Competition and cooperation in the Red Sea region

by David Shinn

The Red Sea, a vital waterway accessed through the Suez Canal on the north and narrow Bab el-Mandeb (Gate of Tears) passage and Gulf of Aden on the south, both divides and links Africa and the Middle East. It is one large choke point that connects the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. The Suez Canal accounts for more than 9% of international trade and additional shipping exits or enters the Red Sea through Bab el-Mandeb. By comparison, about 5% of global trade passes through the Panama Canal. The Red Sea is especially important to commercial shipping interests, both container vessels and oil tankers, of European countries and major trading powers in Asia such as China, Japan, and India. The United States is more concerned about free passage by U.S. Navy ships to support its security interests in the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, and Gulf of Oman. The region has increasingly attracted great power attention and military engagement.

The Red Sea serves variously as a bridge and a barrier between Africa and the Middle East. Both sides have experienced conflict in recent years. African countries have been drawn into disputes in the Middle East, especially the Gulf States, while Middle Eastern countries have engaged, both

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positively and negatively, in African issues. The net result has been to complicate political and security relationships on both sides of the Red Sea and between African and Middle Eastern countries. The current conflict in Yemen, which borders the shipping lanes of both the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden underscores this point.

Nine countries have shoreline on the Red Sea: Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Somalia/Somaliland, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Sudan. Other key regional players include landlocked Ethiopia on the African side and five other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states: United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain. Two important regional powers—Iran and Turkey—are also actors in the Red Sea region. The regional players constitute a volatile mix of political differences, religious beliefs, wealth, and poverty. The relationship between the two sides of the Red Sea is inherently asymmetrical: the African side is generally fragile and poor while the Gulf side, except for Yemen, is wealthy and stronger.

Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Yemen and Saudi Arabia have important ports on the Red Sea. Eritrea and Sudan are dependent on the Red Sea for all seaborne commerce. Saudi Arabia has the most developed Red Sea ports, which account for 70% of its seaborne cargo. Jeddah is the headquarters for the Saudi Western Fleet. Saudi Arabia’s East-West pipeline carries crude from the eastern province near Bahrain to the port of Yanbu on the Red Sea. This increases the percentage of Saudi oil and gas that leaves Saudi Arabia through the Bab el-Mandeb. Jordan’s only sea access and small navy is in the Gulf of Aqaba, which enters the Red Sea. Israel has a secondary port at Eilat in the Gulf of Aqaba. Djibouti, Somaliland, and Yemen have major ports in the Gulf of Aden. The economies of all of these countries rely heavily on the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden ports, except for Israel, which has two major ports on the Mediterranean.

Rich in natural resources, the U.S. Geological Survey estimates there are 5 billion barrels of undiscovered, technically recoverable oil and 112 trillion cubic feet of recoverable gas in the Red Sea Basin. The Red Sea also holds an estimated 3 million metric tons of zinc, 500,000 to 700,000 tons of copper, 6,500 tons of silver, and 46 tons of gold, potentially worth billions of dollars. Eventual exploitation of this undersea wealth could lead to either competition or cooperation among the Red Sea littoral states.

A combination of increased conflict on both sides of the Red Sea, al-Qaeda and Islamic State-affiliated terrorism in several states, Somali piracy, arms smuggling, people and narcotics trafficking, and the inherent strategic and commercial importance of the region have led to a sharp increase in great power and regional military engagement. A number of naval task forces were created to counter these threats in the Red Sea and wider region. The United States established Combined Task Force 150 after the 2001 terrorist attacks in an effort to disrupt terrorist organizations. The European Union Naval Force ATALANTA began in 2008, mostly to protect vessels delivering supplies to Somalia. NATO’s Operation Ocean Shield also started in 2008 in response to Somali piracy but ended in 2016 as piracy decreased in importance. Combined Task Force 151 began in 2009 and continues to function as a counterpiracy force. Foreign military bases subsequently proliferated in Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia, and Somaliland.

