hands. The government also controls Marib's provincial center, which has grown to be one of the most populous cities in the nation in recent years. Government reports state that Marib is home to more than two million internally displaced individuals or around half of the 4.5 million displaced people in the nation. The previous two years have seen a decline in Houthi attacks, despite their attempts to seize Marib, the government's bastion, and the location of the Defense Ministry's major offices, most notably in February 2021. 60% of the population lives in the city of Taiz, which is mostly controlled by the government. The Houthis, however, have the advantage of dominating the area east of Taizz, which is home to private-sector enterprises and generates 70% of the city's overall income.¹⁴ Severe hostilities between government troops backed by the Saudi-led alliance and Houthis, who are backed by Iran, have been going on in Yemen for almost ten years. Famine and starvation are rampant as poverty rises. Yemen, one of the poorest nations on earth, is facing an increasingly dire humanitarian situation as a result of the protracted civil conflict. Given the fact that the Yemenis were almost forgotten oppressed nations for almost a decade, they have strong sympathy for Palestinians in Gaza. Their determination to support Palestinians is unequivocal.

A New Dimension of Regional Security Complex in the Middle East

It is now clear that Houthi strikes in the waters of the Red Sea have given the Gaza conflict a new dimension and put global trade in jeopardy along one of the most significant shipping channels in the world. The coordinated assaults on commercial boats undoubtedly have an

"How escalating fighting in the Red sea could impact the conflict in Yemen," *NPR*, published January 15, 2024. https://www.npr.org/2024/01/15/1224762728/how-escalating-fighting-in-the-red-sea-could-impact-the-conflict-in-vemen

¹⁴ "Yemen and the Red Sea: rising Tensions Threaten Peace Process and International Security," *ACLED*, published January 17, 2024. https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2024/yemen/

ideological component since they help the Houthis redefine their role as a major regional ally of the Palestinian resistance against Israeli rule. However, the Houthis' political goal to hold onto and grow their influence within Yemen is also included in the broader agenda.¹⁵

Hudaydah, a vital port in the Red Sea under Houthi control and a major entrance route for humanitarian goods, was besieged by coalition forces commanded by Saudi Arabia in June 2018. The Stockholm Agreement, mediated by the UN, resulted in a truce in Hudaydah at year's end. However, the accord failed to push the Houthi forces to evacuate the city, and throughout the next years, Houthi breaches of the truce persisted. International interest in the Yemeni crisis had decreased as it appeared to be at a standstill by the close of 2022, with the UN struggling to maintain a provisional nationwide truce. The start of the conflict in Ukraine only served to heighten this, drawing attention to the worldwide energy contention on a regional and even international scale.

Nonetheless, the Houthis have strengthened socio-political administration in the regions they control by taking benefit of these geopolitical factors. Before the most recent strikes on international targets, the Houthis had primarily controlled the north of Yemen, including Sana'a. However, it appears that they have reached the limit of their territorial expansion, as they have not been able to seize control of Marib and its lucrative oilfields, while the southern region is still governed by the Southern Transitional Council (STC), an autonomous political and military organization supported by the United Arab Emirates. Put differently, they now have fewer targets within Yemen, which gives them more freedom to change course and demonstrate their military prowess internationally. Another important piece of background information to comprehend the Red Sea assault is the ongoing backchannel talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis. The Houthis seek foreign assistance to prevent an economic catastrophe, the cessation of Saudi Arabia's military engagement in Yemen, and a reduction in the danger of assaults

¹⁵ "Fed up with war: Yemenis fear new conflict after Houthi Red sea," *ALJAZEERA*, December 20, 2023. attacks" https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/12/20/fed-up-with-war-yemenis-fear-new-conflict-after-houthi-red-sea-attacks

Burak Sakir Seker, "Red Sea crisis: expert unpacks Houthi attacks and other security threats," *The Conversation*,
 January
 2024.https://theconversation.com/red-sea-crisis-expert-unpacks-houthi-attacks-and-other-security-threats-220951

headed by the STC as part of any prospective agreement with Riyadh.¹⁷ They could think that by targeting cargo ships and putting Saudi Arabia and the Western-led global economy in grave danger, they will have more negotiating power to protect their interests. However, to prevent inciting outright Houthi attacks on its territory, Riyadh has remained neutral thus far.

Yemenis have been pleading with the international world, especially the UN, to review its policy regarding their country, which has been devastated by war. Even with the UN's intervention, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran dominated the so-called proxy conflict in Yemen, undermining the influence of other possible intervening nations. Many believed that this unsolved conflict would stay inside Yemen and remain isolated after over ten years, but that belief has now been completely dashed. Now that the world is once again paying attention to Yemen, provides a fresh opportunity to establish long-term peace.

