

Israel's Militarization of Bab Al-Mandab

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Introduction

Israel has realized the importance of waterways quite early, and took steps to control a number of strategic ports either by direct occupation, or in coordination and alliance with some countries overlooking the strategic corridors and straits, including Bab al-Mandab Strait in the southern entrance to the Red Sea.

Israeli moves to control waterways and seaports are based on a strategy developed by the first founders of the Jewish state, who bore in mind that this state was an alien entity in the region, fighting a violent war with the Palestinians and Arab countries, and therefore looked for allies through whom it could break the isolation imposed on it by the Arabs. So, it turned to Ethiopia—which also included Eritrea—which is located in the Horn of Africa near Bab al-Mandab Strait. Then, it established relations with other African countries to achieve the same goal, confronting the Arabs, especially the Arab countries overlooking the Red Sea: Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and the Sudan, though it managed to normalize relations officially with Cairo and Amman, and more recently with Khartoum.

This study will attempt to examine the Israeli vision of maritime security in the seas and corridors surrounding the Jewish state in general, and in the southern Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait in particular. At the same time, it will highlight the status quo in the region which has witnessed an increasing military presence and bases of the superpowers, led by the United States of America, Israel's staunch ally and supporter, in view of the current circumstances in the region under the Iranian escalation through the Houthis, and the increasing tension in Bab al-Mandab, which is one of the most important corridors of international navigation and trade.

The Red Sea: Strategic Importance and Israeli Vision

The Red Sea connects the three continents of Asia, Africa and Europe. It derives its strategic and geopolitical importance from its unique geographical location. It is also adjacent to the richest oil fields in the world and is considered one of the most important waterways in the world and the main corridor through which Gulf and Iranian oil is transited to global markets in Europe. In fact, 60% of Europe's and 25% of US energy supplies transit the Red Sea.¹

The Red Sea is 1,900 km long, while its width ranges between 20 km (at the Bab al-Mandab Strait) and 200 km. It overlooks seven Arab countries: Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia, in addition to Eritrea and Israel that view the Red Sea Part of their national security. The Red Sea provides the only direct Israeli access to Asia and Africa.

Since the declaration of founding the State of Israel in 1948, the Red Sea became part of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Competition of control between Israel and the Arab countries overlooking the Red Sea ensued. In March 1949, Israeli forces occupied the village of Um Al-Rashrash and built the Port of Eilat on its site, thereby carving out a foothold on the Gulf of Aqaba. In response to that, Egypt and Saudi Arabia collaborated in 1950 in an attempt to bring the islands of Tiran and Sanafir, located in the Straits of Tiran at the entrance of the Gulf of Aqaba, under Egyptian military control. In the early 1950s, Egypt took a series of measures with the aim of preventing the transit of Israeli shipping through the Gulf of Aqaba, which led to severing Israel's ties with Asian and African markets. ²

In the early 1960s, Egypt, led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, supported the Yemeni revolution that erupted in September 1962. This allowed the Egyptian navy to reach 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. Egypt's closure of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping and blocking traffic to the Port of Eilat was one of the main reasons of Israel's waging war on Egypt in June 1967. ³

Given its ambitions and attempts to control the Red Sea, in addition to reports of establishing an Israeli base in Dahlak on the Eritrean shores, Israel benefits from its relations with the United States and the narrative of fighting terrorism and piracy. It markets its goals by emphasizing that the Red Sea should be an international waterway that must remain open to shipping of all countries, including Israel, and that Arab countries have no right to control it or restrict freedom of navigation in it. ⁴

Maritime Security in the Israeli Strategy

Interest in the seas by the founders of Israel began at an early age, even before their state was declared on the land of Palestine in 1948. The roots of the Israeli vision can be traced to the first ideas of the Zionist sea culture that crystallized after World War I, specifically between 1919 and 1921 when the Gurvitz Commission in Jaffa, chaired by Meir Gurvitz, was established. 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 Zionist perspective was formed and was based on the idea that the Zionist project of occupation would extend from east to west towards the sea. The importance of coast increased. In this context, Ben Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel and one of its most prominent founders, said that there would be no land of Israel without a sea of Israel. Official Zionist interest in the sea reached its apex in 1930. ⁵

Since 1950, Ben Gurion set the goal of imposing Israeli control over 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 derives his ideas from the Old Testament. For example, he drew on Kings 1, 19:26-7, "King Solomon also assembled a fleet of ships at Ezion-geber, which is near Eloth in Edom, on the shore of the Red Sea. And Hiram sent in the navy his servants, shipmen that had knowledge of the sea, with the servants of Solomon." 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."⁶

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.⁷

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.⁸

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 affirmed 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.⁹

For Israel, the Red Sea is a vital waterway. It consolidated its military and security presence in this sea, and developed political relations with some regimes in the region, especially the Eritrean and Ugandan regimes, which allows it to break Arab-imposed isolation, monitor any Arab military activity against it, and counter any probable future Arab siege against it or against its shipping in the Red Sea and its southern entrance of Bab al-Mandab. In this way, it ensured non-interruption and security of maritime military and commercial shipping from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean, and preventing the Red Sea from being a pure Arab sea. In 2016, Israel secretly established an advanced electronic intelligence base in Eritrea to monitor the strategic Bab al-Mandab Strait.¹⁰