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**History of conflict in the region**

The Red Sea was a backwater until the Suez Canal opened in 1869. The 1888 Constantinople Convention guaranteed, at least in theory, that the canal is open in peace and war to every commercial vessel or warship without distinction of flag. Great Britain, when it controlled the canal, honored this provision during the Spanish-American War, Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05, and the Italian-Ethiopian War of 1935–36. After Egypt took control of the canal, it denied in 1949 access to Israel and all ships trading with Israel.

Egypt and Israel signed a peace treaty in 1979 in which all ships, including Israeli, were permitted to transit the canal.

Today, warships from many nations, including Israel, regularly transit the canal and the Red Sea without incident. There was a hiatus from 1979 until 2011 in the passage of Iranian warships, although it was not clear if Egypt refused permission or Iran did not request access. Two Iranian naval vessels passed through the canal in 2011 in route to and returning from Syria and two more entered the Mediterranean Sea the following year.

Northeast Africa has been one of the most conflict-prone regions of the world since the end of World War II. Egypt was a key participant in the Arab-Israeli War of 1948. The Suez Canal crisis in 1956 pitted France, the United Kingdom, and Israel against Egypt, which closed the canal for six months. Israel’s 1967 preemptive attack on Egypt, Jordan, and Syria led to the shutdown of the canal until 1975. Egypt and Syria attacked Israel in the Yom Kippur War of 1973 and briefly stopped Israeli shipping going through the Red Sea by blockading the Bab el-Mandeb. While this was the last of Egypt’s wars with Israel, terrorist attacks by Islamic fundamentalist organizations have become common occurrences and the Islamic State affiliate, Wilayat Sinai, began operations in the Sinai and beyond. Egypt has a long history of tension over allocation of Nile water with Sudan and Ethiopia, the source of 82% of the water that reaches Egypt’s Aswan Dam. Egypt’s policy toward Ethiopia is driven by Nile water concerns.
A border conflict between Egypt and Sudan dating back to 1958 over control of the Halâbîb Triangle, which borders the Red Sea, remains unresolved. Egypt periodically gets drawn into the conflict for control of neighboring Libya.

Sudan was embroiled in civil war between the northern and southern parts of the country from 1955 to 1972 and then again from 1983 until a peace agreement in 2005 led to a referendum and secession of South Sudan in 2011. The same year, the UN sent a peacekeeping mission to South Sudan. Several border disputes between Sudan and South Sudan remained unresolved, requiring a separate UN peacekeeping operation along the border. In 2013, civil war began in South Sudan, threatening instability in the wider region. Serious ethnic conflict broke out in Darfur in western Sudan in 2003, resulting eventually in a United Nations/African Union peacekeeping mission. While the situation in Darfur is quieter, it has not been settled. There have also been periodic conflicts in eastern Sudan. Until early in this century, Sudan supported al-Qaeda-affiliated groups and has been subject to terrorist attacks aimed primarily at foreign interests. Historically, Sudan also supported rebel groups in neighboring Chad, Libya, Uganda, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. Sudan meddled in Middle Eastern affairs by supporting Iraq in both the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988 and the
Gulf War of 1990-1991. It subsequently cooperated with the network that illicitly moved Iranian arms through the Red Sea to Sudan for ultimate delivery to Hamas in Gaza.

