

# Impact of the War on Gaza on Regional and International Security in the Southern Red Sea

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## Summary

This study examines the impact of the Israeli escalation in Gaza on regional and international security and navigation in the southern Red Sea, especially in the strategic Bab al-Mandab Strait. This region had witnessed mutual escalation in the past two years. Experts and observers viewed those skirmishes as 'shadow war' or 'ship war' between Israel and its allies on the one hand and Iran and its local proxies on the other. The Houthis—Shiite militants who control several governorates in northern Yemen, including the capital, Sana'a, since 2014—have carried out several naval operations that targeted traffic in this strategic corridor.

The study takes into account a number of historical and geographical facts concerning the interconnectedness of the northern Red Sea entrance in the Suez Canal and the southern entrance of Bab al-Mandab Strait. These facts were remarkably strengthened over the past two centuries. At present, many indicators confirm such interconnectedness between the south and the north of the Red Sea, given the conflicts between colonial European powers in the past and then between the parties to the conflicts and wars that have erupted in the past seventy years, particularly Israeli wars against the Arab countries, especially in the Tripartite Aggression against Egypt in 1956, and the 1967 and 1973 wars.

## Northern and Southern Red Sea: Strategic Importance and Reciprocal Impacts

The Red Sea is strategically important because of its distinctive geographical location between Asia and Africa on the one hand, and because it is connected to Europe through the Mediterranean, and with the Indian and Pacific Oceans through the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea in the south. Its strategic importance increased after the opening of the Suez Canal, north of the Red Sea, in 1869. The major colonial powers at the time (Britain, France and Italy) sought to have a solid presence in the Red Sea and in its southern entrance of Bab al-Mandab Strait. About 40 years after opening the Suez Canal, the three countries concluded an agreement determining their interests in the Red Sea. Britain used Aden which it had occupied since 1839 to expand its influence in the region, especially after its occupation of Egypt in 1882, while France took control of parts of the African coast after seizing Djibouti.

The conflicts between colonial European powers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries showed the importance of the Red Sea and the connectedness of its northern and southern entrances.

Similarly, since the declaration of the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the Arab-Israeli conflict has emphasized the importance of the Red Sea regionally and globally and the vital interdependence of its north and south. Since then, competition between Israel and the Arab states overlooking the Red Sea to control this waterway began. In March 1949, the Israeli forces occupied Um Al-Rashrash village and built the Port of Eilat on its site, gaining thereby a foothold on the Gulf of Aqaba. In response to that move, in a mutual effort in 1950, Egypt and Saudi Arabia attempted to subjugate the islands of Tiran and Sanafir—located on the Strait of Tiran at the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba—to Egypt's military control. In the early 1950s, Egypt took a series of measures with the aim of blocking transit of Israeli shipping through the Gulf of Aqaba. This step led to severing Israel's ties with Asian and African markets.<sup>1</sup> From then on, attention began to turn to the southern Red Sea region, where Egypt, led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, supported the September 1962 revolution and sent troops to Yemen. This allowed the Egyptian navy to reach the coast of Yemen's coasts on the Red Sea. Interest in the Red Sea increased during Arab League meetings. Both Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) voiced their concerns about Israeli activities in the Red Sea. The Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had obtained intelligence reports on Israeli activities in the Red Sea.<sup>2</sup> In the June 1967 war, one of the reasons of Israeli superiority was that its ally, Britain, took control of Bab al-Mandab Strait and kept its forces near the strategic bottleneck. In the same vein, one of the reasons for the Arab superiority in the next war (October 1973 war) was that the Yemeni and Egyptian governments closed Bab al-Mandab Strait to Israeli shipping.<sup>3</sup>

## Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and the Allied Lines

One day after the 50th anniversary of the October War—which Israel calls Yom Kippur, (the Day of Forgiveness), a new war erupted between Israel and the Palestinian resistance. In the morning of October 07, 2023, the Palestinian resistance launched a surprise attack (Operation Al-Aqsa Flood) on Israel. Several attacks targeted Israeli military and security posts. Hundreds of Israeli soldiers and officers were either killed or taken prisoner in the attack. Immediately, Tel Aviv declared a comprehensive war on the Gaza Strip in what it called Operation Iron Swords.

