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THE RED SEA SECURITY



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Sudan Democracy First Group

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ZAWAYA

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THE RED SEA

IS NOT A PASSAGE BETWEEN OTHER
PEOPLE'S WARS

THE EDITORIAL TEAM



Photography : ISSAM HAFIEZ

This issue of Zawaya is devoted to the Red Sea basin because the region has moved from the margins of international reporting to the center of a connected crisis. Conflict in Sudan, insecurity off Yemen, renewed piracy near Somalia, competition over ports and military access, and the spread of drones and other low-cost weapons, have made the sea a place where local fragility and global power meet.

The urgency is not only commercial; It concerns sovereignty, civilian life, regional agency, and the question of whether the Red Sea will be governed as a shared political space or treated merely as a corridor to be policed for the benefit of others.

The Red Sea is frequently described as a route: a narrow body of water joining the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, a shortcut for cargo, oil, and containers moving between Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Gulf. That description is true, but it is no longer sufficient. A route is something people pass through. A region is somewhere people live.

For Sudanese readers, for nations across the Horn of Africa, and for readers in the Middle East, the Red Sea is not an abstract line on a political map. It is tied to the price of food, the survival of ports, the movement of families, the security of coastal communities, the circulation of weapons, the future of national sovereignty, and the possibility of regional cooperation. It connects Port Sudan to Jeddah, Hodeidah to Djibouti, Massawa to Suez, Berbera to Aden, and the Gulf of Aden to the wider Indian Ocean. Its crises do not stay in one place because the region itself has never been divided neatly into separate worlds.

This is why Zawaya dedicates its second issue to Red Sea Security.

We do so at a moment when the sea has become a pressure point in a broader regional confrontation within a changing global order marked by fierce competition for control of strategic locations including the Red Sea.

The Red Sea cannot be understood only through the language of disrupted trade. It is increasingly

a theatre where wars on land are projected into the water. The attacks and threats around Bab al Mandeb have shown how a non-state actor using drones, missiles, and inexpensive asymmetric tools can impose strategic costs on some of the world's most powerful navies and commercial fleets. A vessel need not be sunk for the consequences to be felt; The anticipation of attack alone can reroute trade, reshape insurance markets, alter military deployments, and change diplomatic calculations. For Sudan, the Red Sea has acquired a new and painful significance. Port Sudan has become a lifeline: a seat of government, a humanitarian gateway, a commercial artery, and a refuge from violence elsewhere. Sudan's humanitarian emergency remains vast, with millions displaced and large parts of the country facing an unprecedented humanitarian situation. The security of Port Sudan and the wider eastern corridor therefore cannot be separated from the security of Sudanese civilians.

At the same time, Sudan's war has become entangled with a wider contest over influence across the Red Sea. Regional and international powers are increasing their military, political, and commercial engagement across the corridor, while Sudan's coastline, resources, ports, and diplomatic alignment have gained strategic importance. The question is not whether outside powers have interests in Sudan; they plainly do. The question is whether those interests will reinforce Sudanese sovereignty and civilian recovery, or deepen the conditions that keep the country fragmented and militarised.

The issue includes an examination of emerging technologies and their impact on Red Sea security, an article written by Dr. Gada Kadoda. She elucidates how drones, satellite imagery, automated tracking systems, digital navigation, cyber vulnerabilities, and low-cost precision weapons are changing the relationship between geography and power. A coastline, a small boat, a mobile launcher, or a data link can now influence routes that sustain entire economies. Technology has not made the sea more predictable; it has made insecurity more widely distributed.

Omayma Gutabi questions the role of the African Union and the disconnect between the African Union Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), and its maritime security frameworks. The escalating security situation in the Red Sea makes the role of the African Union more than an institutional matter. It is a test of whether African political agency can shape the security architecture of a sea bordered extensively by African states. A durable approach to the Red Sea security cannot bypass African institutions. By the same token, the African Union's security architecture should place more emphasis on maritime security.

Across the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea crisis is exposing the limitations of a familiar model: treat the sea as dangerous, deploy military assets, protect the shipping lane, and leave the political conditions on land unresolved.

Somalia offers a clear example. Piracy was once presented as a problem solved through international naval patrols and hardened shipping practices. But piracy did not disappear because the underlying questions of governance, coastal livelihoods, political exclusion, illicit economies, and insecurity had been settled. It receded under pressure, then found space to re-emerge. Mr. Abdlla Gereida's contribution discusses how antipiracy strategies created a security vacuum in maritime security in Somalia.

The rise in piracy does not mean that Somalia is merely a source of danger to global trade. It means that maritime insecurity cannot be separated from insecurity on land. A security strategy that protects ships but does not invest in accountable institutions, economic dignity, coastal communities, and political settlement creates only a temporary calm and ultimately leaves behind a security vacuum.

Dr. Mossa Hussen Negash examines how the Horn of Africa is becoming increasingly embedded in Middle Eastern security calculations. Ports, access agreements, infrastructure projects, intelligence cooperation, military training, and foreign military facilities are increasingly transforming the African and Arabian shores of the Red Sea into a single

strategic space. The issue is not this interlocking of interests between the Horn of Africa and the Middle East itself, but whether these arrangements are transparent and accountable, shaped by the region's peoples and institutions, and able to prevent fragile states and coastal territories from becoming bargaining chips in geopolitical rivalries driven elsewhere.

Dr. Babiker Elyas argues that trade requires more than safe passage. It rather requires functioning institutions, predictable rules, secure infrastructure, stable communities, fair labour conditions, effective customs systems, and cooperation between states. Furthermore, trade necessitates a recognition that the people living around the Red Sea should not be treated as an obstacle between global commerce and its destination.

This issue examines the legal and institutional dimensions of the Red Sea crisis through the article of Dr. Mohammed Saeed Altayed, "Law, Security, and Governance in the Red Sea: Reassessing the International Legal Order of a Strategic Maritime Corridor." The article considers how international law, maritime governance, coastal-state sovereignty, freedom of navigation, and external security arrangements shape the political future of the region. It asks whether the existing legal order can respond to the realities of conflicts, militarisation, and unequal power in the Red Sea, or whether a more regionally grounded framework is needed, one that treats the states and peoples along its shores as participants in shaping security rather than simply as the setting in which it is enforced.

In regards to the pedagogical contributions produced about and on Sudan, Magdi El Na'im continues his research and documentation through the 'Shattered Sovereignty: An Annotated Bibliography on Sudan's war'. Needless to say that security is also shaped by how conflict is explained and interpreted. What language is used to describe the war? Which histories are included, and which are omitted and why? Who is treated as an expert? Which external roles are examined seriously, and which are softened into the vocabulary of "interests," "partnerships," and "stability"?

In the section on culture and the arts, the inclusion of Red Sea music represented by Hadandawa music, follows the same editorial conviction. Security discourse often makes the region appear as a set of threats, bases, chokepoints, and competing claims. Music restores another truth: the Red Sea has always been a space of movement, memory, exchange, and cultural creativity. Songs, rhythms, instruments, migration routes, and port-city cultures carry histories that predate contemporary military maps and modern states. They show that the sea has linked Africa and the Middle East not only through conflict and commerce, but through the everyday creation of shared worlds and rhythms by the people who live along its shores. Dr. Mohammed Adam's Suliman's Abu Albashar testifies that: to write about security without listening to those worlds would be to reproduce the very narrowness this issue seeks to challenge.

This issue does not argue that military threats are unreal, that trade does not require protection, or that the region can be secured through sentiment alone. The dangers are real: armed attacks at sea, weapons trafficking, piracy, war economies, state collapse, environmental damage, and the spread of conflict across borders. However, Red Sea security is also increasingly shaped by global strategic

competition, including contests over surveillance infrastructure, intelligence access, data collection, maritime monitoring, port control, and military presence. Certain states pursue these capabilities not only to protect shipping or deter armed threats, but also to expand political influence, secure strategic advantage, and advance competing regional and ideological projects. The central question, therefore, is not whether security measures are necessary, but whose security they serve, who defines the threats, and whether the resulting arrangements strengthen the sovereignty, safety, and political agency of the peoples and states along the Red Sea. The broader readership we address, across Sudan, the Horn of Africa, and the Middle East, is not a peripheral audience to this discussion. It is the constituency most entitled to shape it. The future of the Red Sea security cannot be decided exclusively in naval headquarters, commercial boardrooms, or capitals far from its shores.

The Red Sea is not empty water between other people's wars. It is a region in its own right: economically indispensable, politically contested, culturally alive, and inhabited by peoples whose futures cannot be treated as collateral damage to the protection of global trade.

This issue of Zawaya begins from that recognition.



Photography: ISSAM HAFIEZ

FORTIFIED HORN:

THE SECURITY IMPLICATIONS OF MIDDLE EASTERN STATE RIVALRY IN THE HORN OF AFRICA AND THE RED SEA REGION

Mossa Hussen Negash

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the security dynamics of the Horn of Africa (HoA) through the lens of Middle Eastern rivalries and military expansionism. Once tied by geography, commerce, and culture, the HoA-Middle East nexus has entered a militarized phase since 2015, driven by the Yemeni civil war, the 2017 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) rift, Red Sea security, containing their regional rivals and proxies. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and Turkey have engaged heavily in investment, the acquisition of strategic ports and military infrastructure across the HoA. Drawing on Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and the concept of subordinate subsystems, the paper evaluates this engagement's double-edged nature. While Middle Eastern capital and mediation have yielded temporary financial support and diplomatic role; notably the 2018 Ethio-Eritrean rapprochement, such involvement has "fortified" the HoA, exporting security problems, weaponizing domestic cleavages, disrupting regional balances, and marginalizing the AU and IGAD. Without a comprehensive multilateral framework for the Red Sea space, the HoA risks becoming an unstable proxy theater of extra-regional competition.

Dr. Mossa Hussen Negash: specializes in Horn of Africa and Red Sea security, geopolitics, Ethiopian foreign policy, hydropolitics, and peacebuilding.

INTRODUCTION

The geographic proximity between the HoA and the Middle East is defined by the narrow strategic Bab al-Mandeb strait, a mere 27 kilometers separating Djibouti from Yemen's coast, is both a maritime artery and a fault line of asymmetric vulnerability. For centuries, both regions have mutually shaped each other's political, economic, and socio-cultural landscapes; insecurity on one shore of the Red Sea invariably generates ripple effects across the other. For HoA states that depend on the Red Sea corridor, the stakes are not merely economic but increasingly existential. Eritrea, Sudan, Djibouti, and Somalia command a critical share of the Red Sea coastline, making them indispensable nodes in competing external power strategies. Ethiopia, landlocked since Eritrean independence in 1993 yet the sub region's most populous and economically consequential state, has recently articulated with growing urgency its ambition to reclaim maritime access. With the partial exception of Djibouti, these states are simultaneously gripped by profound internal crises and positioned at the epicenter of twenty-first-century geopolitical competition, a convergence that is systematically deepening their instability.

While historically vulnerable to great power competition and presence, the post-9/11 period substantially intensified external powers' militarized presence in the HoA. Today, more than a dozen foreign powers- including the United States, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Japan, China, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and UAE, among others - maintain military bases and footprints across the region (Negash & Salih, 2023; Negash 2022). This paper is focused exclusively on the most consequential current dynamic which is the aggressive power projection of Middle Eastern states involving militarized and securitized presences and its ramifications to the sub-region.

Gulf monarchies, principally Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, alongside Turkey, Iran, and Israel, have systematically exported their intra-regional rivalries into the Red Sea littoral. Through forward military bases, strategic port acquisitions, and transactional

clientelist networks with local elites, these actors compound the HoA's structural fragility through accelerating militarization. This paper critically examines these dynamics, tracing their theoretical foundations, historical antecedents, contemporary catalysts, and long-term security implications for the region.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

To analyze the deepening entanglement between the HoA and Middle Eastern security dynamics, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) offers helpful analytical insights. Developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003), RSCT theorizes that international security is organized into regional security complexes, i.e., clusters of states whose security concerns are so profoundly interdependent that they cannot be meaningfully analyzed in isolation. Classically, the Middle East Regional Security Complex (MERSC) and the HoA Regional Security Complex (HOARSC) have been treated as distinct formations, insulated from one another by the geographic buffer of the Red Sea.

The intensity of extra-regional penetration over the past decade has fundamentally destabilized this demarcation. Scholars now debate whether the MERSC has effectively subsumed the HOARSC, or whether the HoA functions as an asymmetric subordinate subsystem which is partly integrated into the Middle East's broader security architecture without possessing equivalent structural agency (Donelli & Gonzalez-Levaggi, 2021; Kimaita, 2026). The evidence supports an interregional embedded security model, consistent with Woodward's (2002) formulation of an "Afro-Middle Eastern sub-region," in which Middle Eastern dynamics are not merely external pressures upon the HoA but constitutive features of its security environment. Crucially, these influences are asymmetric: the Middle East projects onto the HoA; the reverse rarely applies with comparable force.

This asymmetry is theoretically illuminated by defensive and offensive neorealist frameworks. Middle Eastern states exploit the HoA's economic vulnerabilities and institutional fragility to maximize

their security, deter rivals, and prevent encirclement by establishing external buffer zones (Mearsheimer, 2001). HoA states are thereby rendered structural recipients of externally generated security risks, transforming the Red Sea corridor into a trans-regional sub-complex defined by profound asymmetric dependency.

HISTORICAL TRANS-REGIONAL SECURITY INTERACTIONS

The contemporary penetration of the HoA by Middle Eastern powers represents not a historical anomaly but an intensification of long-standing trans-regional security dynamics. Following decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, newly independent African and Middle Eastern states forged alignments across the Red Sea. During the Cold War, conflicts in the HoA including the Sudanese civil war, the Eritrean liberation struggle, and the 1977–1978 Ethio-Somalia War were consistently exacerbated by spillover Middle Eastern rivalries.