In 1941, following the end of brief Italian control and a legal/diplomatic contest for ownership of Eritrea, Ethiopia faced a succession of regional crises. Independence of Somalia in 1960 resulted in an immediate attempt to incorporate Ethiopia's Somali-inhabited territory into Somalia. This led in 1977–78 to full-fledged war and the Somali invasion of the Ogaden region of Ethiopia. Ethiopia also confronted an Eritrean independence movement that began in the mid-1960s and continued until the overthrow of the Ethiopian government in 1991 and Ethiopia's acceptance of de facto independence for Eritrea the same year. In 1998, a border war broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea that continued until 2000 and resulted in as many as 100,000 deaths. This led in 2000 to creation of a UN peacekeeping mission along the Ethiopian-Eritrean border that ended in 2008 due to an inability to carry out its mandate. Ethiopia-Eritrea diplomatic relations remained broken until 2018. In the meantime, an al-Qaeda-affiliated group known as al-Shabaab gained strength in Somalia and threatened the security of Ethiopia and Kenya. Since 2006, Ethiopia has sent troops into Somalia either bilaterally in support of the Somali government or as part of the African Union peacekeeping mission to defeat Islamic fundamentalists and al-Shabaab. Beginning in 2018, a second terrorist group, the Islamic State in Somalia, began operations as a rival to al-Shabaab.

Legally independent since 1993, Eritrea was consumed by the war with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000 and then suffered economically due to the broken diplomatic and trade relationship with its neighbor until 2018. During much of this period, Eritrea supported rebel groups operating against Ethiopia and groups in Somalia that opposed Ethiopia, which the latter reciprocated by supporting Eritrean dissident groups. In 1995, a dispute broke out between Eritrea and Yemen over control of the Hanish Islands in the southern Red Sea. Conflicting oil exploration claims contributed to the conflict. International arbitration awarded the largest and most important islands to Yemen and delimited the maritime boundary between Eritrea and Yemen. In 2008, Eritrea provoked an incident along the Djiboutian border that overlooks the Bab el-Mandeb; this resulted in limited fighting. Both countries accepted mediation by Qatar, which subsequently sent troops to monitor the border. In 2017, Qatar pulled out its troops following a dispute with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and their implicit support for Eritrea.

Djibouti has experienced less conflict than the other countries in northeast Africa, but because its population is 60% Somali it was also a target of Somalia’s irredentist ambitions to take over its territory. In addition to the unresolved border dispute with Eritrea, Djibouti once faced dissident activity by the Front for Restoration of Unity and Democracy, representing the Afar ethnic minority that now functions as a political party.

Following independence, Somalia was at the center of regional conflict because of its irredentist program to incorporate the Somali-inhabited territory of neighboring countries. The overthrow of the dictatorial Siad Barre government in 1991 ended with a failed state and the unilateral independence of Somaliland. The failure of government and rise of Somali warlords based on clan support resulted in a serious famine and U.S.-led international humanitarian intervention in 1993 followed by a UN peacekeeping mission. As Somali warlords ravaged the country, the UN mission pulled out and the Islamic fundamentalist group, al-Shabaab, eventually seized control of much of the state. The African Union peacekeeping mission created in 2007 and succession of Somali governments reestablished control over most of the country but al-Shabaab held on to rural areas and terrorist attacks became a common occurrence. Further undermining regional stability, pirates based in Somalia carried out many successful attacks in the Gulf of Aden, southern Red Sea, and western Indian Ocean from 2005 to 2012.

The eastern side of the Red Sea, except for the regional impact of the Arab-Israeli wars and frequent fighting in Yemen, has, by comparison, experienced less conflict than the African side. But it too contributed significantly to wider regional instability in past years. Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 united all the GCC states and Egypt with Kuwait. But Jordan, Yemen, and Sudan sided with Iraq. With the passage of time conflicts on each side of the Red Sea have increasingly attracted involvement from the other side.

Saudi Arabia had been a relative haven of political stability among the Gulf States. In 1998, it had a minor military clash with Yemen over control of Duwaima Island in the Red Sea. Yemen contests two other nearby, strategically located islands and the Saudi claim to land in the Empty Quarter in the southeastern part of the Arabian Peninsula. In 2009, Saudi forces attacked Zaidi Shia Houthi rebels inside Yemen. Saudi Arabia’s most serious engagement has been its military intervention in Yemen since 2015 on behalf of the internationally recognized government. Saudi Arabia has important ties with the African countries on the other side of the Red Sea. Hundreds of thousands of Sudanese, Ethiopians, Eritreans, and Somalis come to Saudi Arabia for employment, while the annual Haj to Mecca attracts additional thousands. During the 1990s and early 2000s, Saudi Arabia encouraged the export of fundamentalist Wahhabism to countries such as Somalia and Ethiopia. In addition, funding from wealthy Saudi and other Gulf State individuals supported terrorist organizations in the region, especially Somalia.