Trade exchange with Asian countries accounts 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 culminated 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 Somaliland, 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 Yemen war.¹¹

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.¹²

Israeli Moves in Bab al-Mandab

Israel did not merely theorize about and draw strategic plans and visions of maritime security, but rather sought to achieve its maritime security on the ground, especially in the Red Sea, particularly in its southern entrance of the strategic and vital Bab al-Mandab Strait. Arab-Israeli wars have shown the importance of this strategic strait. In the 1967 war, one of the reasons of Israeli superiority was that its ally, Britain, which occupied South Yemen at the time, took control of Bab al-Mandab Strait. In the same vein, one of the reasons of Egyptian superiority in the October 1973 war was that the Yemeni and Egyptian governments closed Bab al-Mandab Strait to Israeli shipping.¹³

Only a few months after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the Yemeni revolution forced Britain to end its occupation of South Yemen, which declared independence.

Before its ejection from the country, Britain, at the request of the Israeli government, tried to keep Bab al-Mandab under its control, but the pressure of the Yemeni revolutionaries and the support of the Arab countries at the United Nations immediately thwarted this plan. Israel sought to place the island of Perim, which controls Bab al-Mandab, under international administration, and was unsuccessful in this endeavor, too. The argument put forth by Tel Aviv at the time was that international navigation in Bab al-Mandab will be at stake after the departure of British forces.

Israel, which realized early that it would be isolated in a hostile Arab milieu, began to search for allies in the region. Ethiopia, during the reign of former Emperor Haile Selassie was the first and most prominent ally of Tel Aviv. Ethiopia was then a non-Arab country overlooking the Red Sea, and building relations with it could benefit Israel a lot, especially in a context of continued Arab-Israeli conflict.

Strong Israeli-Ethiopian relations continued until indicators of revolution became evident in the province of Eritrea, which was one of the provinces of Ethiopia. Eritrea managed to gain independence in the early 1990s. Israel moved immediately to build relations with the regime of Isaias Afwerki who led Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia. Because of these relations, Tel Aviv managed to establish a military base near the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Then, Israel sought to strengthen its relations with the separatist government in Somalia, known as Somaliland.

Over the past decades, Israel has sought to enhance its presence and strengthen its relations in the region through building relations with African countries to counter Arab countries during the conflict stage, and then to break the chain of Arab-imposed isolation at a later stage. However, Israel was finally able to normalize relations with some GCC countries and the Sudan, the latter being one of the Arab countries overlooking the Red Sea.

American Bases, Iranian Threats & Regional and International Coalitions

In July 2018, Houthi gunmen attacked two Saudi oil tankers, forcing Saudi Arabia—the largest exporter of crude oil in the world—to suspend its oil exports. This came after the Houthis threatened to close Bab al-Mandab Strait to shipping, a threat that was taken seriously, especially since it was issued by an armed group aligned with Iran, which is viewed as a rogue state dissenting from international consensus. Many of Tehran's opponents took the threat to be originating from Iran because the Houthis are its proxies in the region who merely carry out the instructions of Iranian officials.

Immediately, the Israeli occupation was quick to respond to this threat. Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, stated that "If Iran will try to block the straits of Bab al-Mandeb through its Houthi allies, I am certain that it will find itself confronting an international coalition that will be determined to prevent this, and this coalition will also include all of Israel's military branches."¹⁴

The Houthi threat to close the Bab al-Mandab Strait coincided with the threat of their Iranian supporters to close the Strait of Hormuz if Iranian oil exports were banned as the United States threatened after its withdrawal from the 2015 international nuclear deal with Tehran. Iran uses the Houthis to achieve its goals of expanding its influence and protecting its interests.

A series of regional and international reactions to Houthi and Iranian threats in the region ensued. In January 2020, establishing the Council of Arab and African States Overlooking the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden was announced in Riyadh. The council consisted of 8 Arab and African countries; namely, 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."¹⁵ It affirmed that the council will seek to "preserve common interests, counter all risks, and cooperatively benefiting from available opportunities."¹⁶

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, who was killed 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.¹⁷

On the other side of the Persian Gulf, Iran, which supports the Houthis in the Red Sea, was not detached from political and military developments in the region. It hopes to extend its influence at the Bab al-Mandab Strait through the Houthis. This gives rise to accusing Iran of expanding its conflicts with the Arab Gulf states to Bab al-Mandab after it imposed its hegemony on the Strait of Hormuz.¹⁸

Therefore, Iran affirms that "the new entity works within the framework of the coalition of the western hegemony project and the protection of Israeli interests, even if the Israeli entity does not participate directly in this coalition." ¹⁹

Since the September 2001 attacks, an American force has undertaken securing navigation in Bab al-Mandab Strait under the pretext of countering al-Qaeda and piracy in the region. Other countries, including Israel—which officially announced deploying its modern destroyer, Sa'ar 6, in the Red Sea after the Houthi attacks—deployed warships to the region. ²⁰

In 2007, The US established its military base, Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti. The base is responsible for operations and military relations with African countries, and serves as the headquarters of AFRICOM troops. Its mission is to conduct land, maritime and air surveillance in Sudan, Eritrea, Somalia, Djibouti, Kenya and Yemen.