These interventions are guided by pragmatic realist calculus rather than ideological affinity. Egypt consistently supported Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrean insurgents as part of its strategy to safeguard its hydro-political hegemony over the Nile, while Israel cultivated close security ties with Ethiopia to prevent the Red Sea from becoming an "Arab Lake" (Woodward, 2002). The resulting alliance patterns were highly fluid. During the Ethio-Somalia War, Syria and Iraq supported Somalia, whereas Libya and South Yemen aligned with Ethiopia's Marxist Derg regime despite Ethiopia's simultaneous security cooperation with Israel.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia shifted from supporting Emperor Haile Selassie to backing Eritrean and Somali forces after Ethiopia aligned with the Soviet Union, illustrating that balance-of-power considerations routinely outweighed ideological commitments (Woodward, 2002). By the late 1980s and early 1990s, Sudan's military partnership with Iran prompted Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel to support Eritrea as part of a broader effort to contain Iranian influence (Lefebvre, 1996). Consequently, the Arab-Israeli rivalry and divisions

between conservative and radical Arab states were repeatedly projected into the HoA. Major conflicts in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia all reflected the spillover of Middle Eastern rivalries (Khan, 2018; Verhoeven, 2018). Overall, despite cultural and religious affinities, Middle Eastern engagement in the HoA has been driven predominantly by pragmatic geopolitical calculations rather than ideology (Lefebvre, 1996; Negash, 2022).

DRIVERS OF POST-2015 MILITARIZATION AND SECURITIZATION

While historical interactions were focused on diplomatic and subversive activities, the post-2015 period marks a structural break characterized by the establishment of military bases, the strategic acquisition of commercial ports, and the direct operational integration of HoA states into active Middle Eastern conflicts. Four interlocking factors drove this transformation.

First, the outbreak of the Yemeni war in 2015, pitting the internationally recognized government against the Iranian-backed Houthi insurgency, transformed the HoA into an indispensable operational flank for the Saudi-led coalition. Fearing geopolitical encirclement by Iranian proxies along vital maritime chokepoints, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi elevated the HoA to a primary national security priority. To enforce a naval blockade and launch aerial campaigns across the Gulf of Aden, the UAE and Saudi Arabia acquired strategic military installations, notably developing a major naval and air logistics base at the Eritrean port of Assab and utilizing facilities in Djibouti. This intervention effectively integrated these African states into active combat operations, with Sudan and Eritrea deploying ground forces to the Yemeni theater in exchange for critical financial injections and diplomatic support.

Second, the 2017 the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) diplomatic rupture turning Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain against Qatar, directly brought in intra-Gulf factionalism onto the HoA's pre-existing domestic fractures. GCC states leveraged financial dependency to compel fragile HoA governments

to abandon neutrality. Saudi Arabia and the UAE successfully pressured Djibouti, Eritrea, and Sudan into downgrading ties with Qatar and Iran, securing operational depth for their Yemeni campaign. Qatar's subsequent withdrawal of peacekeeping troops from the disputed Doumeira Islands triggered an immediate Eritrean military re-occupation, destabilizing the Eritrea-Djibouti border overnight. Simultaneously, the UAE bypassed Somalia's Federal Government to negotiate autonomous port and military concessions directly with the semi-autonomous regions of Somaliland and Puntland, severely eroding Mogadishu's federal authority and deepening center-periphery fractures (De Waal, 2018). Turkey countered by anchoring its strategy in Mogadishu by establishing the TURKSOM military training complex and assuming Mogadishu port management, cementing a rival axis in direct competition with Emirati influence (Donelli, 2021).

Third, the perceived retrenchment of American hegemonic engagement created a strategic vacuum that Gulf monarchies, Turkey, and Iran moved to fill, each projecting influence according to distinct geopolitical and commercial imperatives. Fourth, political transitions in Ethiopia (2018) and Sudan (2019) which had briefly generated cautious optimism for regional stabilization instead produced catastrophic civil conflicts that external actors swiftly instrumentalized. In Sudan's war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and in Ethiopia's Tigray conflict, competing external patrons backed rival factions, entrenching proxy networks and rendering both crises increasingly intractable. Together, these four dynamics transformed the HoA from a peripheral zone of Middle Eastern interest into a permanently contested strategic theater.

PROXY BATTLEFIELDS AND THE EROSION OF REGIONAL AGENCY

The structural consequence of sustained external penetration in the HoA is increasingly organized around asymmetric patron-client relations that simultaneously produce superficial stabilization and accelerate insecurity. At the level of apparent benefit, Gulf mediation has yielded, if fragile,

diplomatic achievements. The most consequential was the 2018 Ethio-Eritrean rapprochement, brokered through Saudi and Emirati diplomatic and financial mediation, which ended two decades of military stalemate and facilitated Eritrea's reintegration into the regional diplomatic fold. Gulf capital also provided critical financial lifelines to economically isolated states, including Eritrea and Sudan, while the UAE DP World's port infrastructure investments and Gulf countries contributions to counter-piracy operations along the Red Sea corridor constitute tangible, if transactional, security dividends. Besides, Turkish mediated the Ankara Declaration averted the hostile Ethiopia-Somalia relation following the signing of MoU between Ethiopia and Somaliland.

These gains are, however, counterbalanced by a far heavier cost. First, Gulf financial patronage has actively enabled authoritarianism across the sub-region. Unconditional sovereign wealth fund transfers and security assistance insulate authoritarian ruling elites from domestic reform pressures, reinforcing coercive state structures without any conditionality linked to political transition (Donelli, 2021). The 2018 rapprochement itself exemplifies this structural fragility: it has since collapsed, with Eritrea now deeply entangled in Ethiopia's civil conflict and allegedly supporting insurgent forces against the Abiy Ahmed government, demonstrating that Gulf-mediated breakthroughs remain acutely vulnerable to the underlying instabilities they fail to address.

Second, the proxy architecture has grown markedly more complex and dangerous since 2022. Overlapping rivalries such as the Saudi-UAE contest for regional primacy, the Turkey-Qatar bloc versus Saudi-UAE, and the broader Gulf-Iran antagonism play out simultaneously across HoA territory. Sudan's civil war encapsulates this layering starkly: Eritrea, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey reportedly backed the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), while the UAE and Ethiopia were alleged to have supported the (RSF). External actors allegedly committed to regional stability were thus simultaneously fueling the sub-region's most devastating active conflict, demonstrating how patron competition

systematically deepens rather than resolves the crises it exploits. Furthermore, the UAE-operated Assab base was reportedly weaponized during the Tigray War as a launchpad for drone strikes against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), recently, international investigation reports and Sudanese officials have accused Ethiopia of providing military bases and training camps funded by UAE in the Benishangul-Gumuz region to Sudan's RSF (Paravicini & Levinson, 2026, February 10), illustrating how foreign military assets embedded in the HoA can be directly integrated into domestic civil wars, altering their trajectory and intensifying humanitarian catastrophe.

Third, Israel's formal recognition of Somaliland on December 26, 2025, introduced a structurally significant new layer of competition. The move provides Israel with strategic depth to monitor and counter Houthi operations and Iranian influence along the Red Sea. It has crystallized a nascent "Berbera Axis" linking Israel, the UAE, and Ethiopia centered on port access and maritime surveillance. This is directly opposed by a "Mogadishu Axis"-Somalia, Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia that mobilized around the defense of Somali federal sovereignty. The UAE's military footprint at Berbera, now potentially perceived as an Israeli operational asset, risks making Somaliland a target of Houthi retaliation, effectively importing the Yemen conflict's frontlines onto the African coast. Al-Shabaab, meanwhile, has instrumentalized the broader presence of foreign military bases to amplify anti-colonial recruitment narratives and expand its operational reach demonstrating how external militarization generates enabling conditions for non-state extremism.

The defining institutional failure underpinning all of these dynamics is the near-total marginalization of African governance frameworks. The AU and IGAD have proven structurally incapable financially and politically of managing or constraining the transactional diplomacy deployed by wealthy external patrons. Saudi Arabia's creation of the Red Sea Council in January 2020, while nominally addressing this vacuum, exemplifies the problem it purports to solve: by restricting membership to Red

Sea littoral states, the council explicitly excludes Ethiopia, the HoA's demographic, economic, and strategic heavyweight, feeding Addis Ababa's deep suspicion that the framework functions as an Arab-dominated instrument for controlling maritime security while marginalizing non-Arab African states. Rather than fostering inclusive regional governance, the current institutional configuration reinforces fragmentation, leaving the HoA's security dynamics subject to unregulated competition between external patrons with no effective African institutional counterweight.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of the HoA into a "fortified" subordinate subsystem of the Middle East represents one of the most significant geopolitical shifts in contemporary HoA international relations. Driven by the Yemeni Civil War, the GCC split, the Iran-Gulf antagonism, and the accelerating contest over Red Sea dominance, Middle Eastern state actors have successfully projected their rivalries and security architectures onto the African coastline with severe regional consequences.

While Gulf and Turkish engagement has provided selective financial lifelines and brief diplomatic breakthroughs, the structural costs are far more durable: eroded state sovereignty, weaponized sub-state fragmentation, accelerated de-democratization, disrupted regional balances of power, and the systematic marginalization of the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) as legitimate governance actors. The HoA is locked into an asymmetric dependency that renders its internal stability acutely vulnerable to political fluctuations on the Arabian Peninsula, a dynamic that the recognition of Somaliland by Israel, and the emergence of rival Berbera and Mogadishu axis, has further entrenched.

Sustainable stabilization demands a fundamental reorientation away from the transactional, elite-driven bilateral arrangements that currently define the subregion's external relations. What the HoA urgently requires is a genuinely inclusive multilateral

governance architecture — one that integrates both littoral and strategically consequential landlocked states across the Red Sea corridor, and that places African institutional agency at its center rather than at its margins. Without such a framework, the

HoA will remain what it is increasingly becoming: a theater in which the security imperatives of extra-regional rivalries systematically override the sovereignty, stability, and political agency of the region's own peoples and states.



Photography : ISSAM HAFIEZ

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LAW, SECURITY, AND GOVERNANCE IN THE RED SEA:

REASSESSING THE INTERNATIONAL LEGAL ORDER OF A STRATEGIC MARITIME CORRIDOR

Mohamed Saeed M. Eltayeb

ABSTRACT

The Red Sea has re-emerged as one of the most strategically significant maritime corridors in the international system. Connecting Europe, Asia, and Africa through the Suez Canal and the Bab al-Mandab Strait, it serves as a central artery for global trade, energy transit, and naval mobility. Recent attacks on commercial shipping, regional armed conflicts, piracy, and growing geopolitical competition have exposed deep vulnerabilities in the legal and governance frameworks regulating this corridor. This article argues that although the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) continues to provide the foundational legal framework for navigation rights, state responsibilities, and maritime jurisdiction, it is no longer sufficient on its own to manage the hybrid and multi-layered threats confronting the Red Sea. Implementation gaps, fragmented regional politics, and the rise of non-state armed actors have severely limited its effectiveness. Consequently, this article proposes a more coordinated and regionally grounded governance model that integrates international law, collective security cooperation, and sustainable maritime governance. It concludes that the Red Sea constitutes a significant case study for evaluating the adaptability of contemporary international legal institutions.

Dr. Mohamed Saeed M. Eltayeb: A constitutional law expert and human rights consultant who holds a Ph.D. in international human rights law

The Red Sea occupies a pivotal position in the global maritime order, serving as a strategic corridor linking the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean through the Suez Canal and the Bab al-Mandab Strait. A substantial proportion of international trade and energy shipments transit this route, making its stability essential to global economic prosperity and maritime security. Consequently, disruptions in the region generate repercussions that extend far beyond the Red Sea littoral states, affecting international supply chains, transportation costs, and global markets.

Recent developments have underscored the vulnerability of this strategic waterway. Since late 2023, escalating attacks against commercial shipping in the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, including missile strikes, drone attacks, and vessel seizures, have intensified concerns regarding maritime security. These incidents have compelled many shipping companies to reroute vessels around the Cape of Good Hope, significantly increasing transit times, insurance premiums, and operational costs².

Against this backdrop, this article examines whether the existing international legal framework governing the Red Sea remains adequate to address contemporary security challenges. It argues that although international maritime law provides established principles relating to navigation, sovereignty, and security, persistent conflicts, proxy warfare, and the activities of armed non-state actors expose limitations in the practical enforcement of these norms. The Red Sea therefore represents a critical case study for assessing the capacity of international law to respond to hybrid security threats and fragmented governance environments³.

More broadly, this article contends that maritime governance is increasingly shaped by polycentric arrangements involving states, international organizations, regional institutions, naval coalitions, and private actors, reflecting a significant transformation in the structure of the contemporary international order⁴.

The Red Sea has served as a strategic trade route since antiquity. Successive imperial systems - including the Ancient Egyptian, Roman, Ottoman, and later British empires - recognized its importance as a primary connector between continents. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 further enhanced this strategic significance by dramatically reducing maritime travel distances between Europe and Asia.

Control over Red Sea access points has long been intrinsically linked with power projection. During the Cold War era, both Western and Soviet blocs aggressively sought ideological and military influence among coastal states to secure strategic leverage. In the post-Cold War era, the region has witnessed the arrival of a broader array of strategic actors, including the Gulf states, China, Turkey, and the European Union.

The Red Sea's legal and strategic sensitivity derives largely from its constrained geography. It is a narrow, semi-enclosed sea bordered by eight countries: Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Jordan, and Israel. This narrow geography magnifies the strategic importance of its ports, islands, and chokepoints.

2- See UNCTAD. (2025). Review of maritime transport 2025. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development; Reuters. (2026, March 1). Maersk pauses sailings through Suez Canal, Bab el-Mandeb strait citing escalating. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/maersk-pauses-sailings-through-suez-canal-bab-el-mandeb-strait-citing-escalating-2026-03-01/>.

3- See generally Cian Moran, 'International Law, Maritime Security and Freedom of Navigation' (2023) European Journal of Legal Studies; UN Security Council Resolutions concerning Yemen and maritime security (2024-2026); International Maritime Organization, Maritime Security Updates (2024-2026); and Reuters, "Shipping Firms Divert from Red Sea Following Houthi Attacks" (2025); Lloyd's List, various reports on Red Sea maritime security (2024-2026).

4- See Barnett and Finnemore (2004), Bueger (2015), Klein (2011), Ostrom (2009), and Slaughter (2004) for comprehensive frameworks addressing institutional arrangements, expertise, and polycentric governance in international relations

The Bab al-Mandab Strait-situated between Yemen, Djibouti, and Eritrea- is particularly critical; any disruption there effectively impedes access to the entire Suez Canal route⁵.