Yemen has been ground zero for conflict in the Arabian Peninsula. The North Yemen civil war from 1962 to 1970 pitted royalist rebels against the republican Yemen Arab Republic. Jordan and Saudi Arabia supported the royalists while Egypt sided with the
nized by the international community. A rebellion by the Houthis in North Yemen broke out in 2004 and continues to the present. An estimated 100,000 people have died in the conflict.

Yemen has historically had considerable interaction with the Horn of Africa. Economic and political refugees move both directions in large numbers.

Yemenis along the Gulf of Aden coast were complicit during the height of Somali piracy. Somali terrorist groups have collaborated with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which has benefited from the war in Yemen. AQAP is now experiencing competition from an Islamic State affiliate in Yemen.

Current regional competition

In the political/security arena, states on both sides of the Red Sea, especially the Arabian side, have abetted competition on the other side more than they have facilitated cooperation. The priority of the GCC states, is political stability and the absence of extremism in northeast Africa and Yemen. There is not always agreement among them on achieving these goals and their actions are often not in the best interest of the other parties. Qatar, for example, believes support for Islamists aids regional stability; the UAE disagrees.

Perhaps the most important theme currently driving the policies of key Gulf States in both the Gulf and northeast Africa is the effort to rein in Iran’s influence throughout the region. It is led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE and supported by Bahrain. It began with pressure and financial incentives by Saudi Arabia and the UAE on African states to break relations with Iran, which once had significant influence in the region, especially in Sudan. In 2016, Sudan, Somalia, and Djibouti complied but they resented being pressured into taking sides in the Saudi-Iran dispute. Oman, on the other hand, retains friendly relations with Iran while Kuwait just tries to stay out of the disagreement. In 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt broke relations with Qatar, which led to Qatar developing a stronger alliance with Turkey and a more nuanced relationship with Iran. A major reason for disagreement between Turkey/Qatar and Saudi Arabia/ UAE is the latter’s strong opposition to any country with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood; Turkey and Qatar have cordial relations with Muslim Brotherhood affiliates. Turkey relies on Qatar’s financial support but does not want to be sucked into its disputes in northeast Africa with other GCC countries.

The cross currents within the GCC are most pronounced in the war in Yemen, which is consumed by fighting, internal divisions, and presence of terrorist groups. There are three major factions—the internationally recognized but weak government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi based in Aden, the northern Shia Houthi rebels based in Sanaa and supported by Iran, and the secessionist Southern Transitional Council based in Aden. Because of the war, Yemen is in no position to influence significantly events in northeast Africa, but has become a contentious issue within the GCC.

Saudi Arabia and Bahrain support the Hadi government against the Houthis financially and with military forces. Although the UAE is part of the anti-Houthi coalition, its forces favor the Southern Transitional Council. Qatar was part of the anti-Houthi coalition until Saudi Arabia expelled it in 2017; it now balances relations between the Houthis and the Hadi-aligned Islah Party. Kuwait and Oman have stayed out of the war. Houthi drone attacks against Saudi Arabia have significantly increased the tension, although the most serious attack in September 2019 that damaged Saudi oil facilities apparently originated in Iran. The United States has provided air refueling and intelligence and sold arms to the coalition partners.

Egypt joined the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen principally to support

Abu Dhabi’s Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (C) receives Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (L) and Eritrean President Issias Afwerki (R) at the presidential palace in the UAE capital Abu Dhabi on July 24, 2018. (KARIM SAHIB/AFP/Getty Images)
the Hadi government, reign in Iran’s regional ambitions, and prevent the Houthis in Yemen from obstructing or controlling Bab el-Mandeb, which could disrupt shipping through the Red Sea and Suez Canal. Since 2015, the Houthi government has conducted a number of attacks against ships in the Red Sea. The attacks on shipping off Yemen are considered to be at least as serious as those in the Strait of Hormuz, although they receive less international media attention. While Egypt opposes the Houthis, however, it has not sent troops to Yemen. Egypt is also engaged in a long running competition with Saudi Arabia for influence in the Red Sea region.

