

# Iran's Strategy in the Red Sea: Goals and Tactics

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## Introduction:-

Iranian decision-makers have openly expressed their interest in establishing a permanent presence in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden since October 7<sup>th</sup>. This interest arose following the Israeli occupation's military operation in Gaza as a response to a Hamas attack. Subsequently, Houthis in the following month conducted attacks on commercial and military vessels in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Arabian Sea. These events prompted the United States and Western powers to deploy their warships to the increasingly volatile region.

On March 6, 2024, General Yahya Rahim Safavi, a senior military advisor to the Iranian Supreme Leader, stated that the Naval and Air Forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps should focus on the Red and Mediterranean Seas. Safavi described these two seas as essential parts of Iran's strategic depth, empathizing Tehran's intention to "expand its strategic depth by 5,000 kilometers". In December, another Iranian military commander mentioned that their allies in the Resistance Axis have the capability to disrupt navigation in both the Red Sea and Mediterranean Sea.

Simultaneously, Iran has increased its naval activity in the Red Sea by deploying warships. Western military leaders suspect that these warships provide intelligence support to Houthis for carrying out maritime attacks. In April, [Tehran declared](#) that its warships would escort the Iranian commercial vessels to the Red Sea, despite the growing Western international presence in the high seas off the coast of Yemen.

While the United States considered plans to form a maritime coalition against Houthis, the Iranian Defense Minister Amir Hatami [stated](#) in December 2023 that the Red Sea is part of their "region", and forces from outside the region have no place there. Since 2011, the Iranian Navy has regularly deployed warships in the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea, gradually increasing its military presence.

In July 2022, the Israeli Ministry of Defense [expressed](#) concerns about the significant increase in Iranian naval assets in the region, describing it as the largest in the decade. Media reports in March 2024 indicated that Iranian officials requested a permanent military base on the Red Sea from the Sudanese army.

Therefore, the Iran's strategy to expand its influence goes beyond its maritime activities. From an energy and geopolitical perspective, this strategy directly impacts energy resource and global trade, facilitating Iran to establish a presence in a crucial passage like Bab al-Mandab Strait.

## Iran's Strategy in the Red Sea:-

### First: Importance of the Red Sea for Iran.

Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, there was no confirmed [Iranian naval activity](#) in the Red Sea, despite claims that Iran supported a terrorist group which in 1984 laid nearly 200 naval mines in the Sea. However, in early 2011, the Iranian Navy announced its intention to enter into the Red Sea for the first time by dispatching a small flotilla of its warship on a mission to Syria. A few months later, they declared that an Iranian locally-made Navy submarine had traversed international waters through the Red Sea on a 68-day.

However, the Red Sea holds historical significance for Iran, dating back to ancient times when the Achaemenid Empire exerted influence along its shores. This influence continued from the Sassanid era to the Arab era with the rise of Islam when the Umayyad Caliphate pushed the Persian influence in the Arabian Peninsula out of the Red Sea<sup>1</sup>.

Recently, the importance of the Red Sea for Iran can be observed in its growing influence in the region, particularly in Africa. Iran takes advantage of conflicts between post-coup leaders in the African Sahel region and Western countries, including the United States and France. In July 2023, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited Uganda, Zimbabwe, and Kenya where he praised their resistance to colonization and considering their actions as [an awakening and vigilance](#). Although he did not visit countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, he, in September 2023, commended their resistance to “dominant European policies and colonization.”

### Iran's Goals in the Red Sea:

Since 2012, it has become evident that Iran aims to extend its military presence and naval activities beyond the Arabian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, with a particular focus on the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. Between 2013 and 2015, Tehran directed its attention towards Sudan and Eritrea. Discussions [began in 2013](#) regarding Iran's desire to establish a military base outside its borders, mainly in Port Sudan. During that time, Iran dispatched several ships to Sudan, which was experiencing isolation from the West.