In recent years, this landscape has become highly complex, characterized by foreign military bases in Djibouti, port acquisition diplomacy, rivalries linked to Gulf politics, Chinese logistical expansion, an active U.S. naval presence, Turkish and Emirati activity in the Horn of Africa, and renewed Saudi interest in maritime security arrangements. These trends collectively demonstrate that the Red Sea is no longer merely a peripheral Middle Eastern theatre, but a vital component of Indo-Pacific and global strategic calculations.

3 INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The modern legal order of the Red Sea is anchored primarily in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), widely regarded as the constitution of the oceans⁶. Although the Red Sea presents unique geopolitical realities, its governance remains formally structured through the same core principles applicable to other maritime regions: sovereignty, navigation rights, maritime delimitation, environmental duties, and peaceful dispute settlement.

The relevance of UNCLOS to the Red Sea is particularly acute because the region synthesizes multiple complicated factors: narrow sea lanes, overlapping maritime claims, congested commercial traffic, strategic chokepoints, security threats originating from land, and vast asymmetrical maritime capabilities among coastal states.

Under UNCLOS, Red Sea coastal states are legally entitled to claim:

- Territorial Sea up to 12 nautical miles;⁷
- Contiguous Zone up to 24 nautical miles;⁸
- Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) up to 200 nautical miles;⁹
- Continental Shelf rights subject to geological and legal criteria.¹⁰

Because parts of the Red Sea are exceptionally narrow, opposite coastal claims frequently overlap, making maritime delimitation agreements particularly significant. In several sectors, the distance between opposite coasts is less than 400 nautical miles, meaning EEZ claims intersect and require negotiated settlement or adjudication. This geographic reality carries two critical legal implications, first legal certainty depends not just on abstract treaty rules, but on active bilateral diplomacy, and second, unresolved maritime boundaries run a high risk of becoming entangled with broader regional political disputes.

Furthermore, the Red Sea may also be characterized as a semi-enclosed sea within the meaning of Article 122 of UNCLOS. Articles 122 and 123 explicitly encourage cooperation among bordering states regarding the management of living resources, environmental protection, scientific research, and navigational safety. Although these provisions have historically received limited practical implementation in the Red Sea, they provide an indispensable legal basis for future regional governance initiatives

5- See generally De Mello Filho (2025), Guilfoyle (2009), Klein (2015), Kraska and Pedrozo (2013), Maluki and Njoki (2024), and Rodriguez-Diaz et al. (2024).

6- See United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (adopted 10 December 1982, entered into force 16 November 1994) 1833 UNTS 3.

7- Ibid. art. 3.

8- Ibid. art. 33.

9- Ibid. art. 57.

10- Ibid. arts. 76-77.

3.1. BAB AL-MANDAB STRAIT AND TRANSIT PASSAGE

No issue is more important to the Red Sea governance than the status of the Bab al-Mandab Strait, which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. UNCLOS Part III establishes the regime of transit passage for straits used for international navigation between one part of the high seas or EEZ and another¹¹.

Transit passage includes freedom of navigation and overflight solely for continuous and expeditious transit. This regime is legally more robust than innocent passage because coastal states may not suspend transit passage, even for security reasons, and retain only limited regulatory powers concerning maritime safety and pollution control¹². Merchant and naval vessels alike retain strong, non-suspendable legal entitlement to transit through the Strait; coastal insecurity does not automatically extinguish these navigational freedoms. However, recent events have highlighted a stark divergence between legal entitlement and practical safety. A vessel may retain the absolute right to transit while commercial and security realities render passage prohibitively risky. This divergence lies at the very center of current Red Sea instability.

3.2. SUEZ CANAL: DISTINCT BUT CONNECTED REGIME

Although linked functionally to the Red Sea corridor, the Suez Canal is governed primarily through a separate historical treaty framework, especially the 1888 Convention of Constantinople. This convention guarantees free navigation through the canal in peace and war, while explicitly respecting Egyptian sovereignty¹³.

The Canal therefore occupies a hybrid legal position: it is not a natural strait governed by UNCLOS transit-passage rules, but rather sovereign Egyptian infrastructure serving as an indispensable international transit route. Strategically, however, the systems are inseparable; any sustained disruption in the southern Red Sea directly impacts the Suez Canal by reducing traffic volumes and forcing the rerouting of vessels around Africa.

3.3. FREEDOM OF NAVIGATION AND COMMERCIAL SHIPPING

Freedom of navigation remains a foundational organizing principle of maritime law, underpinning global supply chains, commodity markets, shipping insurance systems, and predictable trade flows. Interference with merchant shipping may therefore engage multiple legal concerns including the unlawful use of force, piracy or armed robbery frameworks, terrorism-related conventions, state responsibility, and/or sanctions and countermeasures. Where attacks are politically motivated rather than executed for personal gain, they may fall outside classical piracy definitions under Article 101 of UNCLOS, which require private ends¹⁴. This creates a significant doctrinal challenge: many modern maritime attacks resemble piracy operationally but not legally. The Red Sea crisis has underscored the limits of relying on traditional piracy categories to regulate politically motivated, asymmetric violence at sea¹⁵.

11- Ibid. arts. 37-44.

12- Ibid. art. 44.

14- The Convention of Constantinople is a treaty concerning the use of the Suez Canal in the Ottoman ruled Khedivate of Egypt. It was signed on 29 October 1888 by the United Kingdom, the German Empire, Austria-Hungary, Spain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. For information, see Khadduri (1968) and Love (1969) for historical and legal analyses regarding the structural tensions, conflict dynamics, and maritime blockades surrounding the Suez Canal during this period.

14- UNCLOS, supra note 5, art. 101.

15- See Abdulghany (2026), Ahmad (2020), and Murphy (2012) for expanding debates regarding modern maritime threats, conflict-driven blockades, and the evolving legal boundary separating state acts from piracy.

3.4. MARITIME SECURITY INSTRUMENTS BEYOND UNCLOS

Because UNCLOS alone does not comprehensively address security threats, supplementary international instruments are therefore essential. They include the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Maritime Navigation (SUA Convention 1988), which criminalizes seizure of ships, violence against persons onboard, and placing devices likely to destroy vessels¹⁶. This Convention is particularly relevant to politically motivated attacks that do not fit within piracy definitions. Meanwhile, the main objective of the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, 1974 (SOLAS) is to specify minimum standards for the construction, equipment and operation of ships, compatible with their safety¹⁷. In parallel, the International Ship and Port Facility Security Code (ISPS) is a comprehensive set of measures designed to enhance the security of ships and port facilities. Developed by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in response to the 9/11 attacks, it became mandatory in 2004 as part of the SOLAS Convention. The code aims to detect security threats and prevent incidents in international maritime trade¹⁸. Additionally, UN and unilateral sanctions serve as additional regulatory mechanisms targeting entities involved in illicit weapons transfers or destabilizing maritime conduct.

3.4.1 THE AFRICAN CHARTER ON MARITIME SECURITY, SAFETY AND DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA (LOMÉ CHARTER)

The African Charter on Maritime Security, Safety and Development in Africa (Lomé Charter) adopted by the African Union in Lomé, Togo, on 15 October 2016, provides a comprehensive continental framework for maritime governance in Africa¹⁹. The Charter seeks to address maritime threats such as piracy, armed robbery at sea, trafficking, illegal fishing, and marine pollution while promoting the sustainable development of Africa's blue economy²⁰.

The Charter is founded on three interrelated objectives: (i) enhancing maritime security and safety; (ii) strengthening maritime governance and inter-state cooperation; and (iii) fostering sustainable economic development through the responsible use of marine resources²¹. It complements existing international maritime law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and advances the goals of the 2050 Africa Integrated Maritime Strategy.²²

3.5. THE STRUCTURAL LIMITS OF EXISTING LAW

Despite the sophistication of these legal rules, three structural weaknesses undermine the international maritime order in the Red Sea:

1. **Operational Dependency:** The practical efficacy of maritime law depends entirely upon the enforcement and operational capabilities of states and international coalitions.

16- Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Maritime Navigation (SUA Convention) adopted on 10 March 1988 and entered into force on 1 March 1992. On 10 October 2005, a Protocol to SUA was adopted and entered into force on 28 July 2010. It significantly broadens the scope of criminalized acts and enhances international law enforcement. For more information of the Convention and its Protocol see the webpages of International Maritime Organization (IMO).

17- International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) adopted on 1 November 1974 and entered into force on 25 May 1980. The SOLAS Convention in its successive forms is generally regarded as the most important of all international treaties concerning the safety of merchant ships. The first version was adopted in 1914, in response to the Titanic disaster, the second in 1929, the third in 1948, and the fourth in 1960. The 1974 version includes the tacit acceptance procedure - which provides that an amendment shall enter into force on a specified date unless, before that date, objections to the amendment are received from an agreed number of Parties. For a thorough discussion of the Convention see the webpages of International Maritime Organization (IMO).

18- See the webpages of the International Maritime Organization (IMO).

19- See African Union, 2016, art. 2.

20- Ibid. arts 3-6. For a detailed examination of the Charter. See Biloa (2023), Brits and Nel (2018), Igwela and Chiangi (2021), and Nkomadu (2024) for critical assessments of the Lomé Charter, spanning its human rights dimensions, implementation hurdles, and regional legal implications for human trafficking and maritime security across Africa.

21- Ibid. arts 8-19.

22- See African Union (2014) and United Nations (1994) for the respective regional and international legal and strategic frameworks governing blue economy initiatives, jurisdiction, and maritime security architectures across the African continent.

2. **The Exploitation of Legal Gaps:** Hybrid threats - such as drone attacks, deniable state-sponsorship, proxy operations, and cyber disruptions - frequently fall between traditional, rigidly defined legal categories.
3. **Fragmented Sovereignty:** Where coastal states suffer from civil war or institutional collapse, executing treaty obligations and enforcing compliance becomes impossible.

Thus, the crisis in the Red Sea does not reveal an absence of law, but rather an insufficiency of law when detached from robust governance and enforcement capacity.

4 EMERGENCE OF MULTINATIONAL NAVAL COALITIONS

The escalation of maritime insecurity has prompted extensive multinational naval deployments designed to secure shipping lanes, deter asymmetric attacks, and uphold freedom of navigation. Major maritime operations currently active in the region include the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), Operation Atalanta, Operation Aspides, NATO maritime surveillance activities, and Operation Prosperity Guardian. The increasing militarization of the Red Sea reflects a global consensus that maritime instability here threatens the foundational functioning of the global economy.

4.1. LEGAL BASIS FOR NAVAL OPERATIONS

Historically, several anti-piracy operations in the Horn of Africa region were anchored in UN Security Council resolutions authorizing states to use “all necessary means” to combat piracy off the Somali coast²³. While those resolutions marked significant developments in collective security governance, contemporary naval responses to attacks linked to the Yemen conflict present more complex legal challenges. Current operations generally rely upon a combination of:

- The inherent right to individual or collective self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter.
- The customary international law principle of protecting international navigation.
- Explicit invitations or consent from recognized territorial states.

The absence of a comprehensive UN Security Council consensus authorizing offensive or enforcement actions for certain operations has raised ongoing academic and diplomatic debates concerning legal clarity, proportionality, and geopolitical selectivity.

4.2 THE LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OF HOUTHI ATTACKS AND INTERNATIONAL NAVAL RESPONSES

Since late 2023, attacks conducted by the Houthi movement against commercial shipping in the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab Strait have generated some of the most significant legal controversies in contemporary maritime security law²⁴. More than one hundred incidents involving anti-ship ballistic missiles, land-attack cruise missiles, one-way attack drones, and attempted boardings have disrupted international commerce, forcing shipping conglomerates to bypass the corridor entirely²⁵. From the perspective of the law of the sea, these targeted actions directly undermine the principle of freedom of navigation. Because the Bab al-Mandab Strait is subject to the UNCLOS transit passage regime, deliberate strikes on transiting vessels represent a systematic challenge to international navigational rights²⁶. Merchant vessels and warships

23- See United Nations Security Council (2008a, 2008b) for the pivotal international legal mandates that authorized external maritime powers to enter Somali territorial waters and deploy land-based operations to suppress piracy.

24- See generally Ademuni-Odeke (2025) for a comprehensive examination of the commercial disruptions, environmental safety risks, and legal implications emerging from Houthi drone and missile strikes on international merchant shipping in the Red Sea and Bab-el-Mandeb Strait.

alike enjoy a legal entitlement to continuous and expeditious passage through the strait. Consequently, deliberate attacks against vessels exercising these rights constitute a direct challenge to the legal regime governing international navigation. Several legal commentators have therefore argued that the attacks represent not merely isolated security incidents but systematic interference with internationally protected navigational freedoms²⁷. This crisis highlights several unresolved legal debates:

The "Private Ends" vs. Political Motivation Dilemma: As noted, classical piracy under Article 101 of UNCLOS requires that unlawful acts be committed for "private ends." Because the Houthi attacks are overtly political and linked to broader regional conflicts, they do not comfortably fit within the traditional definition of piracy²⁸. Instead, many scholars argue that the attacks are more appropriately analyzed under the framework of maritime terrorism and the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Maritime Navigation (SUA Convention)²⁹. The SUA Convention was specifically designed to address politically motivated violence against ships and therefore fills an important gap left by the traditional piracy regime³⁰.

The Threshold of an "Armed Attack" and Self-Defence: A further question concerns whether attacks against commercial vessels may constitute an "armed attack" capable of triggering the right of self-defence under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter³¹. This issue has become particularly significant following military operations conducted by the United States, the United Kingdom, and other participating states against Houthi military assets. Although international law traditionally associated self-defence with attacks against states, contemporary practice increasingly recognizes that large-scale attacks by non-state actors may also trigger defensive measures³². Nevertheless, uncertainty persists regarding whether attacks against foreign-flagged commercial vessels, absent direct attacks against the territory of a state, satisfy the threshold required for the exercise of collective self-defence. Recent scholarship suggests that the unique nature of maritime commerce and the multinational character of shipping may require a more flexible interpretation of collective self-defence in the maritime domain³³.