The progress achieved in 2023 toward peace in Yemen is overshadowed by the Houthis' assaults on cargo boats in the Red Sea and the reactions that followed. A peace deal appeared to be in the works following months of bilateral negotiations between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia to put an end to the years-old protracted conflict. On December 23, 2023, the internationally recognized Yemeni government and the Houthi movement pledged to "implement a nationwide ceasefire," according to a statement made by UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg. The UN roadmap called for the payment of public sector wages, the opening of highways in Taizz and other provinces, the restart of oil exports, and the removal of limitations on air and sea ports, among other things.¹⁸

Sustainable Peace and Evolving Security Predicament

Even if an initiative under UN auspices is soon to be announced, the internal situation in Yemen is still critical. However, a regional crisis intensification in the Red Sea might undermine current

¹⁷ Samia Nakhoul, "Yemen's Houthis say they do not seek to expand Red Sea attacks," *REUTERS*, January 19, 2024. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/yemens-houthis-say-they-do-not-seek-expand-red-sea-attacks-2024-01-1

¹⁸ "Who are the Houthis and why are they attacking Red Sea ships?" *BBC*,February 5, 2024. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67614911

peace initiatives and spark a renewed confrontation. Domestic, regional, and international players find themselves in a variety of situations as a result of this complex circumstance.

It's conceivable that the Houthis will profit from strikes in the Red Sea. They were confronted with turmoil and protests in September 2023 from public sector workers who were seeking payment of their salaries. Conveniently distorting public opinion, the Israel-Gaza war improved the group's standing both domestically and regionally. It gave them influence over Riyadh as well. It might be argued that the Houthis would continue to assault the Red Sea while attempting to negotiate a peace agreement with Saudi Arabia until a truce permits humanitarian relief to reach Palestine. In general, they may attempt to strike a balance between "controlled deterrence" and targeted actions in response to direct US assaults to prevent more international retribution. Additionally, the Houthis can use their commanding presence in internal military matters as a negotiation chip. Although escalation of the conflict in Yemen seems unlikely while discussions are continuing, if talks break down, frontline action may quickly resume. Under such circumstances, the Houthis may take control of Shabwa or the oil-rich Marib governorate.

A regional split between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, who are both fighting for power in the Red Sea, is reflected in the tensions inside the PLC between supporters of the separatist Southern Transitional Council and loyalists to the government. The old oil-driven economy is becoming more and more dependent on exports from the western Yanbu plant, while Riyadh's Vision 2030 roadmap calls for tourism developments along the Red Sea coast and a growth of exports through the Jeddah port. Abu Dhabi's "string of ports" plan calls for direct military control of a few strategically significant islands, such as Perim and Socotra, along with indirect oversight of the marine infrastructure in southwest Yemen through local proxies.²⁰

Way Forward and Recommendation

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¹⁹ Mohammed Ali Thamer, Betul Dogan Akkas, "Red Sea Hostilities: Local, Regional, and International Implications," *Carnegie Endowment International Peace*, January 30,2024 https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/91500

Mehmet Nuri Ucar, "Yemen's power dynamics heighten Red sea tensions," *AA*, January 17, 2024. https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/yemens-power-dynamics-heighten-red-sea-tensions/3111423

It will be evident how the Red Sea situation affects trade volumes since it has grown to be a serious danger to international trade. Across industries and geographical areas, its effects are becoming more noticeable. An increasing number of low-margin items will become unviable for export from their existing locations due to growing transportation and insurance costs as well as delayed shipments. These factors are going to keep interrupting global value chains. Other than that, the most disruptive countries will be in Asia, Africa, and Europe.

With no end in sight to the attacks, which are becoming worse every day, the Red Sea fiasco will have a significant negative influence on geoeconomics. The issue highlights the pressing necessity for extensive international cooperation. It could be important to investigate alternate land- and sea-based trade routes, including the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). Through enhanced energy infrastructure, communication networks, and transportation, the IMEC project seeks to establish a vast economic corridor linking Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. It is divided into two primary corridors: the Northern Corridor, which connects the Gulf to Europe, and the East Corridor, which connects India to the Arabian Gulf. These corridors include rail, road, and maritime lines.

So far the coalition of the United States and the United Kingdom have not been successful and there is no perspective of Houthis to give up unless the War on Gaza is stopped. Since the conflict in the Red Sea is directly linked to the human tragedy in Gaza, the Houthis have repeatedly announced that they will stop the attack as soon as the carnage in Gaza is stopped, then the key to resolving the conflict in the Red Sea is in Gaza. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the mobilization of all efforts by the international community to realize an immediate permanent ceasefire in Gaza, otherwise, the conflict may be extrapolated to other regions.

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