The war in Yemen and Gulf State efforts to solicit support for the war from countries in northeast Africa have had mostly negative consequences for the region. Sudan contributes between 8,000 and 12,000 troops that have a light infantry capability to the Saudi/UAE coalition in Yemen. These troops, who are paid for by the UAE, come from the highly controversial Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a quasi-private militia that has not yet been integrated into Sudan’s national army. As of 2018, the UAE transferred almost $8 billion to Sudan’s central bank before it decided to abandon President Omar al-Bashir, contributing to his overthrow. Sudan also received significant financial support from Qatar and agreed in 2018 to a $4 billion project to develop with the help of Turkey the Red Sea port of Suakin off Sudan’s coast. Turkey has a military base in Qatar; Saudi Arabia and Egypt feared Turkey intended to revive the Ottoman dream and build a military facility on Suakin. Early in 2019, probably to help ensure Sudan’s continued supply of troops in Yemen and to undercut Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE pledged $3 billion in aid to Sudan’s new military leaders. The civilian opposition movement in Sudan, which opposes military rule, interpreted this pledge as taking sides on behalf of the national army and the RSF. The overthrow of al-Bashir, the Saudi/UAE rupture with Qatar, and, most recently, creation of a combination military/civilian government in Sudan raise questions about the future of Sudanese troops in Yemen and whether the Qatar/Turkey project at Suakin will go forward.

In 2015, the UAE signed a 30-year lease with Eritrea for a major air base and small naval facility at the port of Assab immediately after UAE and Saudi troops had been evicted from Djibouti following a diplomatic incident in Djibouti involving the UAE. The sole purpose of this base is to support the war in Yemen, which the UAE, contrary to Saudi wishes, began to withdraw from during the second half of 2019. The UAE is also constructing a military base at Berbera in Somaliland and Saudi Arabia received permission to establish a base in Djibouti, but has not yet begun construction. As the UAE exits the war in Yemen, it raises questions as to the need for military bases in Assab and Berbera. While these bases earn foreign exchange for the African countries, they also drag them into Gulf disputes that they may one day regret. Ethiopia has retained diplomatic relations with Iran and refrained from choosing sides in Gulf State disputes but still managed to receive a pledge in 2018 from the UAE of $3 billion in aid and investments. Ethiopia may be sufficiently strong to avoid a UAE quid pro quo.

Some of the Gulf States’ most disruptive policies have occurred in Somalia, a fragile state threatened by the al-Shabaab terrorist organization and one struggling to maintain the loyalty of its federal components. The Gulf States continue to use these divisions for their own purposes. Turkey was the first to develop a strong relationship with the Somali central government in Mogadishu. By aligning with Qatar, which provided Mogadishu with more than $1 billion in aid, however, it has indirectly become involved in Gulf State intrigue in Somalia. Turkey has become Mogadishu’s most important foreign backer and invested $50 million in the establishment in 2017 of a military base staffed by 200 Turkish soldiers whose goal is to train more than 10,000 Somali soldiers. A Turkish company also operates the port of Mogadishu.

The Somali central government, although it broke relations with Iran and supports the war against the Houthis, balked at Saudi and UAE pressure to sever relations with Qatar. This refusal especially irritated Saudi Arabia’s largest trading partner and a source of significant financial aid. Mogadishu’s decision to maintain relations with Qatar is also linked to its unhappiness over UAE assistance to two of its autonomous federal components, Puntland and Jubaland, and to breakaway Somaliland. The UAE funds and trains the Puntland Maritime Police Force and supports its air wing in the port of Bosasso. This situation has not only worsened relations between Mogadishu and its federated states but led to disagreement within the central government concerning the wisdom of maintaining relations with Qatar. In the meantime, Somalia is trying to balance its relations between Qatar and the UAE.