These legal debates have become particularly visible in relation to multinational naval operations such as Operation Prosperity Guardian and the European Union's Operation Aspides. Both missions have been presented as defensive measures designed to safeguard freedom of navigation and protect commercial shipping from attack³⁴. Their legal justification has generally rested on a combination of self-defence, collective self-defence, and the protection of internationally recognized navigation rights. In addition, international concern regarding maritime security in the Red Sea has been reflected in Security Council discussions and resolutions condemning attacks against commercial shipping and emphasizing the importance of maintaining freedom of navigation³⁵.

At the same time, the naval responses have generated concerns regarding the potential expansion of security exceptionalism in maritime governance. Critics argue that prolonged military operations conducted without explicit Security Council authorization may contribute to the gradual normalization of unilateral uses of force in defence of global commerce³⁶. Others contend that the protection of international shipping constitutes

25- See Reuters (2025) and Stewart (2025) for real-time assessments of the highly fluid geopolitical environment in the Red Sea corridor, mapping the diplomatic expectations of a shipping de-escalation alongside immediate counter-pressures from American foreign policy reclassifications.

26- UNCLOS, *supra* note 5, arts 37-44.

27- Odeke, *supra* note 23.

28- UNCLOS, *supra* note 5, art 101.

39- SUA Convention, *supra* note 16.

30- See Klein (2011, pp. 147-152) for an in-depth analysis of the international legal parameters, jurisdictional challenges, and specific UNCLOS provisions regarding maritime enforcement operations and safety regimes on the high seas.

31- See United Nations (1945, art. 51).

32- See Schmitt and Watts (2022)

33- See De Mello Filho (2025, p. 201)

34- See Escudero Espinosa (2025, p. 178) for a legal evaluation of the EU's deployment of Operation EUNAVFOR Aspides.

35- See United Nations Security Council debates and statements concerning Red Sea maritime security (2024-2025).

a legitimate collective interest warranting robust defensive measures³⁷. The resulting debate illustrates a broader tension within contemporary international law between the preservation of navigational freedoms and adherence to the collective security framework established by the United Nations Charter³⁸.

Ultimately, the Red Sea crisis demonstrates that existing legal frameworks were not designed with hybrid maritime threats of this nature in mind. The combination of non-state armed actors, long-range missile and drone attacks, strategic chokepoints, and multinational naval responses has exposed important gaps in both the law of the sea and the law governing the use of force. The legal challenges generated by the Houthi attacks therefore extend beyond the Red Sea itself and raise broader questions regarding the future governance of maritime security in an era increasingly characterized by fragmented authority, technological warfare, and strategic competition⁴⁰.

5 GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES IN THE RED SEA

5.1. INSTITUTIONAL WEAKNESS AND FRAGMENTATION

The principal institutional vulnerability in the Red Sea is the absence of an integrated, comprehensive regional institutional framework comparable to those governing other highly trafficked maritime regions (such as the Baltic or Mediterranean seas). Current governance remains fragmented across disconnected regional organizations, ad hoc security coalitions, bilateral agreements, and unilateral naval missions. This structural fragmentation severely inhibits coordinated, intelligence-led responses to transnational maritime threats.

5.2. THE COUNCIL OF ARAB AND AFRICAN COASTAL STATES OF THE RED SEA

Efforts to institutionalize regional ownership led to the creation of the Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden in 2020. This body was designed to strengthen cooperation among littoral states regarding security, trade, and environmental governance.

However, the Council faces significant limitations, including divergent political interests among member states, unequal military capabilities, external geopolitical pressures, and absence of strong enforcement mechanisms. For the Council to transition into an effective governance mechanism, member states must find ways to prioritize collective maritime security over zero-sum geopolitical rivalries.

6 REASSESSING THE INTERNATIONAL LEGAL ORDER IN THE RED SEA

The evolving security environment of the Red Sea reveals profound structural tensions within the contemporary international legal order. Traditional maritime law frameworks were designed for state-centric navigation disputes and classical piracy; they are poorly equipped for hybrid conflicts featuring non-state actors, proxy warfare, and intense great-power competition.

Five major trends emerge from these tensions, each of which reveals important limitations in the existing legal and governance architecture.

36- See Glavica and Brulc (2024)

37- Escudero Espinosa, *supra* note 30.

38- See Glavica and Brulc, *supra* note 35.

39- See De Mello Filho, *supra* note 32; Klein, *supra* note 29.

40- See Odeke, *supra* note 23.

A. Expansion of Security Exceptionalism: States increasingly invoke the protection of global commerce to justify expansive, open-ended military operations. While securing shipping lanes is imperative, the normalization of exceptional security measures risks eroding the structural constraints imposed by the UN Charter system.

B. Erosion of Collective Security Mechanisms: The inability of the UN Security Council to maintain a unified, effective approach to maritime crises reflects a broader structural polarization within international governance institutions.

C. Rise of Competitive Maritime Governance: The Red Sea demonstrates a shift toward competitive governance, where maritime space is shaped by strategic rivalry rather than cooperative legal regimes. Competing naval footprints and infrastructure projects risk creating fragmented, overlapping spheres of influence.

D. Need for Regionalized Legal Frameworks: Long-term stability requires genuine regional ownership. This includes the harmonization of domestic maritime laws, deep coast guard cooperation, shared maritime domain awareness (MDA) systems, regional dispute resolution mechanisms, and coordinated environmental protection regimes.

E. Great-Power Rivalry and the Fragmentation of Maritime Governance: The Red Sea has increasingly become an arena of strategic competition among major and regional powers. While maritime law presupposes cooperation and rule-based governance, contemporary geopolitical realities suggest that maritime order is increasingly shaped by competing security agendas and strategic interests. The establishment of foreign military facilities along the Red Sea coast reflects this trend. Djibouti alone hosts military installations operated by the United States, China, France, Japan, and other states⁴¹. Although these deployments contribute to anti-piracy operations and maritime security, they also signify the growing militarization of a strategically important waterway. China's military support facility in Djibouti, in particular, represents an important extension of its global maritime strategy and its broader Belt and Road Initiative⁴². Simultaneously, the United States maintains a substantial naval presence aimed at safeguarding freedom of navigation and securing critical maritime routes⁴³.

Regional powers have likewise expanded their strategic footprints. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Iran increasingly view the Red Sea as an extension of broader regional security competition⁴⁴. Port investments, infrastructure projects, military cooperation agreements, and support for local actors have transformed the region into a complex geopolitical space characterized by overlapping spheres of influence.

These developments challenge traditional assumptions regarding maritime governance. Rather than a unified legal order, the Red Sea increasingly exhibits features of competitive governance, where legal norms coexist with strategic rivalry. The result is a fragmented security environment in which competing actors invoke international law selectively while simultaneously pursuing geopolitical objectives⁴⁵.

From an international law perspective, the growing presence of multiple naval powers raises important questions regarding freedom of navigation, the legality of unilateral security operations, and the relationship between collective security mechanisms and strategic competition. The Red Sea therefore illustrates how contemporary maritime governance is increasingly shaped by the interaction between legal norms and geopolitical power.

41- For the discussion of foreign military bases in Djibouti, See generally Fowler (2023), International Crisis Group (2024), and Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2024) for comprehensive evaluations regarding the militarization of coastal choke points, the proliferation of foreign naval facilities, and the multi-layered security architectures attempting to manage shifting major-power rivalries across the Red Sea corridor.

42- For China's military presence and Belt and Road Initiative See generally Center for Strategic and International Studies (2024), Hillman (2020), and Lanteigne (2024).

43- For U.S. naval operations and freedom of navigation See generally United States Naval Institute (2025) and Kraska and Pedrozo (2022, pp. 421-446).

44- See generally Chatham House (2023), Verhoeven (2015, Ch. 8), and Bianco (2024).

45- See Guilfoyle (2022) and Klein (2011).

6.1. HUMAN SECURITY AND THE LEGAL GOVERNANCE OF MARITIME CORRIDORS

Discussions of maritime security often focus on state interests, commercial shipping, and naval operations. However, the consequences of insecurity in the Red Sea extend far beyond questions of navigation and trade. The region's instability has profound implications for human security, humanitarian access, and the protection of vulnerable populations⁴⁶.

The Red Sea serves as a vital corridor for the transportation of food, fuel, medical supplies, and humanitarian assistance destined for conflict-affected populations in Yemen, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa. Disruptions to maritime traffic therefore affect not only commercial interests but also the delivery of life-saving assistance. Increased shipping costs, the rerouting of vessels, and heightened insurance premiums may ultimately be passed on to consumers, exacerbating food insecurity and economic hardship in already fragile societies⁴⁷.

The intersection between maritime insecurity and humanitarian concerns is particularly evident in Yemen⁴⁸. Restrictions on maritime access and disruptions to shipping routes can affect the availability of essential goods and humanitarian relief. Similar concerns arise in relation to Sudan, where the ongoing conflict has heightened dependence on maritime trade and humanitarian supply chains through Red Sea ports⁴⁹.

These developments suggest that maritime governance should not be understood exclusively through the traditional lenses of sovereignty, navigation rights, and military security. A broader conception of governance is required—one that integrates principles of human security, sustainable development, and humanitarian protection. Such an approach is consistent with contemporary developments in international law, and increasingly recognizes the interconnected nature of security, development, and human welfare⁵⁰.

The Red Sea therefore represents not only a strategic maritime corridor but also a humanitarian corridor whose governance carries significant implications for regional stability and human well-being.

6.2. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE RISKS

The Red Sea also faces mounting environmental risks associated with intensive shipping traffic, oil transportation, offshore infrastructure, and armed conflict. Maritime accidents, oil spills, and damage to critical coastal ecosystems could generate consequences extending beyond national boundaries. Given the ecological significance of the Red Sea's coral reef systems and marine biodiversity, future governance initiatives should integrate environmental protection into broader maritime security strategies. Such an approach would be consistent with the cooperative obligations contained in Articles 123 and 192 of UNCLOS.

46- For humanitarian implications of maritime insecurity, see generally United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Review of Maritime Transport 2025; World Food Programme, Global Logistics and Humanitarian Access in Maritime Corridors (2025).

47- For impacts on food security and supply chains, see generally FAO et al. (2025) and Michel and Sticklor (2024) for a broader analysis of these overlapping global pressures.

48- See generally the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2025) and Schmitt and Watts (2023) for an analysis of the evolving legal and humanitarian landscape.

49- See generally the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2025) and de Waal (2015) for a deeper understanding of the region's socio-economic and political dynamics.

50- For human security as a legal and conceptual framework, see generally Sen (1999) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994).

6.3. PROPOSED REGIONAL MARITIME GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

To address these structural deficiencies, this article proposes the formal establishment of a multi-layered regional architecture consisting of five core pillars:

1. A Red Sea Maritime Security Coordination Centre: A centralized regional hub dedicated to real-time intelligence sharing, maritime domain awareness, and coordinated incident reporting.
2. A Regional Code of Conduct for Maritime Security: A comprehensive code tailored to contemporary hybrid and non-state threats, modeled partly on the operational successes of the Djibouti Code of Conduct.
3. Joint Coast Guard and Search-and-Rescue (SAR) Mechanisms: Operational frameworks designed to institutionalize regular joint patrols, capacity-building, and interoperability among littoral states.
4. A Red Sea Maritime Dispute Resolution Mechanism: A specialized diplomatic and legal forum to proactively address overlapping boundary claims and navigational friction before they escalate into militarized disputes.
5. An Environmental and Human Security Protocol: A binding legal instrument regulating marine pollution, guaranteeing unhindered humanitarian access, and protecting critical undersea and maritime infrastructure.

7. CONCLUSION

The Red Sea occupies a central, volatile position within the contemporary international legal and geopolitical order. Recent shipping attacks and escalating strategic competition have exposed deep vulnerabilities in the governance structures regulating this vital maritime corridor. The ongoing transformation of the Red Sea from a rule-based commercial transit route into a heavily militarized, fragmented arena reflects broader, systemic shifts in global power dynamics.

While multinational naval operations have provided vital tactical protection for commercial shipping, they do not resolve the underlying structural governance deficiencies that fuel regional instability. Fragmented institutions, weak regional coordination, and escalating great-power rivalries continue to hinder the realization of a sustainable maritime order.

A fundamental reassessment of the international legal framework governing the Red Sea is no longer optional. Future governance arrangements must transition away from ad hoc, reactive military responses toward a proactive, regionalized model. Only by balancing maritime security with regional sovereignty, strengthening cooperative legal mechanisms, and directly integrating the human security and humanitarian dimensions of the crisis can the international community secure a stable and predictable future for the Red Sea corridor.

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STRENGTHENING TRADE SECURITY IN THE RED SEA AND THE HORN OF AFRICA REGION:

THE CONTRIBUTION OF ANTICIPATORY CAPABILITIES

Babiker Alyas .A. Osman

INTRODUCTION: STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

Trade route security challenges in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region have intensified as regional and global actors deepen their geopolitical engagement. The region faces rising insecurity, expansion of military basing, and volatile political influence driven by “hot money” flows that shape alliances and counter-alliances. These dynamics have disrupted existing regional orders and competing visions advanced by influential states including Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates (Verhoeven, 2018).

Given the evolving security landscape and the nexus between proximity and geopolitics, the region requires deeper analysis of how changing factors affect trade routes. Decision-makers increasingly turn to strategic foresight, drawing from corporate foresight practices, to interpret a system that has become the new norm in a geopolitically sensitive environment (Rohrbeck & Kum, 2018). The core question is: how can we proactively anticipate and prepare for what lies ahead in the security of Red Sea trade routes?

Strategic foresight supports the anticipation of multiple futures, planning for uncertainty, and safeguarding free navigation by preparing for geopolitical risks (Rohrbeck & Kum, 2018). Rohrbeck and Kum describe foresight as a systematic process that anticipates and prepares for future challenges by examining the probability of risky events using recognised methodologies such as horizon scanning and scenario planning (Rohrbeck & Kum, 2018).

Institutional embedding is also central. Jütersonke and Munro argue, within the context of ministries of foreign affairs, that foresight-linked anticipatory governance must be consolidated by systematic integration throughout governance structures. They emphasise the need to enhance organisational and human resource capacities and to embed foresight into policy-making and implementation rather than treating it as an episodic exercise. This strengthens proactive, transparent and inclusive planning aligned with broader governance objectives (Jütersonke & Munro, 2024, pp. 4–6).