A few days after the outbreak of the war, the leader of the Houthi group, Abdul Malik Al-Houthi, threatened to target Israel in missile and drone attacks. Soon after that threat, the group claimed responsibility for launch a number of missiles against Israeli targets. Although the attacks did not achieve their goals, there are those who raise questions about their seriousness and ability to cause damage in the Israeli army or important Israeli facilities and targets.

The Israeli government dealt with the Houthi escalation as a secondary threat, postponing its response to it because it currently focuses on the Gaza Strip, and to a lesser extent on southern Lebanon. Although it continues to target Iranian and Syrian sites and targets inside Syria, which confirms that the Houthi front "will not have the same impact as the northern front (Hezbollah), not only because of the diversity of the Israeli and American deterrence mechanisms, but because there is an American desire to focus on fighting Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and to avoid opening other fronts that would dissipate efforts to resolve the war in Gaza for the benefit of Israel."<sup>4</sup> This has not been achieved yet—nearly 50 days after the outbreak of the war that Tel Aviv claimed it aimed to eradicate Hamas.

However, it is important to note that the Israelis see the Iranian presence in the southern part of the Red Sea, through the Houthi group, a direct threat to them, given that Iran has provided the group with missiles and drones that could reach Israel. The Houthis can also target Israeli ships in the Red Sea, either by seizing or by attacking them through planting marine mines, as they did in February 2021 with the Israeli ship, MV Helius Ray. The shadow war with Iran—which included a series of assassinations that targeted Iranian nuclear scientists, and mysterious bombings in Iranian nuclear facilities—has expanded to the sea, which occupies great importance, especially as Israel relies on maritime shipping in most of its commercial exchanges.

## US Strategy Towards Escalation: Countering the South and Besieging the North

Since the outbreak of the Israeli onslaught on Gaza, statements by the American administration have unfailingly confirmed its support for Israel against Palestinian resistance, especially Hamas, while confirming that it will do its best to prevent the war on the Gaza Strip from expanding outside Palestine.

By expansion it means the possibility of an external intervention, by Iran or Turkey, to support the Palestinian resistance or target Israel and the powers supporting it, including the United States itself, which has military bases in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, and in Iraq and Syria as well.

While Washington stated that its strategy was to keep the war within the borders of the Gaza Strip, Tehran also mostly seemed to be committed to this strategy, except for intermittent skirmishes in northern Israel and southern Lebanon, by Iran's proxy there (Hezbollah). Separate attacks by other proxies in Iraq and Syria also target American bases, but without causing any significant damages.

The United States threatened retaliation in the case any parties intervened in the war against Israel. The Pentagon's spokesman, Patrick Rider, explained that Washington was still working to identify those responsible for the recent attacks that targeted American troops in Syria and Iraq, noting that according to the information available to his country, Iran did not appear to be directly involved in the recent Hamas attacks.

Despite the announcements of both the Israeli army and Hezbollah of the military operations carried out by each party against the other, those operations are by no means on a par with the massive onslaught in Gaza. American analysts believe that the responses carried out by the proxies of Tehran against Israel and the United States confirm Tehran's commitment to the red lines set by Washington, especially in the first regional theater in southern Lebanon and the third in Iraq and Syria.

However, some American experts turned towards the second regional theater, which also witnessed a similar escalation, reflecting Iranian moves, though indirectly. This second theater is Yemen, specifically the areas controlled by Iran's proxy, the Houthi group, which threatened a few days after the outbreak of the Gaza war to launch missile and drone attacks on Israeli targets.