Iran is a wild card in the Red Sea region. It is currently preoccupied with events in the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman and has no diplomatic relations with Red Sea littoral countries, thus limiting its actions. But its support for the Houthis still gives it leverage and, since 2008, Iranian warships have participated independently in the Gulf of Aden anti-piracy operation. This gave them periodic access to the Red Sea, which they used to smuggle weapons to Syria and Hamas in Gaza. At the end of 2018, Saudi Arabia was instrumental in establishing the Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden for the purpose of enhancing security, trade, and investment in the region. All of the Red Sea/Gulf of Aden littoral states except Eritrea and uninvited Israel are part of this new organization, which has a secondary goal of thwarting Iranian expansionism in the region. Saudi Arabia then hosted a joint drill with the seven countries for promoting naval security in the Red Sea region. Saudi-Egyptian competition for leadership in the region may, however, limit its effectiveness.
Current global competition

The inherent strategic importance of the Red Sea for commercial shipping and passage of warships has increased global attention to the region, especially in the aftermath of Somali piracy, the war in Yemen, growing tension between Arab states and Iran, persistent terrorist activity, and significant political change in countries such as Sudan and Ethiopia. While threats to shipping, drone and missile attacks on Saudi oil facilities, and rising tension between the Gulf States and Iran have recently focused international attention on the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, and Gulf of Oman, it would be a mistake to neglect what is happening in the Red Sea region, which is an equally fraught neighborhood.

Great Power (and not so great) competition has become a feature of the Red Sea region. This has become most evident with the proliferation of military bases in Djibouti. France has had a military presence in Djibouti dating back to the early days of colonial rule. The number of personnel assigned there has declined from 4,300 in 1978 to 1,450 today. The United States established a naval expeditionary base at Djibouti in 2001, primarily to combat terrorism in the region. Two years later it became a permanent military base and now hosts about 4,000 military and civilian personnel. Some 50 German military personnel have operated out of the French base in Djibouti since 2001 as a counterterrorism force and subsequently to protect shipping in the region. In 2008, Spain assigned about 50 military personnel to the French base to assist with protection of commercial shipping. In 2011, Japan established a base in Djibouti with about 200 personnel to support its anti-piracy contribution. India is reportedly in discussion with Japan concerning access to the base. Both Japan and India envisage Djibouti as a location from which to monitor Chinese military activity in the region. In 2013, Italy opened a military base, which averages 80 personnel at any given time, to support Italian naval activity in the region.

The most important new arrival in Djibouti is China, which in 2017 opened its first ever foreign military base. China's stated reasons for the base are to support the Somali anti-piracy operation in which Chinese naval vessels have participated since 2008, the emergency evacuation of Chinese nationals from the region, countering terrorism, and support for Chinese troops assigned to UN peacekeeping operations. China constructed a pier that can accommodate large warships. An estimated 2,000 Chinese military personnel are assigned to the base, but it may be able to accommodate up to 10,000 personnel. China reportedly allows Russia to use the facility; Russia requested permission to open a base at Djibouti, but was turned down by the Djiboutian government. U.S. officials have expressed concern about the purpose of the Chinese base and believe it portends additional Chinese military facilities in the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean region and the global expansion of China's economic and political influence.

Competition in the region is not confined to the establishment of numerous military installations at Djibouti. Among non-littoral Red Sea states, the United States can bring the most naval and air power to the Red Sea on short notice. In addition to the base at Djibouti, Bahrain is the location of two airbases, the Naval Forces Central Command, and the headquar-
Chinese and Russian naval vessels held a joint exercise in the Mediterranean and in 2019 both countries joined Egypt for an exercise in the Mediterranean. China and Russia are major arms suppliers to the region, especially the African side of the Red Sea. China’s popular nationalistic movie, “Operation Red Sea,” which is a highly fictional account of the People’s Liberation Army Navy’s (PLAN) evacuation in 2015 of some 800 Chinese and foreign nationals from Aden, only fuels this concern. The PLAN helped the Hong Kong studio film the movie. It is, however, the more assertive global foreign policy of Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin that has put the United States on edge. The stability and security of this region has become a central part of Xi Jinping’s principal foreign policy, the Belt and Road Initiative.