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Jütersonke and Munro connect anticipatory governance to institutional resilience in changing political environments. They highlight how foresight supports policy consistency despite staffing turnover and the cyclical nature of administrations, while also enabling agility, by adjusting tactics and strategies as new information and scenarios emerge (Jütersonke & Munro, 2024).

To translate these insights into trade and maritime security settings, Grim's foresight maturity model provides a structured lens. The model focuses on organisational parameters, human resources capability, and mindsets. Before embedding foresight into operations, organisations in the trade community need to assess where they stand, determine whether they already practice elements of foresight, and then develop strategies to integrate anticipatory governance for robust strategic maritime security planning (Grim, 2009).

Evidence from maritime commerce also matters. One standout example is Maersk. Through continuous horizon scanning for emerging trends and disruptions in the Red Sea context, Maersk has used supply chain intelligence - combining real-time data analytics and AI-driven forecasting - to improve rerouting and security measures, thereby reducing route disruption to some extent. In parallel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and its commercial port operator Dubai World Ports (DP) illustrate how strategic foresight can be used by states and corporate entities in long-term regional positioning. The UAE has increasingly recognised the strategic importance of Red Sea ports and has pursued both commercial and military presence through bases and infrastructure development. DP's investments and involvement in trade diplomatic efforts and financial support to countries such as Ethiopia and Eritrea reflect an approach oriented toward future influence over trade routes and alliances (Styan, 2018, pp. 5-6).

These cases support a broader proposition; foresight in the maritime economy is not only about security preparedness, but also about long-horizon

competition for control over trade infrastructure, influence, and alliances.

INTEGRATING ANTICIPATORY CAPABILITIES

Integrating anticipatory governance, power dynamics, security projection, and geopolitics is necessary in the Red Sea context, where emerging security and geopolitical challenges intersect with economic opportunity. The Red Sea's geostrategic location exposes it to geopolitical competition from regional and international powers as well as non-state actors. Power dynamics multiply complexity and require both authorities and businesses to anticipate alliance formation, strategic shifts, and risk escalation (Germond, 2015, p. 141).

Anticipatory governance enables the early identification, assessment, and quantification of threats and opportunities. It supports planning policing responses, building scenarios, and developing risk management measures that prevent escalation. Business and trade communities likewise incorporate strategic foresight into geopolitical dynamics and engage in anticipatory governance cooperation with governments and regional organisations to enable capacity-building and structured dialogue for the benefit of the wider trade community (Germond, 2015, p. 142).

In addition, increasing trade volumes and the expansion of trade infrastructure projects, especially ports and economic zones, raise the need for strategic foresight linked to geopolitical planning. Anticipatory governance allows trade actors and governments to devise continuity plans and negotiate security cooperation frameworks to mitigate threats (Germond, 2015, p. 139). Beyond security mitigation, foresight supports international collaboration: conducting foresight exercises allows stakeholders to anticipate future scenarios, including new routes, security threats, or shifts in trade patterns, requiring coordinated responses (Demneh et al., 2023, p. 11).

Foresight methodologies provide operational guidance for these capabilities. Cuhls argues that

foresight is a strategic approach for thinking about and planning the future to identify opportunities and avoid adverse outcomes. It broadens understanding of possibilities, develops strategies to pursue desired futures, and integrates methods for anticipating multiple scenario implications across short-, medium-, and long-term time horizons (Cuhls, 2019, p. 4).

Lubell and Morrison frame anticipatory governance as a fusion of foresight and decision-making processes, supporting resilience and adaptability through scanning for emerging trends and innovations that influence policy and governance (Lubell & Morrison, 2021). Woods similarly defines horizon scanning as the systematic examination of potential threats, opportunities, and likely future developments. It goes beyond traditional risk management by enabling leaders to visualise scenarios through multi-source information gathering, risk and trend assessment, and data-informed strategy choices. Horizon scanning challenges assumptions and prioritises risks and opportunities with the potential to significantly affect an organisation (Woods, 2023).

ANTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE IN TRADE SECURITY SETTING

Trade communities can strengthen Red Sea trade-route security by building a foresight organisational culture within existing business structures. Munro's work on strategic foresight for sustaining peace frames a set of organisational actions that translate into business practice. Munro emphasises the routine incorporation of foresight analysis into decision-making, embedding foresight into existing structures so it becomes an integral part of organisational direction and operations rather than an external or occasional activity (Munro, 2023). This embedding requires prioritising the Red Sea actors and instruments that influence future security outcomes and including decision-makers so that foresight insights become actionable in implementation.

Munro also stresses collaboration and information exchange: exchanging insights and generating

innovative ideas across a stakeholder ecosystem builds sustainable security. In practical terms, the trade infrastructure and strategic significance of Red Sea ports and straits cannot be ignored. The Red Sea functions as a corridor linking the Mediterranean Sea with the Indian Ocean through the Suez Canal and the Strait of Bab al Mandab. With around 80% of global trade transported by maritime routes, and significant portions of containerised traffic and Asia-Europe seaborne trade transiting through the Red Sea, geopolitical disruption in the region translates into immediate systemic vulnerability for global markets (Luigi & Cyril, 2021).

Geopolitical competition has also increased interest in developing economic centres and logistics hubs. Littoral states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE pursue port and economic zone development on the western Arabian Peninsula, securing food supplies and extending geo-economic influence into Africa by controlling critical trade infrastructure.

At the same time, security risks are expanding into the digital domain. Cybersecurity vulnerability in the Red Sea region increases as innovations in shipping, navigation, and trade practices are adopted. As economic significance grows, cyber risk increases accordingly, while cybersecurity regulations and frameworks remain insufficient. Stakeholders therefore need collaborative foresight processes and joint initiatives, such as regional insight platforms and coordinated cybersecurity monitoring and assessment, to strengthen cybersecurity risk governance across trade infrastructure networks.

Overall, anticipatory governance in trade security supports a comprehensive logic: scanning and anticipating geopolitical and operational risk, embedding foresight into routines and decision processes, and coordinating across stakeholders to reduce uncertainty and improve continuity under disruption.

DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Developing and integrating foresight within a multinational business context is addressed by Bereznoy, who describes corporate foresight as

a tool for long-term vision, strategic anticipation, and enhancing horizon scanning capabilities (Bereznoy, 2017). Bereznoy's central contribution is the organisational design logic: successful foresight requires culture and structure that enable broad participation rather than a closed analytical circle. This implies collaborative workshops, business continuity teams, capacity-building, and communication channels linking employees, senior managers, and Red Sea stakeholders, security agencies, government authorities, and industry associations, so that insights become integrated into action-oriented processes (Bereznoy, 2017).

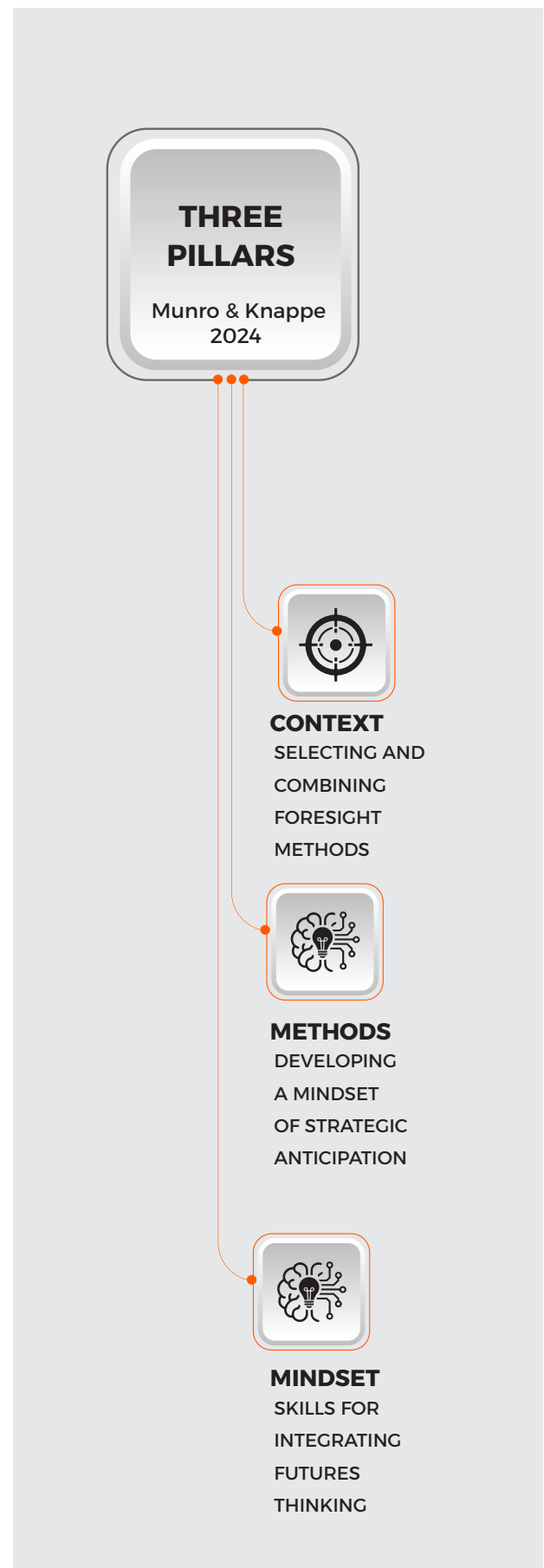
Given limited but relevant existing practices within the trade community, foresight development can be organised around Munro's three foundations. These foundations (Figure 1) provide a sequencing logic for building anticipatory governance capabilities.

FIRST FOUNDATION: MINDSET.

The trade community conducts horizon scanning of geopolitics and builds databases of regional trends supported by solid signals. The aim is to connect past, present, and future in how threats and opportunities emerge for Red Sea trade security. The mindset also enables anticipating and shaping future outcomes starting "today," producing a preferred future orientation supported by signal-based learning.

SECOND FOUNDATION: APPLYING FORESIGHT PROCESSES AND METHODS.

Scenario planning and related methods should not remain limited to academics or external consultants. Instead, they should be inclusive: facilitated multi-disciplinary stakeholder groups can co-produce scenario assumptions, build problem ownership, and develop cooperative capacities. Human skills, institutional capacity, and financial resources are decisive for method facilitation, and trust, generated through relationship-building and insight exchange, supports better security outcomes.



THIRD FOUNDATION: CURRENT GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENT SCENARIOS.

Because the Red Sea environment is fast-moving, scenario work requires leadership, understanding of timing, inclusive communications, and resource mobilisation for better security results.

Munro (2023) also links these foundations to security-setting steps for sustaining security on trade routes. These steps include: organising and classifying local, regional, and global actors; ensuring foresight analysis becomes a regular business procedure; integrating foresight into existing business structures and operations; and enhancing the Red Sea stakeholders “as one trade community” through sustained coordination (Munro, 2023).

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The purpose of this paper is to strengthen trade security in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa by assessing anticipatory capabilities and linking strategic foresight to anticipatory governance within the business sphere. This includes recommending structures such as committees or units dedicated to foresight, alongside culture-building using business parameters: mindset, financial resources, and technological advancement. When integrated, these capabilities allow the trade community to anticipate and capitalise on future opportunities while mitigating geopolitical risks (Demneh et al., 2023).

A key trade-off remains: anticipatory governance must balance forward-looking planning with the flexibility to respond quickly to unexpected events. Too much reliance on scenario routines may produce inertia, while too little integration will weaken foresight’s institutional impact

The placement and proximity of foresight units matter. Locating foresight structures near the trade community’s business headquarters improves

communication, helps ensure foresight aligns with operations, and supports rapid decision-making in response to geopolitical challenges. Proximity also reduces dialogue “gatekeeping” that can block dissenting views or isolate stakeholders. It improves trust gradually by clarifying purpose and scope for common security initiatives (Boston, 2016, p. 419).

Collaboration across the trade community and other Red Sea stakeholders is also essential to address geopolitical risks. Kuosa emphasises the value of multi-stakeholder approaches over rigid, traditional systems. The success logic in corporate foresight planning, illustrated through Shell’s corporate foresight preparedness, rests on flexible coordination and the capacity to incorporate international assistance (Kuosu, 2014, p. 70). In the Red Sea context, integrating military and intelligence services into foresight processes is necessary when planning capabilities that address hostility, intentions, and incentives among international and regional actors.

This implies that foresight products should serve both strategic and operational purposes. For example, long-term defence and security planning can use foresight questions such as whether forces should participate in peacebuilding operations and which states would support those missions. The Supreme Commander’s foresight outputs, in this logic, should integrate all elements; the same products are relevant to politicians and ministerial planning, reinforcing how collaboration can enrich policy alternatives and address threats effectively (Kuosu, 2014, pp. 58–59). For the trade community, such foresight collaboration supports comprehensive geopolitical risk assessment, informs scenario building for rerouting strategies, and enhances awareness that supports better decisions (Kuosu, 2014, p. 70).

Technological innovation also adds value by enabling anticipatory knowledge generation. Nascimento and colleagues argue that foresight and emerging technologies can help navigate uncertainties and risks through continuous technological advancement and transformative foresight processes. Emerging maritime security

technologies at different levels of maturity can help stakeholders address socio-economic challenges while strengthening security in the Red Sea economy (Nascimento et al., 2020).

However, technology alone does not deliver anticipatory governance. The trade community needs staff with analytical and technical competencies to interpret signals and convert them into decisions. Staff preparation, including upskilling and capacity-building, supports strategic foresight and anticipatory governance effectiveness by enabling data-informed decision-making and implementation. This supports cultural continuity and resilience among stakeholders facing fast-changing geopolitical scenarios (Jütersonke & Munro, 2024). Moreover, legitimate and accountable anticipatory governance frameworks depend on staff skills and institutional learning capacity (Slaughter & Hines, 2020, p. 249; Jütersonke & Munro, 2024).

Leadership is another central enabling condition. Burke argues that leaders with foresight competence shape futures by learning deeply and creating development opportunities that enhance multi-skilled capability. Leadership commitment supports coaching and mentorship, embedding agility and preparedness in the organisation's culture. Burke's framing also treats leadership as the builder of communication platforms and provider of choices, enabling stakeholders to redefine identity, security processes, and organisational structures for desired future outcomes (Burke, n.d). Institutionalisation may be enabled through

dedicated units or divisions, as seen in some public-sector foresight systems (Choo & Fergnani, 2021). Ultimately, leadership links strategic foresight to governance mechanisms that improve adjustment capacity and resilience under volatility (Jütersonke & Munro, 2024).