Although the attacks claimed by the Houthis consisted of missiles or drones that fell or were intercepted in areas far from the intended targets, the escalation of the Houthi threat on November 19, through seizing a commercial ship, under the pretext that it is an Israeli ship, raises many questions on the fate of these actions in light of the escalation of the Israeli war on Gaza, given the strategic importance of Bab al-Mandab Strait,

especially as the Houthis have demonstrated the ability of their Iranian supporters to harm traffic and international trade in the most vital strait for the World Trade transit.

With regard to the southern Red Sea, the United States and its international and regional allies have, for more than two years, been leading military and security efforts to counter possible threats, whether from Iran and its proxies or from China and Russia. In January 2020, in Riyadh, the formation of the Council of Arab and African States Overlooking the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden was announced. The council consists of 8 Arab and African countries: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Yemen, Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti. According to the founding statement, the council "is a realization of the importance of coordination and consultation on the waterway, as the Red Sea is the main passage for East Asian and European countries."<sup>5</sup> It affirmed that the council will seek to "preserve common interests, confront all risks, and cooperate in benefiting from available opportunities."<sup>6</sup>

Establishing the council came a few days after the escalating tension in the region in light of the mutual threats by Washington and Tehran, which vowed to revenge the killing of the Quds Corps commander, Qassem Soleimani, in an American airstrike in Iraq. Then, there was Iran's participation in triple naval maneuvers with Russia and China in the Gulf of Oman and the Pacific. This likely prompted the founders of the new council to take Iranian threats seriously, especially in light of the moves of Iran and its Houthi allies in the Red Sea, near Bab al-Mandab Strait.<sup>7</sup>

In April 2022, the US Navy announced the formation of the Combined Task Force CTF 153, the mission of which is to patrol the Red Sea and combat "terrorist activities and smuggling." According to the commander of the Fifth Fleet, Admiral Brad Cooper, the force will "enhance cooperation with regional maritime partners to achieve security in the Red Sea, parts of the Indian Ocean, Bab al-Mandab strait and the Gulf of Aden."<sup>8</sup> The timing of this declaration is not unlinked to the rapid developments in Yemen and the Red Sea, as it came a short time after the Houthis hijacked a UAE-flagged cargo ship carrying Saudi medical supplies. This confirms the existence of an Iranian threat to the same corridor and the international navigation traffic. It is worth noting that it is the fourth division of the Combined Military Force (CMF), which also includes CTF 150, CTF 151, CTF 152.



The mission of this force is to ensure maritime security and build the capabilities of states, in direct cooperation with the CTF 151, whose water crafts are deployed in the Gulf of Aden, and off the coasts of Somalia.<sup>9</sup> In December 2022, Egypt assumed the command of CTF operations. This is the first time it assumes the command since it joined the maritime partnership, which consists of 34 countries in April 2021.<sup>10</sup>

The goals of the US naval force can be summarized in the following: ensuring the security of international navigation corridors within an integrated framework of combined international task force in the region, countering maritime threats related to the activity of terrorist organizations, crime groups and piracy, achieving wider naval control in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, and creating a larger margin of movement for American forces from the region to Southeast Asia, and preparing for any geopolitical transformations in the region, especially in view of the recent Chinese-brokered Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, which raised US concerns in light of the current conflict with China and the prolonged Russian-Ukraine war.<sup>11</sup>

About a month after the outbreak of the war in Gaza, analysts and observers began to predict a possible expansion of this war, south towards Bab al-Mandab Strait, at the southern entrance to the Red Sea, north in the Suez Canal, and east in the Strait of Hormuz on the Persian Gulf.<sup>12</sup> According to these analysts, the current war is not Israel's war, but rather the war of the United States, which "seeks to control the most important corridors of international navigation as part of the war on China and the Silk Project," according to Yemeni political researcher and Chairman of Abaad Studies and Research Center, Abdel Salam Muhammad.

## Indicators of Houthi Escalation in Southern Red Sea

After Israel launched its offensive on the Gaza Strip, the Houthis threatened to target Israel by drones and missiles, and to target Israeli ships or vessels owned by Israeli companies. Below is a list of the most important indicators of Houthi attacks on Israeli targets since the beginning of the war:

- On October 20, a US Navy ship in the Red Sea shot down missiles and drones launched by the Houthis at Israel, according to a statement issued by the Pentagon.