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<sup>1</sup> [Bowersock, G.W. The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam. Oxford University Press, 2013](#)

Like Washington, Tehran is creating reasons to justify the existence of its military bases in the Red Sea, such as “combating terrorism and piracy”, protecting “global maritime routes” and “securing their maritime trade.” Since 2011, the Iranian Navy Officials have consistently stated that the reason for deploying their military ships in the Red Sea, is to secure the waterway, counter Somali pirates, and expand this naval presence in international waters to protect their trade.

Despite [the antiquity](#) of traditional Iranian warships, Iran recently has [invested](#) in building surface fleet capable of accommodating fast attack drones, helicopters, and missiles. These technologies and weapons have been also utilized by Houthis, a non-state entity supported by Iran, in their maritime attacks. Iran’s Goals in the Red Sea include:

### **1- Pressure on West:**

On March 14, 2024, Houthis declared their intention to target ships voyaging to the Indian Ocean en route to South Africa’s Cape of Good Hope. As results, about 75% of commercial ships travelling between Asia and Europe choose to navigate through the Cape of Good Hope instead of crossing the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Shortly after this declaration, Iran, Houthis’ main supporter, issued its new [own warning](#) framing the threat as a response to US sanctions on the Iranian energy sector. Furthermore, Admiral Ali Reza Tangsiri, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps navy said if their oil and tankers are seized anywhere in the world, we will respond reciprocally. He asserted that the era of foreign exploitation of Iranian resources with impunity is over.

### **2- Show of Capability and Testing War Theater:**

The launch of ballistic missiles and unmanned weapons acquired by Houthis from Iran is seen as a show of the military capabilities of the Islamic Republic of Iran in potential future conflicts. In April 2024, Houthis participated in the Iran’s retaliation against “Israel.” Iran’s announcement of deploying additional warships in the Red Sea, not only near the borders with Egypt or Saudi Arabia, but also in strategically important areas for Israel and Jordan, can be interpreted as an expansion of the presumed [Iranian-Israeli confrontation](#) and serves Iran’s perception of the decline of the unipolar system. In 2021, [Israel targeted](#) the ship “Saviz” with limpet mines, as Saviz had been providing information to Houthis since 2015.

Iranian strategists [have not hidden their desire](#) to establish a presence in the Red Sea and expand their influence there since the early 2010s. They have sought to strengthen their relationships with Sudan, Eritrea, and Djibouti in order to gain access for their forces. In October 2012, Iran sent warships to a Sudanese port in the Red Sea for the first time and expressed their [interest](#) in establishing a military base in the region.

### 3- Focus on Africa:

African countries introduce themselves as [an opportunity](#) for Iran to become their primary supplier of weapons as alternatives of Western's weapons, which often attached with conditions related to non-coup policies and human rights violations to their arms deals. Since decades, Iran has supplied armed drones to guerrilla groups in the Middle East, and the [purchase](#) and use of the Iranian drones (Shahed) by Russia in Ukraine has sparked interest in Iranian systems in Africa and other regions. Reports indicate that Iran has recently provided drones to the Sudanese army to counter the Rapid Support Forces.

In May 2023, Colonel Sadio Camara, Malian Defense Minister, visited Tehran. During this visit, the Iranian Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani "expressed his country's readiness to supply Mali with military equipment and expertise in the fight against terrorism," according to Iranian official media. This desire indicates that Iran is also significantly interested in a presence outside the West Asia and the closer region (the Arab Region and Central Asia). This presence is a part of establishing itself as a major regional power, not only in West Asia but also in Africa. This goal requires a greater presence in the Red Sea.

### Second: Tactics and Alliances:

Iran does not have permanent military bases in the Red Sea. Since the early 2000s, Iran has turned to the African side to establish a base in Eritrea, but faced challenges due to the existence of military bases belonging to the UAE and [Israel](#). Reports indicated that Iran attempted to establish a base in the Dahlak Islands between 2007 and 2015. In March 2024, Iran renewed its request to Sudan to establish a base in Port Sudan, but the request was rejected.

According to Iran's national security doctrine, which emphasizes strategic depth of up to 5,000 km, having military bases in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea is crucial for creating deterrence. [The Iranian strategy](#) views that "the establishment of distant naval bases is no less important than nuclear technology, but worth dozens of times more for creating deterrence."