France has the largest foreign military base outside its territorial borders. About 1,500 troops are deployed at the French base in Djibouti. Their mission is to fight "terrorism" and protect navigation in the region. Britain keeps a military base in Baidoa, and trains Somali troops. It still seeks to build another base in the Republic of Somaliland. There is also an American Baledogle Air Base in Somalia. Sources also talked about secret US military bases in the Horn of Africa, and two naval bases in Kenya. In Ethiopia, there is the Arba Minch Drone Air Base, the mission of which is surveillance and monitoring in East Africa. ²¹

In April 2022, the US Naval Forces announced the formation of the Combined Task Force (CTF) 153, whose mission was 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." ²²

It is worth noting that CTF 153 is the fourth division of the Combined Maritime Force (CMF). In December 2022, Egypt assumed the command of CTF operations. This was the first time it assumed the command since it joined the maritime combined forces, which consisted of 34 countries in April 2021. ²³ This force aims to "improve security in all maritime passageways, ensure the safe passage of vessels in international waters and fight all forms of organized crime which negatively affects global trade transit and the interests of partner countries." ²⁴ The United States assumes leadership of those forces on 12 June 2023.

Escalation After the Aqsa Flood

In late December 2023, US Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, announced the formation of an international coalition consisting of 10 countries, with the aim of countering the recurrent Houthi attacks on ships bound to Israel in the south of the Red Sea. According to Austin, the coalition works "with the goal of ensuring freedom of navigation for all countries and bolstering regional security and prosperity." The coalition includes the United States, the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles, and Spain.

For its part, Iran warned against cooperating with the United States against the Houthis. The Iranian Supreme Guide Political Affairs Advisor, Ali Shamkhani, said that "any country joining the US coalition gets directly involved in Israel's crimes." The Iranian official defended the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, describing them as "courageous acts".²⁵

The announcement of this new military coalition is only the last escalation of militarization of the Red Sea. In fact, the region that has witnessed the formation of several regional and international military and security alliances in recent years. In addition, it hosts more than 10 military bases run mostly by superpowers; namely, the United States, China, France and Britain. This sparked a lot of controversy over the factors that prompted many actors to secure a foothold in the Red Sea region, which represents one of the sub-regions of the Middle East, and over the strategic repercussions of the heavy military presence, especially of foreign powers, on security and stability in this region.²⁶

In anticipation of the closure of the Bab al-Mandab Strait by Iran and Iran-aligned groups in response to the Gaza war, the US Navy Fifth Fleet announced the arrival of more than 3,000 US troops to the Middle East in October 2023, and the arrival of USS Patan and USS Carter Hall in the Red Sea via the Suez Canal. According to the statement issued at the time, fleet operation theater covers the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, the Red Sea, parts of the Indian Ocean and the three critical points of the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal and the Bab al-Mandab Strait.²⁷

Israel, which likes to fight its opponents "from behind the walls of the international community," considered Houthi acts a threat to international community at large.

According to Israeli Broadcasting Authority website, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, stated "what is going on in the Red Sea is a threat to shipping in the entire world. Israel is fighting a war against Iran that threatens to close the maritime corridor." ²⁸

Conclusion

The accelerating political, military and security developments still raise concerns in the region about the future of the current escalation, which has intensified in the past two years. These developments were closely linked to the war in Yemen and more recently with the latest escalation that was associated with Israel's war on Gaza since last October.

The US announcement of the formation of a new military coalition in the southern Red Sea is an indicator of a new escalation in the strategic region, which home to a number of military bases and regional and international coalitions. In view of this reality, transborder armed conflicts are likely, especially in light of the competitions between vying forces and actors at the local, regional and international levels to expand the scope of their control and influence in this region. The Bab al-Mandab Strait, which has been a cause of conflict and wars between countries overlooking this vital passageway and sometimes between these countries and the foreign powers prompted by their colonial ambitions overseas, is at the heart of the different layers of this competition. In fact, foreign powers have always sought to secure a foothold at this strait with the aim that such a foothold would enable them to protect her interests and enhance their presence.

In this state of affairs, for more than half a century, Israel— which is indulged in a ruthless genocide in Gaza— has sought to affirm its security at the southern entrance of the Red Sea, the Strait of Bab al-Mandab, which was closed to Israeli shipping one day, leading to the poor performance of her army in the 1973 war. It has a substantial presence in the region, provided by its great allies, led by Washington, which places protecting Israel at the top of its priorities, even if it waged and dragged the countries in the region into a new war.

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