- On October 31, the Houthi group announced, for the first time, targeting Israel with a number of drones and missiles. For its part, the Israeli occupation army announced on the same day using the Arrow-Hetz anti-ballistic missile system to intercept a surface-to-surface missile fired from the Red Sea area at Israel. The statement added, that the air defense systems monitored the missile, which was successfully intercepted at the optimal and appropriate operational point. The Israeli occupation army added that this was the first time since the beginning of the war in which an operational interception was implemented using the Hetz long-range defense system.
- On November 8, US Defense Department officials confirmed that the Houthis shot down a US M-Q-9 drone off the coast of Yemen.
- On November 9, the Israeli army used its Arrow 3 anti-missile system for the first time to intercept an explosive fired from the Red Sea region, while the Houthis said they fired ballistic missiles at Israel.
- On November 14, the Houthi group announced firing a batch of ballistic missiles against targets inside Israel. The Houthi military spokesman, Brigadier Yahya Sari', said in a statement that their armed forces fired a new batch of ballistic missiles at various targets in the occupied Palestinian territories. Earlier that day, the Israeli army announced the interception of a surface-to-ground missile that was apparently fired from Yemen at the city of Eilat on the Red Sea coast, according to the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation.
- On November 19, the Houthis announced seizing an Israeli cargo ship in the Red Sea and transferring it to the port of Salif in Hodeidah (western Yemen). Tel Aviv denied that the ship was Israeli, describing the incident as "very dangerous and has global consequences." Earlier, the Houthis stated that they would target all types of Israeli-flagged ships, and those that are operated by or owned by Israeli companies.
- On November 20, the Japanese government said that Galaxy Leader was attacked. The representative of the Japanese government, Chief Cabinet Secretary, Hirokazu Matsuno, confirmed the seizure of Galaxy Leader, run by Nippon Yusen, and strongly condemned the attack, calling on the Saudi, Omani and Iranian authorities to quickly release the ship and its crew. <sup>13</sup>

- On November 23, a Houthi spokesman announced firing a winged missile at military sites in Eilat, while the Israeli occupation army said that it had intercepted a Cruise missile that was fired at the city. Earlier, warning sirens sounded in Eilat, following a suspected drone infiltration.

## Maritime Security in the Israeli Strategy

It is noteworthy that the Israeli strategic maritime interest derives from the early ideas of the Zionist sea culture that began to crystallize in the early years after the First World War. These ideas were proposed by the Water Commission that was established in Jaffa, and functioned between 1919 and 1921. They were first put forth by Meir Gurvitz, who was very active in spreading and enhancing his maritime vision. The Gurvitz Commission was the first body to try to present a comprehensive Zionist plan of marine professions, with the aim of consolidating an independent Zionist maritime culture. With the growth of the numbers of Jews before the occupation of the Palestinian territories, a new perspective was formed so that the Zionist project of occupation would extend from east to west towards the sea.<sup>14</sup>

Since 1950, Ben Gurion took into account the Israeli need of controlling the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. In a lecture he gave before the graduates of the first regiment of Israeli navy officers in 1950, he used a historical study in which he indicated that the Jews never controlled the beaches of these seas since "Moses' exit from Egypt," according to Jewish legend, through the era of King Solomon, and even the Hashmonean Dynasty. He affirmed that the first political authority on these two seas and on the lines of maritime navigation in them in Jewish history was the current authority of Israel. He saw this as a realization of God's promise to Moses by saying: "Let your kingdom extend from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines." He concluded that "the truth of Jewish settlement on the shores of these two seas in the modern era is a significant milestone, and is economically, politically and strategically important. The sea is not an unpopulated desert of water, but a full treasure."<sup>15</sup>

In 2015, the Israeli Chief of Staff, Gadi Eisenkot, published a document entitled "The Israeli Military Strategy," which included the security doctrine of Israel, the security environment surrounding it, and the threats it faces and how to deal with them.