In 2016, [the Iranian Navy revealed](#) its efforts to build naval bases in Yemen and Syria. In light of the cautious de-escalation between Iran and Saudi Arabia since March 10, 2023 when both countries signed the sponsored agreement by China, an overt Iranian presence with a military base in Yemen seems far-fetched. Therefore, Iran will use various tactics and seek alliances to achieve its objectives.

## 1- Houthis:

Houthis are considered Iran's primary proxy group in the Red Sea. Recently, [US intelligence](#) indicates that Iran has been "deeply involved in planning operations against commercial ships in the Red Sea." The Houthi attacks in the Red Sea have solidified the Yemeni group's position within Iran's axis of resistance, particularly after Houthis expressed concerns about the repercussions from the March 10, 2023 agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The crisis resulting from the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea has proven resilient against international diplomatic initiatives, US military strikes, and threats. This crisis demonstrates how a non-state entity affiliated with Iran can significantly impact the economies of advanced nations that rely on freedom of navigation for 70% of their trade. This is crucial for Iran's ambition to influence global policies.

Moreover, the failure of the world's most advanced armies to stop the Houthi naval attacks in recent months is a setback for the United States and Britain. It also serves as a propaganda tool for Iran, highlighting the superiority of its military capabilities to its allies and countries seeking the most impactful weapons technology on regular armies.

## 2- African Axis:

Iran has made no secret of its interest in Africa. It has been strategically focusing on gaining access to this region for years, which is both strategic and economically important. With a population of about 200 million, Africa can be a large market for Iranian products, which have been affected by US sanctions. Overlapping policies also allow Iranian influence in that geography as part of the competition with its traditional adversaries in the region.

In March 2023, Iranian President [Ebrahim Raisi visited](#) East African countries and signed agreements with Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Additionally, the leaders in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, who came to power after coups, have taken steps in the beginning of this year to distance their countries from France and the United States. These leaders echo Tehran's accusations that Western powers exploit African and Global South populations for their own interests.

[Iranian leaders think](#) that strengthening relations with African leaders can help bypass US-led sanctions and enhance Iran's role as a supplier of advanced weapons, particularly drones. This has been achieved through military and economic agreements. Tehran has also taken sides in the conflict in Sudan and provided the Sudanese army with drones to counter the Rapid Support Forces, supported by the United Arab Emirates. These alliances in Africa are closely tied to the Red Sea and the freedom of navigation, which are crucial for trade and the Iranian naval forces that protect their interests. It is part of Iran's strategy to establish itself as an influential regional and global power.

### 3- Coordination between Resistance Axis's Members:

From the Arabian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea, Tehran requires “strategic depth” in the form of centers and passages. Iran’s allies and proxies play a crucial role in exerting influence in the Arab region. However, over the past decade, these proxies have faced challenges, including increasing restrictions on Lebanon as a regional center for the Iranian revolution and the Resistance Axis.

Therefore, the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea serve as an opportunity for Iran to establish a new regional center in the area and initiate a new phase of exporting the revolution and supporting its policies in the Arabian Gulf and East Africa. There are indications that Sana’a may be an alternative to Beirut and Doha for Palestinian resistance movements associated with Iran, as well as Shia opposition groups in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. This implies a greater impact of Iranian alliances on maritime security around the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

### 4- Classical Naval Power and Popular Mobilization Organizations:

While Iran’s classic naval forces may be weaker compared to Western powers, they are still capable of operating in international waters, requiring access to naval bases. In a region marked by rivalries, influences, and concerns about sovereignty and colonial powers, Iran seeks alliances with popular mobilization organizations, particularly in East and Coastal Africa. This [has become evident](#) in Niger, where Iranian Shia operations and mobilization institutions are spreading.

### Third: Impact of Iranian strategy on the Red Sea:

The Red Sea region is already witnessing security and economic threats due to ongoing conflicts for dominance. Iran appears to be at the center of this dominance. It employs its tactics depending on non-governmental entities to exert influence and a foreign policy independent of Western colonialism. It capitalizes on the failures of Western foreign policy to further its own gains.