The limitations of researching and implementing anticipatory capabilities in this region are real; the environment is complex and rapidly evolving, and data access can be uneven. Yet these constraints do not remove the necessity of advancing anticipatory governance capabilities. Collaboration and sustained exchange of insights among governments, international and regional organisations, and the trade community remain the primary pathway for overcoming limitations and deepening understanding of trade-route security dynamics. Future research should examine how geopolitical rivalries and strategic alliances, especially those shaped by port politics in the Horn of Africa, affect trade outcomes and security cooperation. With increasing military presence and investments by regional powers (e.g., UAE-linked port and base dynamics), a key gap remains whether port competition (container and cargo infrastructure) links to broader strategic conflict patterns such as war spillovers and alliance deterioration across Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Styan (2018) raises questions about the relationship between commercial port involvement and military base decisions, providing a foundation for further investigation into how geo-strategic interests are translated into military and security posture (Styan, 2018).



Photography : ISSAM HAFIEZ

CONCLUSION

Trade infrastructure in the region, combined with ongoing geopolitical events, underscores the geostrategic significance and vulnerability of Red Sea and Horn of Africa trade routes. Trade community actors must anticipate geopolitical and security dynamics and their impacts on routing, continuity, and safety. Strengthening anticipatory capabilities provides a path toward more resilient security governance under volatility.

By blending strategic foresight strategies with corporate foresight integration logic, the trade community can better plan for operational disruptions and safeguard both security and economic interests (Bereznoy, 2017). In this context, enhancing anticipatory governance supports

continuous evolution of capabilities across physical security, undersea and infrastructure-related risks, and cyber risk governance, reducing uncertainty and improving trade-route security performance.

Ultimately, strengthening trade security in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa region depends on fortifying anticipatory capabilities across the trade community and coordinating with wider stakeholders. When foresight becomes institutional, supported by organisational design, staff capability, technological integration, and leadership-driven embedding -it becomes a mechanism for producing resilient outcomes rather than reacting to crises after escalation. These anticipatory capabilities, continuously developed, support the conditions for secure, stable trade practices in the Red Sea economy.

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Photography : ISSAM HAFIEZ

RED SEA SECURITY, SUDAN AND THE AFRICAN UNION: WHY MARITIME SECURITY MATTERS NOW?

Omayma Gutabi

INTRODUCTION: STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

The African Union has developed a meaningful maritime policy architecture that speaks directly to Red Sea security, even if it does not yet amount to a fully operational regional regime. Through the 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy, the African Charter on Maritime Security and Safety and Development in Africa (Lomé Charter), and the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), the AU has established a normative foundation for maritime governance, African ownership, and cooperation on security and development (African Union, 2012, 2016; African Union Peace and Security Department, n.d.). Yet, this framework remains fragmented, under-resourced, and slow to implement, creating a persistent gap between policy ambition and operational capacity. This gap is especially consequential for Sudan, whose coastline and ports are central to sovereignty, trade, and post-war reconstruction.

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In the corridor of the Red Sea, maritime security is shaped not only by piracy, smuggling, and trafficking, but also by port competition, military basing, and the growing presence of external powers. The Red Sea, therefore, cannot be understood only as a shipping lane; it is a contested geopolitical and security space in which coastal state weakness and foreign competition reinforce one another (ISS Africa, 2019; SIPRI, 2019). The recent development of Israel's diplomatic recognition of Somaliland provides the latter with a strategic position and foothold on significant naval and political information. There was no action from the AU beyond condemnation.

For the African Union, this environment has clear continental implications, particularly for peace and security. Its maritime strategy treats Africa's seas and oceans as strategic assets that must be governed through cooperation, sovereignty, and sustainable development (African Union, 2012). The Lomé Charter reinforces that approach by linking maritime security to peace, safety, development, and legal cooperation among African states (African Union, 2016). Taken together, these instruments show that the AU understands maritime insecurity as a structural challenge rather than a narrow naval problem. The instruments also provide a basis for addressing trafficking, environmental degradation, and competition over ports and coastal infrastructure.

However, the AU's maritime framework is broader than the Red Sea itself, and that breadth is both a strength and a weakness. It offers principles and shared priorities, but it does not create a specialised Red Sea institution with stable funding, technical capacity, and enforcement authority. Scholars and policy analysts have repeatedly noted that African maritime governance suffers from implementation shortfalls, institutional overlap, and weak coordination between continental and regional bodies (Egede, 2016; ISS Africa, 2025a, 2025b). In practice, this means that the AU's maritime vision is visible at the normative level but uneven in operational terms.

The African Peace and Security Architecture (APS) was designed as the AU's main framework for conflict prevention, management, and resolution. And further built around institutions such as the Peace and Security Council, the Continental Early Warning System, the Panel of the Wise, the African Standby Force, and the Peace Fund (African Union, n.d.; African Union Peace and Security Department, n.d.). In principle, this architecture should allow the AU to respond to maritime insecurity when it intersects with broader conflict dynamics. In reality, APSA has historically been stronger in land-based crises than in the maritime domain, where operational coordination is more dispersed, politically sensitive, and shaped by a stronger international presence than continental presence. This raises a broader question about whether continental sovereignty in maritime affairs remains more aspirational than effective.

APSA's weakness matters a great deal because the Red Sea insecurity is never only maritime. It is connected to state fragility, border insecurity, armed conflict, illicit economies, port competition, and external rivalry. The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden also sit across multiple regional and diplomatic arenas, including IGAD, Arab-African coordination formats, and bilateral security partnerships, which makes African coordination more difficult. The result is a crowded security environment in which the AU has a legitimate role, but not a monopoly over agenda-setting.

The Red Sea is also increasingly militarised. Foreign military access in the region is commonly justified through counterterrorism, violent extremism, anti-piracy, or the protection of commercial shipping routes, but these justifications have also enabled durable external footholds in African coastal spaces (ISS Africa, n.d.; SIPRI, 2019). Djibouti is the clearest example, hosting multiple foreign military facilities because of its location near a critical maritime chokepoint. More broadly, the Horn of Africa has become one of the world's most concentrated zones of foreign military presence, with implications for sovereignty, regional competition, and local security choices (SIPRI, 2019). Africa is also hosting a rising number of foreign military operations and bases, largely through bilateral agreements between some AU member states and external powers. Despite the AU Peace and Security Council's concerns about the expansion of foreign military bases on the continent (ISS, 2019). Below is a table showing international and regional powers with military bases or major facilities relevant to Red Sea Security.

International and Regional Powers with Military Bases or Major Facilities Relevant to Red Sea Security (CRS, 2026).

The AU's maritime framework becomes politically relevant. Although the AU does not prohibit foreign basing through a single Red Sea-specific instrument, its policy logic is clear: African maritime spaces should be governed through African cooperation rather than external militarisation (African Union, 2012, 2016). The concern is not abstract. Heavy foreign military presence can intensify dependency, deepen rivalry, and reduce the policy autonomy of coastal states. In the Red Sea, this is especially significant because military access, port development, and strategic alignment often overlap.

International / Regional Power	Location of the base	Nature of operation
The United States of America	Djibouti (camp Lemonnier; airfield/airport area)	Camp Lemonnier is a long-running US facility in Djibouti
China	Djibouti (People's Liberation Army Support Base (near Doraleh))	China's first overseas military base is in Djibouti
France	Djibouti	Presence includes air and naval facilities
Japan	Djibouti	Overseas base facility
Italy	Djibouti	Operates a national support base/facility
United Kingdom	Djibouti	Troops presence and facility access
Germany	Djibouti	Military personnel operating out of Djibouti facility
Spain	Djibouti	Troop presence/ facility access reported
Saudi Arabia	Djibouti / Red Sea connecting basing negotiated	Troops presence and/or arrangements
Russia (reported/prospective)	Horn of Africa including Somaliland and Sudan (Sudan being negotiated for during Bashir's time)	Interest in possible facilities/ logistics
Turkey	Somalia (Mogadishu)	Presence that can affect Bab al Mandab/ Red Sea Security dynamics

Table (1) International and Regional Powers with Military Bases or Major Facilities Relevant to Red Sea Security (CRS, 2026).

Sudan is one of the most important states in the Red Sea equation. Its coastline gives it access to a major commercial route, and Port Sudan remains central to trade flows, customs revenue, and external economic viability. Besides Sudan is of prime importance to African landlocked countries such as Ethiopia, Chad and South Sudan. The coastline is not just a geographic feature; it is a strategic asset tied to sovereignty, fiscal capacity, and regional influence. That strategic value has made Sudan's coast a contested site of foreign interest in ports, logistics, and military access, further raising the stakes of maritime governance (SIPRI, 2019). Although there is currently no official forging military operation on Sudan's waters of the Red Sea, yet that maritime space remains contested where Russia has been pursuing building a naval base on the Red Sea. In addition to the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) longstanding ravenousness for ports' control and its military engagement with/through the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). While Saudi Arabia continues to provide interest-loaded support for SAF as well as Qatar's and Turkey's interests in Suakin's port.

The Red Sea matters for Sudan in at least four ways. First, it is a matter of sovereignty and territorial control, since coastal infrastructure shapes state authority and revenue collection. Second, it is a matter of foreign influence and militarisation, because external actors have sought access to Sudan's coast through investment, security partnerships, and logistical arrangements. Third, it is a matter of conflict-economy and insecurity, as war weakens the state's ability to control smuggling, illicit flows, and coercive networks. Fourth, it is a matter of diplomatic leverage; a coherent Red Sea policy would allow Sudan to shape regional rules affecting ports, shipping, and coastal governance (UNCTAD, 2024). The ongoing war has sharply reduced Sudan's capacity to exercise these roles. State fragmentation has made the coast more vulnerable to external influence and internal contestation. In this context, Red Sea security is not a peripheral foreign policy concern. It is part of Sudan's struggle over state survival, reconstruction, and future sovereignty. A purposive operationalisation of AU's maritime security policies could contribute to supporting Sudan as it is trying to emerge out of the current multifaceted violent conflict.

The question, then, is whether the AU's Red Sea agenda is relevant to Sudan. The answer is yes, but only within clear limits. The AU framework is relevant because it provides a continental language for sovereignty, maritime safety, and African cooperation, and because it offers a counterweight to externally dominated security arrangements (African Union, 2012, 2016). At the same time, three constraints remain decisive. The first is institutional; the AU does not yet have a dedicated Red Sea mechanism with the technical capacity to manage the corridor's complexity. The second is political; Sudan's war has weakened state capacity precisely when effective regional engagement is most needed. The third is structural; the Red Sea security is shaped by external actors whose influence often exceeds that of African institutions (ISS Africa, n.d.; SIPRI, 2019).

In sum, the AU's maritime security architecture provides a credible continental foundation for how African states should govern the Red Sea, linking sovereignty, safety, development, and cooperation, yet its operational reach remains uneven due to fragmentation, under-resourcing, and limited maritime-specific enforcement capacity. For Sudan, maritime security is not a distant regional issue but a direct concern tied to state authority, port-centered trade, and the security dynamics that flow from war, external militarisation, and conflict economies. The implication is that Sudan should engage the AU's maritime agenda with strategic clarity: treat it as a political framework for norm-setting and coordination, while simultaneously pushing for stronger technical mechanisms and wider APSA operational integration into the maritime domain. Only then can the AU's policy ambitions translate into practical support for Sudan's reconstruction and future sovereignty in a corridor where external interests and contested access continue to reshape the security landscape.

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THE IMPACT OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES ON RESHAPING RED SEA SECURITY

Gada Kadoda

PRELUDE

Geopolitical rivalry and illegal activities have long threatened the security of the Red Sea, a crucial marine "superhighway" that connects Africa, Asia, and Europe from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean via the Suez Canal. By and large, piracy, smuggling, regional proxy conflicts, and the militarization of chokepoints such as the Bab al Mandeb Strait have transformed this trade route into a complex geopolitical flashpoint where asymmetrical threats from armed non-state actors have largely replaced state-versus-state conflicts. Furthermore, emerging technologies have revolutionised the way that problems are presented and resolved in recent years, leading to new security paradigms in the region (Xian, 2025). Before delving into the types of technology that are changing the security landscape of the Red Sea, which is the subject of this essay, it is important to recognize the historical eras and key events that laid the ground for the current tensions.

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RED SEA SECURITY DISRUPTIONS: A CHRONOLOGY

Historically, the Red Sea has always served as a vital, highly contested trade conduit. When Israeli forces occupied the northern shores of the Gulf of Aqaba (the eastern branch of the Red Sea) in 1949, security tensions rose significantly. In retaliation, Egypt and Saudi Arabia placed Egyptian military control over the Strait of Tiran, the Gulf of Aqaba's gateway to the Red Sea, blocking Israel's southern marine access. A further major escalation occurred during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, when Egypt blockaded Israeli ships at the Bab al Mandeb Strait (which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean) (Labib, 2024). The shipping canal was physically blocked by these state disputes, resulting in multi-year closures and significant worldwide economic losses.

Following Somalia's economic collapse in the 2000s, Somali commercial piracy surged. As state wars subsided, the main security danger moved south to the Bab al Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden. International cargo ships were taken over by pirates, who demanded ransom payments of millions of dollars. This situation spurred unprecedented worldwide cooperation. Large-scale international naval operations and coalitions, such as the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), were formed in 2008 to combat Somali piracy (Lons, et al., 2025).

Up to the 2000s, piracy, smuggling, and unlicensed vessels could be intercepted by traditional security methods, including human-crewed patrols and legacy security technologies like radar surveillance, manned combat planes, and navy deck guns. When Yemen's civil war broke out in 2015, the situation drastically shifted, and the eastern Red Sea coast became a hotspot for conflict. Using sea mines, remote-controlled drone boats, and shore-to-ship missiles against Saudi-led coalition forces and occasionally commercial tankers, the Iran-backed Houthi rebels gradually transitioned from land warfare to maritime asymmetry after seizing vital port infrastructure like Hodeidah and deploying long-range weaponry to the coastline.