The document was considered by Israeli military analysts "a milestone in the history of the national security of the State of Israel." This strategy referred to the maritime superiority factor, in addition to other superiority factors, such as land maneuvering, air superiority and promoting cyber security, as basic requirements, to increase the effectiveness of military operations.<sup>16</sup>

In April 2017, the Haifa Research Center for Maritime Policy and Strategy published a study by General Oud Gorravi, on Israel's holistic maritime strategy, in which he dealt with maritime strategies of a number of states around the world, highlighting common points in them. He concluded that Israel needed a general maritime strategy, suitable for its position and the sensitive geo-strategic and security conditions in the Middle East. He affirms that "the location of Israel between the seas and the continents endowed it with a special function among nations." Although the location has not changed, from his point of view, the geo-strategic milieu has changed a lot over time, which requires Israel to enhance its national security and economy. Therefore, the author believes that the appropriate model for Israel is the "engagement strategy" model. At other times, it may have to adopt a defensive strategy as well, in the sense of creating a reality that it does not allow to change.<sup>17</sup>

The strategic importance of marine areas for the national security of Israel has increased. According to the Israeli maritime strategic evaluation report 2016, issued by the Haifa Research Center for Maritime Policy and Strategy, there were a number of considerations and determinants that governed the importance of those areas for Tel Aviv, the first of which is the maritime component which is part of the general threat to Israel.<sup>18</sup> Imports and exports to and from Asia account for about a quarter of the total volume of foreign trade in Israel. Most of the Israeli ships that play a role in this trade pass through the Red Sea corridors, which makes securing this region an issue of national security for Israel. Therefore, the Jewish state began to pressure its international allies to protect the Bab al-Mandab strait. It resorted to improving its regional relations, which ended in signing the Abraham Accords with the UAE and Bahrain in 2020. Later, Israel participated in naval maneuvers in the Red Sea, along with the US, Emirati and Bahraini navies. Israel began to establish close relations with the UAE, especially after the latter gained a foothold on the coasts of several countries, including Djibouti, Eritrea and Somalia, in addition to the islands of Perim (Mayyun) and Socotra in Yemen. Experts and analysts rule out that Israeli concerns about the threats from Yemen will end with a final settlement that puts an end to the Yemeni war.<sup>19</sup>

Given these threats and Israeli concerns about them, Israel has developed its maritime military policy to counter the threats according to a number of pillars of movement, which included operational coordination with the US Central Command and securing the necessary support, especially since maritime threats go beyond Israel's independent naval capabilities. Therefore, Tel Aviv decided to intensify its cooperation with the American Fifth Fleet and Central Command. It also moved towards strengthening its relations with the American military in January 2021. So, the American administration decided to move Israel from the European Command (EUCOM) to the US Central Command (CENTCOM). Geographically speaking, this shift will make Israeli interests in the Middle East and its marine areas more linked to the American military strategy.<sup>20</sup> This will be an escalation factor, especially as Washington emphasizes its unlimited support for Israel.

## Conclusion

Local and regional political and military developments in the areas surrounding the Red Sea have cast shadows on its southern entrance in Bab al-Mandab Strait. Escalation began in the past two years, and was linked to the current war in Yemen, but escalation indicators have increased in frequency in the past weeks due to the Israeli war on Gaza that was launched on October 07.

There are increasing concerns that escalation will include the Bab al-Mandab Strait area, the most important international strategic corridor, especially since there are major world powers that have begun competing for influence in this strategic area in recent years, particularly the United States of America, the most prominent ally and supporter of Israel. By contrast, opponents and competitors of Washington; namely, China and Iran, have military bases in the same region. In fact, Iran uses its Houthi proxies to achieve its goals of competing and searching for a foothold. This fact indicates that escalation is still possible because of competition and conflict, in addition to the war in Gaza that has been going on for nearly two months.

## Margins:

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