For over a decade, the region has been plagued by security threats such as Houthi naval attacks, civil wars, maritime piracy, regional tensions, extremism, and terrorism. Additionally, the economic challenges in the region are diverse, ranging from the transition of Gulf countries to a post-oil stage to economic transformation and integration in East African countries. Therefore, the current Iranian strategy will pose short- and medium-term security and political threats. It is also exacerbated by the regional tensions that could potentially transform the region from a maritime security area related to the region to an “international maritime security” area, especially with the increasing presence of international navies in the region.



## 1- Security Threat:

Iran's influence in regional countries poses a risk of fueling internal civil wars in the region. It is like the role played by most regional States which support certain internal parties for influence at the expense of others. For example, in the Sudanese civil war, Iran and the UAE have taken divergent positions. The security of the Red Sea region can be further compromised by various parties, such as Ethiopia's agreement to access the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden through the Somali Land Agreement, which is backed by the UAE. As a response, the Somali Central Government in Mogadishu has signed a military agreement with Turkey, a competitor to Iran.

The increasing competition among regional and international powers for influence in the Red Sea raises concerns as it paves the way for multiple regional conflicts and increases pirate activities. The pirates will take the advantage of the tensions to resume the attacks on commercial ships. Furthermore, the collapse of nation-states and internal instability create an environment conducive to cross-border extremism and terrorism, allowing them to thrive.

On the international front, it seems that Iran employs Houthis in the Red Sea, through [low-cost operations](#) rather than direct confrontation, aims to raise concerns among Washington and its NATO allies. Simultaneously, it gains admiration from the people in the developing countries horrified by Israeli behavior in Gaza. This supports Iranian influence and facilitates its expansion in the new conflict area within international politics, especially in the Middle East and Africa.

## 2- Impact on International Economy:

Iran employs Houthi attacks in the Red Sea as a tool to impose economic sanctions against the United States and the European Union in response to their sanctions on it. It seems that Chinese and Russian ships are unaffected by these Houthi attacks.

Houthis and Iran have succeeded in achieving their objective of imposing [costs](#) on Western policies that support the Israeli occupation. Although these attacks on ships have not significantly impacted Israeli actions in the Gaza Strip, the show of force near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait has affected prices in the European Union and has had repercussions on international energy and maritime trade.

The Houthi leaders have enhanced the competitive advantages for Chinese and Russian shipping companies by providing [a safe passage through the Red Sea](#) with guarantees against attacks. In return, they seek diplomatic support, the specifics of which are yet to be determined. This selective strategy used by Houthis imposes [economic sanctions](#) is similar to those disproportionately affecting European Union-based companies. It also affects Egypt, which [loses](#) transit fees through the Suez Canal due to shipping rerouting around the southern tip of Africa.

## Conclusion:-

Can the Iranian strategy be deterred?

Despite the gains of Russia and China from the current Iranian strategy in the Red Sea, these gains will not continue for a long time. Both countries will feel the changes imposed by Iran on their economies in the medium term. However, the Western approach to the current crisis in the vital waterway of the Bab el-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden reflects Western arrogance, which inadvertently serves Iranian propaganda in the developing and region countries. This raises concerns about a potential new wave of colonization in these countries, pushing them towards the East. This further complicates the dynamics of maritime security in the Red Sea.

Hence, the Iranian strategy in the Red Sea can be deterred through an emerging counter-strategy led by the coastal states in the region. These states should be supported by international actors, like China and Russia, which currently have good relations with most of the coastal states on the Red Sea.

It should be asserted that the presence of an external strategy to address maritime security in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden adds fuel to the fire and ignites international competition in a region that has been plagued by turmoil and instability for decades.

Finally, until the regional countries find their way to a new strategy to protect maritime security in the Red Sea- with limited participation from sub-regional countries associated with Red Sea security, like UAE, Iran, and Ethiopia- the current developments will only serve policymakers in Tehran.



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