European members of NATO, especially those with military facilities at Djibouti, generally support U.S. interests in the Red Sea region. France, in particular, wants to maintain freedom of navigation through the Suez Canal and Red Sea to resupply its Indian Ocean overseas departments of Réunion and Mayotte, where it has a modest military presence. These and other small islands in the southern Indian Ocean give France control over 2.5 million square kilometers of exclusive economic zone. While the United Kingdom has pulled back significantly from the Red Sea region, it has about 400 British military personnel based in Kenya, opened a naval base in Bahrain, and a military training facility in Oman. In 2018, the UK deployed 20 troops from the Special Boat Service to protect its vessels after Houthi rebels in Yemen attacked an oil tanker in the Red Sea.

India and Japan are potential American allies in the Red Sea region. India is more important because it is closer but Japan has the stronger navy. India is seeking additional military bases in the Indian Ocean region, mainly to counter China’s rising military presence. It has reached an agreement with Oman for logistical support and is constructing military facilities on the Mauritian archipelago of Agalega that will enable India to sustain naval operations in the south-western Indian Ocean. The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden are among the sea lanes that are considered crucial to Japan’s maritime transport. Japan is expanding the role of its base at Djibouti to include emergency evacuation of Japanese nationals from the region. The base is also clearly an effort to counter China’s influence in the Red Sea region.

Iran, although currently an adversary of the United States, is preoccupied with developments closer to home. It has been pushed out of the Red Sea region by the Gulf States, but will at some point renew efforts to develop allies in the region and return as a major force. It continues periodically to send naval vessels to the Gulf of Aden and could theoretically mount a blockade of the Bab-el-Mandeb. It is highly unlikely, however, that Iranian vessels would be capable of maintaining a blockade for an extended period of time or would even risk doing so as they would be highly vulnerable to attack from the air.

Regional and global cooperation

There is a positive side to regional interaction and global engagement in the Red Sea region. The GCC states are an important source of investment in northeast Africa and non-regional states in Europe, Asia, and North America are important investors on both sides of the Red Sea. This investment creates jobs and aids economic growth. GCC investment in northeast Africa is arguably the most constructive aspect of the relationship. It can also result in profits for companies in GCC countries and, in the case of agricultural investment, improve food security in the Gulf States.

Aid to the region’s poorest countries is another positive contribution. The GCC countries and Turkey are aid donors to countries in northeast Africa and could help develop Yemen when the war ends. International development partners, including China, provide significant assistance to countries in northeast Africa. It is important that loans, especially those offered by China, not contribute excessively to debt. In an extreme case, for example, China holds an estimated 68 to 82% of Djibouti’s total external debt. At the same time, China’s loans financed a $590 million multipurpose port at Djibouti and an electrified railway from Djibouti to Addis Ababa.

Trade has both positive and negative effects but has not yet become an important part of the northeast Africa-Gulf State relationship. The Gulf States are, however, an important market for livestock from Somalia/Somaliland, Ethiopia, and Djibouti and charcoal from Somalia, which has serious negative environmental implications for Somalia. China is the largest trade partner with most countries in the Red Sea region. It runs a large trade surplus with the poorer countries such as Ethiopia, Egypt, and Djibouti but a sizeable trade deficit with energy suppliers such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Kuwait. Trade has the potential for becoming a more important positive factor if the countries of northeast Africa can substantially increase agricultural production and exports to the Gulf States, which import 80 to 90% of their food. The Gulf States also employ hundreds of thousands of workers from northeast Africa, thus reducing the unemployment problem.

