

The Boiling Water of the Red Sea: Power Struggles and Israel's Interests

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The Red Sea basin includes 12 states with a combined population of around 300 million. On the eastern shore lie Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel share the Gulf of Eilat/Aqaba. On the African coast of the Red Sea are Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, and Djibouti. The Red Sea basin also includes Ethiopia, with no direct access to the sea, as well as Somaliland and Somalia, which are located in the Gulf of Aden, opposite the shores of Yemen, at the entrance to the Red Sea. In geographical terms, the Red Sea divides between Africa in the west and Asia in the east, and forms part of the Syrian-African rift. In geopolitical terms, throughout history the Red Sea served as one of the most vital trade routes in the world, connecting Europe and the west on the one hand with the Middle East on the other. Today it is the busiest trade route in the world. For this reason, Egypt is of particular importance in the territory of the Red Sea – it constitutes a bridge between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean – as are Yemen, Djibouti, and Somalia, which are located on both sides of the straits of Bab al-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden, at the southern entrance to the Red Sea. Likewise, the Red Sea was the maritime route via which every year millions of Muslim pilgrims from all over the world made their way to Mecca and al-Medina, the two holiest cities of Islam, which are located in Saudi Arabia.

In the past two decades, and all the more forcefully in the past year, three factors have threatened the freedom of navigation in the Red Sea, making it one of the “hottest” areas in the world and an arena for rivalry and competition between superpowers and regional powers alike. These factors are: the activities of terror organizations linked to al-Qaeda and Daesh in Somalia and Yemen, Somali pirates, and the war in Yemen.

Considering the need to guarantee freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and to eradicate the elements threatening it, and in the framework of ongoing economic and political struggles, the great powers and other countries established military bases in the southern Red Sea basin and took control of its main ports. Djibouti houses French, US, EU, Japanese, Italian, and Chinese military bases, making it the country with the most foreign military bases in the world. The construction of the Chinese base in Djibouti results from the competition between China, on the one hand, and India and Japan, on the other, for hegemony in the Indian Ocean. As part of this struggle, which has been underway for the past decade, both sides have established military bases and ports in the area. In recent months, Russia too

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once again returned to the Red Sea and is active therein on both the military and economic plains. According to unverified reports, Russia is in contact with the government of Somaliland regarding the construction of a military base in its territory. Moreover, the Russian government signed agreements with Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia regarding the establishment of civilian nuclear power stations.

In parallel to the struggle between the great powers for influence and hegemony in the Indian Ocean and Djibouti, a similar battle is underway in the Red Sea between the local powers. This battle began a year ago, in June 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Egypt, and Mauritania severed relations with Qatar. The diplomatic crisis between the Gulf states affected the balance of power between the rival states in the Red Sea Basin. Saudi Arabia and the UAE regard the shores of Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Sudan as their western buffer zone against the war in Yemen and in defense of one of the world's most important trade routes. Qatar and Turkey, for their part, are trying to prevent Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt from expanding their influence in this area.

This activity is characterized, mainly, by the construction of military bases or the leasing and management of ports: the competing sides exploit to their advantage existing rivalries between the countries in the Red Sea Basin in order to achieve their aims and, in so doing, also restrain one another. Thus, for example, Turkey has a military base in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, while the UAE leased and is establishing a base at the port of Berbera in Somaliland and has a base in the port city of Assab in Eritrea. Turkey is constructing a military base on the island of Suakin, which is located in Sudan. So too Ethiopia, which has no access to the sea, is exploiting the situation to guarantee itself a maritime gateway by leasing or purchasing shares in strategic ports such as Berbera in Somaliland, Djibouti, and Port Sudan.

Simultaneously, an additional battle is underway among the countries of the Nile basin – Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia – regarding the construction of the Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile in Ethiopia. Egypt fears that the completion of this project and its use for development purposes will significantly reduce the amount of water flowing through the Nile into its territory. Furthermore, Egypt fears that the penetration of Turkey and Qatar into Sudan is likely to renew its dispute with Sudan regarding the control of the Hala'ib Triangle on the shores of the Red Sea. In the meantime, a breakthrough has occurred in the negotiations between Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia regarding the Dam and this is likely to lead to an arrangement between the countries.