Since the return of Israeli attacks in the Gaza Strip in 2023, the security environment has degraded severely following the Houthis' declaration of an active maritime blockade against Israel-linked shipping, a move that quickly expanded into indiscriminate attacks against commercial vessels. Major shipping companies were compelled to entirely avoid the Suez Canal because of the ongoing threat. Instead, ships circumnavigated the Cape of Good Hope, the southernmost point of Africa, lengthening transit times and significantly raising the cost of international trade (Lons, et al., 2025). To stop attacks, US-led coalitions established defensive military alliances like Operation "Prosperity Guardian" (Sorge, 2024). Concurrently, countries like China, India, and various European powers operating under separate mandates, deployed independent naval fleets, resulting in a highly militarised and politically fragmented chokepoint showcasing cutting-edge technologies. More recently, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which influences a vast network of commercial and logistics hubs across the Red Sea, has been collaborating closely with the United States, India, and Israel to protect Western Indian Ocean and Red Sea shipping lanes.

THE CONTEMPORARY SECURITY SCENE: A TECHNOLOGY WARFARE

In the following paragraphs, I highlight some of the emerging technologies that are changing Red Sea security threats and responses. These include unmanned systems like Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) for continuous surveillance and Unmanned Surface Vessels (USVs) for maritime patrols to increase detection without endangering human life; AI-powered surveillance, which integrates artificial intelligence into digital maritime images to quickly detect anomalies, automatically track targets, and monitor vital underwater cable infrastructure (Leccese, 2025); and non-kinetic countermeasures using sophisticated, powerful lasers and electronic warfare systems to disrupt optical sensors, blind adversary reconnaissance flights, and gain tactical control without running the risk of escalation. Maritime surveillance is one such area where

technology exerts influence. Traditionally, satellite imaging and sporadic naval patrols were used to monitor activity in large oceanic spaces. However, real-time situational awareness has been revolutionised by the combination of drones, synthetic aperture radar, and automated identification systems (AIS) (Xian, 2025). Drones with sophisticated cameras can perform wide-ranging aerial surveillance, enabling the prompt detection of suspicious vessels. In addition to improving naval capabilities, these tools enable environmental organisations and regional coast guards to monitor illegal fishing and other activities that endanger maritime biodiversity and security.

On the same note, communication technologies have had an impact on making decisions in real-time during emergencies. The implementation of secure communication networks guarantees prompt and effective information sharing between naval forces and pertinent stakeholders. In times of crisis, this trustworthy communication is essential for reducing tensions between countries that share borders or maritime areas. In order to create a more stable environment in the Red Sea, these platforms are used to enable coordinated responses and reduce the likelihood of errors caused by false information or poor communication.

Additionally, cybersecurity has been essential to the region's modernisation of security frameworks. As reliance on digital systems grows, malicious actors increasingly target national infrastructure (Hieber, 2025). The possibility of cyberattacks on maritime operations seriously threatens the safety and security of ships navigating these waters. Also, developments in artificial intelligence (AI) have provided predictive analytics capabilities that help authorities anticipate and address issues before they become more serious (Chukwunweike et al., 2024). Furthermore, the Internet of Things (IoT), such as sensors embedded in ships, buoys, and offshore platforms, is used to collect and transmit data regarding environmental conditions, vessel movements, and potential hazards (Allan, 2021; Hamid, 2025). This real-time data gathering promotes cooperation among countries and organisations involved in Red Sea security and

enables more informed decision-making. The benefits also include environmental monitoring, which makes it possible to respond more effectively to impending ecological disasters and climatic changes.

While the aforementioned emerging technologies are paving the way for smarter and cooperative maritime operations to respond to threats, they are doing the same for armed groups who have been posing the primary threats to Red Sea security. For instance, the Houthis have utilised weapon-laden and surveillance drones (UAVs); deployed remote-controlled explosive-laden boats (USVs) to strike commercial vessels; and operated highly advanced, precision-guided anti-ship ballistic and cruise missile systems.

On the other hand, Somali pirates have re-emerged as an organised, high-tech enterprise, largely by taking advantage of the regional instability and security vacuum created by Houthi attacks (Allen, 2025). Before launching an attack, they now use commercial drones, advanced GPS technology, and satellite tracking for aerial reconnaissance to accurately locate high-value targets hundreds of nautical miles off the coast of Somalia (Mamouni, 2025). More crucially, Somali pirates and Houthi rebels in Yemen are converging in their maritime threats, where there are indicators that Houthis provide military-grade training, suicide drones, and weapons directly to proxy groups like al-Shabaab and the Islamic State in Somalia (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2025), who in turn sponsor and protect piracy operations in exchange for a cut of ransom proceeds (Mamouni, 2025).

It is important to remember that technological enablement and the cross-pollination among armed groups had started in the Red Sea region before the Houthis evolved into a potent maritime threat, such as with the migration of fighters from the US War on Afghanistan (2001) and on Iraq (2003) that significantly militarised the Red Sea corridor (Atteridge, 2016). Battle-hardened veterans relocated to Yemen, helping to transfer knowledge about advanced communications and tracking technologies, insurgency and asymmetric

naval tactics like GPS spoofing (Raymaker, 2026), and weapon manufacturing techniques like 3D printing. This allowed local groups like the Houthis to develop their capabilities, thus adding a layer of electronic warfare to the contemporary maritime security architecture (Paoli & Bueger, 2024).

Likewise, it is hard to ignore how the fluid nature of armed groups mirrors an evolving landscape of world orders competing for regional and global influence. While the cross-pollination among armed groups is informal and considered criminal; the cross-pollination among world orders is institutional and deemed legal. It is true that smuggling, piracy, and maritime blockades are criminal activities, but so are resource extraction, proxy wars, and occupation that affect entire nations. It's also important to note that because technology democratises military-grade capabilities, it serves as a potent facilitator in both cross-pollinations, blurring the lines between armed organisations and world orders. Therefore, we are in for the long road, particularly if the erosion of global bodies like the UN, the weakness of regional bodies like the African Union, and the decline in multilateralism continue.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the wider regional context, security in the Red Sea region is primarily shaped by intense, overlapping, and frequently competing interests among global superpowers, regional middle powers, and coastal states, as well as exacerbated by instability and conflict in its vicinity (Alsayed, 2021; Ardemagni, 2025; Pinto, 2026). The consequences of US-Israel aggression on Palestine, Lebanon, and Iran, in addition to the Saudi-UAE conflict of interest, including their disparate war and regional policies in Somalia, Yemen, and Sudan, may well be that the Red Sea remains a flashpoint. The interplay between emerging technologies and security in the Red Sea reflects an evolving and noteworthy landscape. By enabling smaller entities to challenge traditional powers, they radically changed maritime security, just as they transformed warfare by democratising power and influence, with no decisive victory for anyone.

While this essay illustrated the dual-use dynamic

of emerging technologies by adversaries, they also hold promise for assisting in peace processes and fostering diplomacy (Duursma & Karlsrud, 2021; López, et al, 2024; Liiv et al, 2025). There is a myriad of possibilities where technology can facilitate dialogue among stakeholders, such as government officials, non-governmental organisations, and local communities, to design innovative and more inclusive strategies for regional security that focus on participatory governance, sustainability, and conflict resolution (IMO, n.d.) rather than the more prevalent military-centric approaches (Maluki & Njoki, 2024).

Examples include data analysis and predictive analytics that furnish tools for detecting early indicators of conflict and monitoring social media for public sentiment; virtual and augmented reality can enable adversaries to experience diverse perspectives in a conflict, fostering empathy and understanding; blockchain technology can safeguard the integrity of peace agreements; crowdsourcing solutions can facilitate the engagement of ordinary citizens in peacebuilding; and virtual platforms and AI can support mediation efforts by providing objective analysis and translation tools to transcend information disorder and language barriers.

Furthermore, civil society and regional watchdogs can employ high-resolution remote sensing to detect environmental dangers, monitor conflict-related ecological damage, and maintain transparency, allowing for early accountability without forceful posturing (Zwijnenbur & Ballinger, 2023). Smartphone reporting networks and AIS integration enable local fishers and coastal communities in littoral states to report illegal fishing, human trafficking, and distress incidents (Şeker, 2026).

While the preceding examples demonstrate that technology serves as a functional tool and enhances processes, it can only treat symptoms, not core issues, and, more importantly, it does not act as a moral catalyst or resolve deep-seated injustices. Researchers and activists, particularly those concerned with emerging technologies, can play an

important role in promoting their responsible use and ensuring that they support rather than impede international cooperation. Thus, paving the way for a new path toward stability, peace, and prosperity for all through utilising technological innovations.

In conclusion, it is critical to emphasise that technology cannot solve fundamental human and ethical issues such as those connected to Red Sea security. Because technology is dubbed the new currency of power, it stimulates the competition of

world orders to the detriment of weaker countries. Relying primarily on "techno-fixes" when problems necessitate substantial cultural, political, economic, or structural changes frequently diverts focus away from the difficult decisions needed to create meaningful, long-term transformation. Because people, not technology, will shape the future, the perpetual amoral pursuit of national interest should not be the only approach to geopolitics if we are to prevent the reproduction of crises and address the underlying causes of instability.



Photography : ISSAM HAFIEZ

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VICTORY WITHOUT STABILITY:

HOW DID PIRACY DETERRENCE CREATE A VOID IN MARITIME SECURITY IN SOMALIA?

Abdalla Gereida

In April 2026, security tensions escalated off the coast of Puntland in northeastern Somalia, triggering a series of coordinated maritime attacks against commercial ships and oil tankers, which prompted global navigation authorities to raise their security alert level. These developments created an unexpected shock, activating a threat structure that had remained dormant for a long time. The resurgence of piracy raises serious questions about the effectiveness of international deterrence, which is a coordinated intervention aimed at undermining actors' ability to carry out attacks by increasing their operational costs. International interventions have succeeded in containing piracy and reducing its threat to navigation in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, however, they have failed to sustain stability on the Somali coast. With the decline of international military presence, the conditions for the resurgence of the threat returned. This article argues that maritime deterrence did not involve building local capacities or sustainable governance and coordination mechanisms, which perpetuated the reproduction of the piracy environment.

Abdalla Gereida: Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Understanding the mechanisms behind the resurgence of piracy requires navigating a winding path to go beyond superficial explanations. Piracy in Somalia has transcended the threshold of mere criminal acts since the collapse of the central state in 1991, which led to a lack of surveillance of Somali waters, facilitating the proliferation of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing practices (IUU) as well as environmental dumping. As a result, there was a depletion of marine resources, a deterioration of fishing economies, and an exacerbation of poverty in coastal communities. This drove a segment of fishermen and economically marginalized individuals to resort to piracy as a livelihood alternative in the context of weak governance and the absence of economic alternatives. The literature indicates that the fragility of livelihoods in coastal communities, the decline in fishing yields, along with high rates of poverty and unemployment, have collectively created a fertile environment conducive to recruiting individuals into piracy networks (Journal of Strategic Security, 2012)².

At the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, international naval forces announced that Somali piracy was under control and that threats to navigation in Bab al Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden had decreased to low levels. This assessment was accurate at the operational level, as the frequency of attacks decreased and maritime security indicators improved; however, the conditions that produced the crisis did not change. This reflects the persistent gap between the operational containment of piracy and the structural measures needed to address its root causes, a gap that has contributed significantly to the resurgence of the phenomenon. From a strategic perspective, the subsequent phase witnessed a broad reallocation of resources toward maritime deterrence, while investment in local governance remained limited. This enhanced ship protection, but left unchanged the underlying political and economic conditions onshore that produced the threat, while the pressure on Somali maritime resources continued unabated.

The acceleration of piracy attacks towards the end of 2008 led to a gradual increase in the international response, starting with resolutions issued by the UN Security Council, the most notable of which was the resolution that led to the establishment of the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS, 2008)³. This response then expanded through international naval operations such as the European Union's Operation Atalanta (European Union Naval Force, n.d.)⁴, NATO's⁴ Ocean Shield (NATO Allied Maritime Command, n.d.) and the Combined Task Force (CTF-151) (Combined Maritime Forces, 2026)⁵. However, these interventions did not stop the escalation of attacks, which peaked between 2009 and 2011, exceeding two hundred incidents annually (International Crisis Group, 2017)⁷.

These international operations carried out maritime patrols, deployed armed guard teams on board ships, and strived to enhance rapid response capabilities, early warning systems, and coast guard forces in the region. This led to a noticeable decrease in attacks during the second decade, suggesting that the decline was due to the dismantling of piracy networks. However, this conclusion was inaccurate, as the structure of these networks remained intact, lying dormant due to the high cost of their activities under international pressure, yet they remained untouched.

In the context of efforts to curb piracy, it is necessary to distinguish between deterrence and structural stability, as the latter cannot be achieved suddenly but must develop over time. While piracy deterrence has been relatively achieved in its usual active zones, structural stability has not actually begun. Attacks have decreased due to the high operational costs involved, but piracy networks remain dormant, retaining their structure, relationships, and accumulated expertise. This is because interventions focused on risk mitigation through operational tools such as patrols and

2- S/RES/1851 (2008). Security Council. <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/ar/s/res/1851-%282008%29>

3- Mission, EUNAVFOR. <https://eunavfor.eu/mission>

4- Operation OCEAN SHIELD. mc.nato.int. <https://mc.nato.int/missions/operation-ocean-shield>

5- CTF 151: Counter-piracy. (2026). Combined Maritime Forces. <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/ctf-151-counter-piracy/>

6- <https://www.crisisgroup.org/ojs/africa/somalia/roots-somalias-slow-piracy-resurgence>

naval escorts, without any significant change in the social and institutional environment that produces the threat. Hence, the result was operational containment that has fallen short of addressing the structural conditions.

The Gulf of Aden and Bab al Mandeb region have not experienced a complete absence of international forces, but the deterrent naval presence has indeed diminished significantly. The reduction in the density of international forces, coupled with the decline of coastal governance institutions and the weakened capabilities of maritime law enforcement, including the coast guard and surveillance systems in Somalia, has led to a decrease in security coverage and coordination. This has created a security vacuum that reflects a decline in the ability to monitor, coordinate, and exchange information, rather than a complete military or security absence.