There have been numerous occasions when non-regional countries have helped end or mitigate conflicts in the region. In 1991, the United States helped bring together the Ethiopian government and rebel forces as their war was coming to an end. In 1995, France was instrumental in bringing Eritrea and Yemen to the negotiating table to settle the dispute over the Hanish Islands. China played a key role in convincing Sudan to accept a hybrid UN/African
The military commands of the Defense Department place responsibility for Africa with the Africa Command based in Stuttgart, Germany, and for the Middle East, including Egypt, with the Central Command in Tampa, Florida. The Indo-Pacific Command also has an interest in the Red Sea region. Communication among these units is not always as good as it should be. The problem is further exacerbated because states in the region see the United States as largely absent from a policy perspective, although it does have a strong military presence. Increasingly, China is being looked to as the region's long-term partner.

In order to emphasize the importance that the United States attaches to the region and obtain a better understanding of the issues on both sides of the Red Sea, the United States could send a team from both regional bureaus of the State and Defense Departments at the deputy assistant secretary level or higher to key capitals in the Gulf States and northeast Africa. The team could include appropriate representatives from the Africa Command, Central Command, and Indo-Pacific Command. An additional option is to appoint a special envoy for Red Sea regional issues who would have responsibility for engaging countries on both sides of the Red Sea and for making policy recommendations.

Looking beyond increased U.S. engagement in the region, a strong argument can be made for creating an organization that brings together all nine of the Red Sea littoral states with some kind of participation by important contiguous countries such as Ethiopia and the other members of the GCC. No current organization, except for the United Nations and its sub-agency the International Maritime Organization (IMO), brings all of these countries together. Existing groups such as the African Union and Arab League have not been particularly effective in bridging the Red Sea divide. Bringing together all of these countries, including Israel, some of whom are not currently speaking to each other, would be a challenge. But if the mandate begins as a free-standing discussion forum or one managed by the UN or IMO, it might be feasible. One of the issues, at least for the littoral states, is the future development of undersea resources.

Moving forward
The complexity of issues in the Red Sea region is enormous and from the point of view of U.S. foreign policy further complicated by the fact that responsibility for them crosses bureaucratic lines in both the Department of State and Department of Defense. The State Department divides responsibility between the bureau in charge of Sub-Saharan African affairs and the one in charge of the Middle East and North Africa. The Department of Defense has a similar division of responsibility.
**discussion questions**

1. The United States during both the Obama and Trump administrations aligned with Saudi Arabia and the UAE in their war against the Houthis in Yemen, selling arms and providing air refueling. Has the time come to end that support?

2. For the most part, the Trump administration has not shown much interest in the conflicts of the Red Sea region. Should it be more engaged, for example, in efforts to encourage democratization in Ethiopia, transition to a civilian government in Sudan, and resolve differences between Saudi Arabia/UAE and Qatar/Turkey?

3. In view of its close security relationships with Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Turkey; how does the United States manage this horribly complex situation?

4. What is the threat to the future of the only permanent U.S. military base in Africa at Djibouti? How can the United States minimize any potential threat?

5. The foreign policy focus of the Trump administration is strategic competition with China and Russia. Is this the best policy for the Red Sea region? Are there areas where cooperation makes more sense, especially in the case of China?

6. How will China’s Belt and Road Initiative impact development in the Red Sea region? Is China’s role in the region seen as positive by the regional countries? By non-regional countries?

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**suggested readings**


Lackner, Helen. *Yemen in Crisis: Road to War*. 352 pp. Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2019. The democratic promise of the 2011 Arab Spring has unraveled in Yemen, triggering a disastrous crisis of civil war, famine, militarization, and governmental collapse with serious implications for the future of the region. Yet as expert political researcher Helen Lackner argues, the catastrophe does not have to continue, and we can hope for, and help build, a different future in Yemen.

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and click on the topic under Resources, on the right-hand side of the page.