In economic terms, the Red Sea Basin constitutes a massive leverage for development in the fields of energy, environment, infrastructure, trade, and tourism. Environmentally, many renewable energy projects are in progress in the Red Sea Basin, including the construction of civilian nuclear cores in Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, as well as the building of desalination facilities, and the Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia; the latter is intended to provide electricity. Likewise, many tourist projects are situated throughout the basin. Alongside these projects, pursued by every state independently, joint projects between a number of countries in the basin are also in progress. These include infrastructure projects funded by the Chinese in Ethiopia and Djibouti, the construction of the city of Neom – which is designed to connect Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan – the King Salman Bridge Project connecting Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and the Red Sea-Dead Sea Conveyance (Two Seas Canal) project involving Israel and Jordan, which has not been realized.

From Israel's perspective, developments in the Red Sea basin are not only a topic for theoretical discussion but constitute an important factor in how the country perceives the current reality, as well as its security and economic interests. Israel is an additional player located on the shore of the Red Sea and is also active in this arena. The Gulf of Eilat is Israel's gateway to the Red Sea: from there Israeli merchant ships sail to countries in the Far East and Eastern Africa. Therefore, ensuring freedom of navigation in the Red Sea is a vital Israeli interest. For this reason, from Israel's perspective the closure of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli ships twice – in 1956 and again in 1967– constituted grounds for war. Israel anchored the freedom of navigation for its ships in the Red Sea in the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan.

In parallel, Israel has endeavored to bolster the freedom of navigation in the southern Red Sea using a combination of political activity vis à vis the non-Arab states in the area – Ethiopia, and subsequently Eritrea – and, from the 1990s onwards, vis à vis Djibouti, Somaliland, and Somalia. Likewise, Israel strove to build military bases, eradicate weapons smuggling to Hamas in the Gaza strip and probably also took part in the War in Yemen, alongside the coalition forces led by the Saudi Arabia.

Israel has good informal relations with Djibouti. The two countries have reached an understanding, without a written agreement, regarding the anchoring of Israeli ships in the port of Djibouti and the passage of El Al flights through its air space. Israeli entrepreneurs pursue business interests in the country and, on occasion, conversations also take place between representatives of the two states. In recent years there has been contact between the Israeli and Somalian heads of state, and Israel refuses to recognize Somaliland as an independent state, despite the latter's strategic location in the Gulf of Aden, at the entrance to the Red Sea.

With regard to security, Israel and Saudi Arabia share a number of security interests: the battle against Iran and against Daesh and other terror organizations. As a result, the relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia are warming up. Evidence of this are the latter's unprecedented statements regarding Israel's right to exist and the right of the Jewish people to a national state, together with meetings between senior Saudi and Israeli leaders and covert security cooperation. So too, Israel and Egypt cooperate on the security and military levels to eradicate terror organizations and radical Islam in the Sinai Peninsula.

Politically, Israel's situation in the Red Sea basin has never been better. For the first time in its history, Israel has contacts, secret relations, or diplomatic links with all the countries in the Red Sea Basin apart from Yemen. This is light-years away from the situation Israel found itself in at the beginning of its history, when it was isolated and, in the 1950s, had diplomatic relations only with Ethiopia.

Yet this situation does not translate into cooperation on the economic level. One of the best examples of this is the Two Seas Canal project, in cooperation with Jordan, which is not progressing. However, the unrealized potential for joint projects in the Red Sea Basin is far greater, particularly considering that many private Israeli companies possess significant environmental knowledge which is in high demand among the countries of the area: in the fields of agriculture, water, transport, energy, and greenhouse crops. These companies can offer highly significant contributions to projects such as the city of Neom, the establishment of desalination facilities, cost-effective irrigation, development of renewable energies, water conservation, and more.

Additional shared interests exist in the field of tourism. These include a joint Israeli, Egyptian, Jordanian, and Saudi Arabian effort to defend the maritime and coastal environment – in particular, the coral reefs and fish in the Gulf of Eilat/Aqaba – from destruction and damage by pollutants and accumulating waste, as well as cultivating religious tourism to the holy sites in Saudi Arabia and Israel. These interests are not realized due to the current political situation: Israel has no diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Djibouti. At the same time, cooperation is limited even vis à vis those countries with which Israel has diplomatic relations, such as Egypt and Jordan.

All these developments on the security, political, and economic levels make the Red Sea basin a very dynamic and volatile area, subject to frequent and rapid vicissitudes. Therefore, Israel must exploit this window of opportunity and examine how it can integrate further into the arena, both economically and politically.