This shortcoming manifests on several levels, as information exchange does not occur regularly, preventing its use in immediate field plans. Meanwhile, maritime interception capabilities are no longer able to cover the vast operational area exceeding two million square nautical miles, making comprehensive coverage practically impossible. This limitation is evident in incidents far outside the traditional coverage, such as the hijacking of the ship *Navios Apollon* (European Union Naval Force, 2009)⁷ in 2009, 200 nautical miles east of the Seychelles. Additionally, the recent redirecting of some efforts toward the Red Sea and Bab al Mandeb Strait has reduced the intensity of interceptions in certain areas of northern and central Somalia, offering piracy networks a wider margin of movement within the uncovered regions. In conclusion, the Somali decision-maker found himself hostage to an information gap and an increasingly shrinking maneuvering margin, which allowed piracy networks to reproduce themselves by exploiting these gaps and the conditions conducive to their persistence.

The sustainable structure of maritime security requires a comprehensive framework that balances the protection of maritime assets, environmental conservation, biodiversity, and support for the blue economy. This necessitates strengthening local and regional capacities to ensure operational continuity after the withdrawal of the international presence, along with building effective coordination institutions and permanent mechanisms for exchanging intelligence even during periods of reduced threat. However, this path remains incomplete in Somalia, as the naval forces, rebuilt in 2009, continue to suffer from chronic structural weaknesses.

In the broader regional context, the Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea since late 2023 have increased pressure on the maritime system and redirected part of the resources toward protecting navigation there. Conversely, piracy is not returning in the same strategic environment that saw its previous peak in the past, as the maritime space stretching from the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea has become more crowded with armed actors and irregular networks. This is in light of the continued activity of "Al Shabaab" and the increasing presence of the Islamic State (ISIS) in parts of Puntland, as well as the political developments related to Somaliland and its regional relations. While these developments do not indicate a direct relationship with piracy, they reveal a more fragmented environment that allows for the expansion of the illicit economy and the exploitation of security gaps.

In such a context, any security gap along the Somali coast has a dual effect: it increases insurance costs and shipping routes, while giving piracy networks greater scope to reposition themselves. Regional coordination mechanisms, such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), have had a limited impact and have not evolved into an operational framework capable of delivering measurable results, which has kept security gains confined to the maritime domain, while land and coastal deterioration continue.

Throughout this period, the military approach predominated, as the focus was on securing

7- <https://eunavfor.eu/news/hijacked-mv-navios-apollo-arrives-somalia>

shipping lanes, escorting commercial vessels, and intensifying interceptions at sea. Meanwhile, investment in local governance tools within Somalia remained scarce, leaving the roots of the threat untouched by any genuine structural remedy.

Many international interventions began with an implicit assumption that Somali piracy is essentially a security or criminal problem that can be contained through deterrence and prosecution. However, this perception overlooked a fundamental aspect of the context in which the phenomenon arose. Some coastal communities did not initially view pirates as criminal groups operating outside the law, but rather as a distorted response to a deep-rooted sense of economic deprivation and inability to protect local resources. With the continued illegal and unregulated fishing by foreign vessels and the local impression that authorities are either unable or unwilling to impose legal restrictions on these activities, the feeling has grown that maritime law is applied selectively; international resources are mobilized to secure the protection of global trade routes, while violations affecting the livelihoods of local fishermen remain at the bottom of the international response agenda.

However, this does not mean that piracy was a legitimate form of economic resistance, as it quickly evolved into organized profit networks linked to intermediaries, financiers, and brokers, surpassing the pretence of defending coastal communities. Nevertheless, ignoring the grievances that contributed to its emergence has led to overlooking one of the most important conditions for its reproduction. With the decline in fishing revenues and the erosion of trust in the authorities' ability to protect resources, recruiting new members and gaining local sympathy for the pirates becomes

easier, even within communities that previously rejected them. From this perspective, the resurgence of piracy appears to confirm the persistence of the social and economic environment that grants it a degree of local acceptance and legitimacy as security control wanes.

It is essential to reach a regional agreement that matches the quality of the military victory achieved by international forces at the height of their deployment. If piracy has returned because the conditions for its production remain in place, then any new strategy must target these conditions first and foremost. At the institutional and security levels, building regular regional coordination mechanisms and improving the exchange of intelligence information through the establishment of continuous monitoring and evaluation systems are required. At the legal and executive levels, local agencies need to enhance their capabilities in maritime law enforcement, investigation, prosecution, and coastal surveillance. On the economic front, maritime security is linked with the future of coastal communities, as revitalising fishing economies and expanding job opportunities by reducing resource depletion are essential tools to prevent the re-recruitment of individuals into piracy networks.

Accordingly, the required regional agreement should integrate a framework for security cooperation with a system that ensures the continuity of these institutional, security, and legal dimensions after the reduction of international interventions. The return of piracy remains, of course, a logical consequence of the temporary intervention model that keeps the environment fertile for the reproduction of threats. The cost of continuing with this model today has become much higher than the cost of dismantling it.



SHATTERED SOVEREIGNTY: AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY TO UNDERSTANDING THE APRIL 2023 WAR IN SUDAN

Magdi El Na'im

INTRODUCTION

This is the second part of this annotated bibliography, which is structured around two central arguments. First, the 2023 war represents the culmination of long-standing structural failures within the Sudanese state rather than an isolated event. Second, the conflict has evolved into a proxy war involving regional powers and has become increasingly fragmented, giving rise to multiple interconnected sub-conflicts involving numerous armed actors and marked by widespread atrocities and international crimes.

The bibliography aims to synthesize scholarship from different disciplines, identify key trends in knowledge on the ongoing war, and provide researchers with accessible and authoritative references.

For further information on the bibliography's design and methodology, readers are invited to consult the introductory essay published in the first issue of *Zawaya*.

Magdi El Na'im: Translator, Editor and Researcher in Politics and Policies of Human Rights

SECTION 1: THE DIRECT ROOTS OF RUPTURE

Ibrahim, A. A. (2025). *Min al-thawrah ila al-harb: Al-tariq al-wa'ar li-bina al-dawlah al-Sudaniyyah [From revolution to war: The Rugged Road to Building the Sudanese State]*. Dar Al-Mawsoo'ah Al-Sagheera إبراهيم، عبد الله علي. (2025). *من الثورة إلى الحرب: الطريق الوعر لبناء الدولة السودانية*. دار الموسوعة الصغيرة

This book comprises a selection of articles written by the author at various stages, offering a critical reading of the Sudanese state-building process from the colonial era to the December 2018 Revolution and the subsequent war that erupted in 2023. The book's chapters address numerous issues through an approach that combines historical analysis with political and cultural critique. Its value lies in documenting the evolving vision of one of Sudan's most prominent thinkers regarding the Sudanese crisis, and in providing a coherent interpretation that connects the current war to its historical and institutional contexts. Therefore, it is an important resource for understanding the intellectual and political roots of the conflict. The author, Abdullah Ali Ibrahim, is a prominent Sudanese historian, scholar, and intellectual whose work has made significant contributions to the study of Sudanese history, politics, and culture.

The author argues that, alongside the war, Sudan is witnessing an ongoing political contestation between the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), in its various incarnations, and the remnants of the old regime (the Islamists) with each side accusing the other of instigating the war. The author reviews numerous essays written by various Sudanese writers exploring the views of both sides. He also observes that these parties have fabricated evidence to prove the other's involvement in the ongoing war. In his critique of both sides' views, the author recounts how Hemedti, unlike other members of the Military Council, became deeply involved in overt political activity after April 2019, with the aim of consolidating his leadership and the independence of his Rapid Support Forces (RSF). To understand this eagerness to maintain independence, the author draws attention to the RSF's economic activities and the influence of Hemedti and his family in the market. Therefore, Hemedti's acceptance of the Framework Agreement, which stipulates the eventual integration of his forces and their exclusion from the investment market, was mere subterfuge. However, the book goes beyond this by discussing a wide range of issues across seven chapters. It examines the absence of certain historical dimensions from current discussions, such as the legacy of colonialism and interactions with major powers. It also explores the origins and roles of key actors in the post-revolutionary period, including the SAF, the RSF, and the Resistance Committees, as well as their interactions. The book further addresses the "center and periphery" debate, a prominent theme in the intellectual discourse in Sudan, and the migration of some 'Arab' ethnic groups from the Sahel to Sudan due to what the author calls "the plight of the nomads." Finally, it analyses the competing conflicts narratives, including the disputed nature of the state, the derailed democratic transition, the brutality of the war, and the failure of international mediation. It also examines the RSF's strategy in some local conflicts and its conduct during its control of Gezira State, as well as the positions of the FFC (later "Taqadum") on the war, a critique that the author further elaborated in the book's conclusion.

SECTION 2: DOCUMENTED HUMAN TOLL

Sudanese Archive. (2024, May 8). *Open source investigation into the detention and abuse of adults and children in Ardamata*. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/mr374rwm>

This report highlights a critical moment in the mass violence that followed the capture of El Geneina in West Darfur by the RSF in October 2023 where allegations of genocide against the Masalit community emerged. The evidence used in the report is derived exclusively from digital, online, open-source

information using analytical techniques focusing on detention and abuse; allegations of killing, torture, looting, and sexual violence. The victims were 500 to 750 detained individuals including children in the Ardamata neighbourhood northwest of El Geneina at the SAF's 15th Infantry Division and other areas in the neighbourhood between 4 and 6 November 2023. The report establishes the incident's time and location and indicates that the responsibility, apparently, lies with the RSF.

This type of open-source digital archive can be helpful in accountability as it transforms social media posts into strong evidence. Importantly, it establishes the command responsibility for the crimes perpetrated. Also, preserving evidence through digitalisation is crucial in justice processes, building a historical record for future prosecutions, and truth-seeking processes in the context of transitional justice. Further, geolocation of atrocities overcomes the allegations of perpetrators dismissing human rights reports as "fake news" or propaganda. The report is based on the analysis and verification of 289 video clips, pictures, reports, and posts on social media platforms concerning the detention of people by the RSF. It matches landmarks that appear in visual content with satellite imagery and reconciles incident initial reports with information available from other sources. The report includes Google Earth satellite maps, graphics and screenshots of the digital verification tools used.

SECTION 3: WAR ECONOMIES

Sudan Transparency and Policy Tracker (STPT). (2026). Drugs in wartime Sudan: An illicit economy fueling the war. Retrieved from <https://sudantransparency.org/drugs-in-wartime-sudan-an-illicit-economy-fuelling-the-war/>

The paper addresses a critical emerging dynamic in the current conflict, namely the transformation of Sudan into a 'regional manufacturing hub' for synthetic drugs. It tracks the relocation of Captagon production following the collapse of the industry in Syria, documenting how the fall of the Syrian regime in December 2024 led to the migration of Captagon manufacturing networks into fragile environments. It notes that amidst the chaos of the war in Sudan, the vacuum of oversight, and easy access to the Red Sea, producers found a haven to shift from merely exploiting Sudanese smuggling routes to establishing an 'industrial production hub.' The production capacity in certain laboratories discovered in Khartoum has skyrocketed to 100,000 pills per hour. The report highlights how the illicit trade of drugs (including Captagon, crystal meth, and locally consumed Bango) has become a vital tool for armed actors to finance their operations, alongside gold smuggling and levies imposed at the proliferating checkpoints.

The paper also notes the surge in domestic demand driven by psychological trauma, displacement, and youth unemployment, alongside the heavy and systematic use of Captagon and Tramadol by combatants on the frontlines to suppress hunger, enhance alertness, and mitigate fear during battles. The significance of this paper lies in providing recent empirical evidence on the fragmented sovereignty and porous borders and how the contestation and shifting control of territory between combatants facilitate illicit activities. It ultimately elevates the Sudanese conflict beyond a localized war, placing it within the context of transcontinental organized crime networks.

SECTION 4: INTERNATIONALISATION AND GEOPOLITICS

Human Rights Watch. (2026, May 25). From Bogotá to El Fasher: The UAE's Role in the Deployment of Colombian Fighters and Other Backing to the Rapid Support Forces in Sudan. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/3kdha5sd>

The report traces the recruitment and deployment of Colombian Private Military Contractors (PMCs) since August 2024 by the Global Security Services Group (GSSG), a private security firm based in Abu Dhabi that maintains strong links to UAE authorities and the ruling family. By September 2025, at least 300 Colombian PMCs had been deployed in Darfur. The report provides a detailed account of the processes of recruiting, hiring, transporting and deploying of the Colombian military contractors. It substantially establishes the links of the UAE authorities to this illegal intervention baking the RSF in a conflict that was supposed to be internal. It also provides evidence of Libyan, Somali, Chadian and RSF involvement in these processes. HRW found that the Colombian military contractors have supported the RSF's training operations and were deployed alongside RSF fighters in and around El Fasher and other battles.

The report states that the weapon and technologies were diverted to the RSF after originally being destined for the UAE from Serbian, Bulgarian and French manufacturers. Finally, the report asserts the legal liability of GSSG and the state of the UAE for assisting the RSF. The report concludes with recommendations directed to the United Arab Emirates, the RSF, the European Union, the US government, the United Nations Security Council and, the African Union Peace and Security Council, the Colombian government and, the Sudanese government.

This report is based on interviews including those with Colombian military contractors who were deployed in Sudan, retired Colombian military officers, employees and sources with knowledge of UAE activities in the region, Colombian journalists and sources in and from El Fasher. The researchers used open-source research verifying content, and geolocating relevant videos and photographs. Further, they analyzed relevant company and government documents and records. The report contains geolocated video footage as well as high-resolution satellite imagery and maps.

SECTION 5: THE APRIL 15 WAR IN CULTURE, ART AND LITERATURE

Ahmed, H. I., & Emberling, G. (2025). Archaeology and cultural heritage in wartime: Sudan 2023-2025. *Antiquity*, 99(407), 1197-1211. Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/yw34v6x2>

This study provides a record of the devastating impacts of the war on the country's tangible cultural heritage from April 2023 through mid-2025. The authors document the structural damage, combat exposure, and systemic looting of premier national museums and archaeological sites, while examining the localized emergency responses designed to mitigate these losses. The paper advances two primary arguments regarding the management of cultural heritage during armed conflict. First, major institutions such as the National Museum in Khartoum are particularly vulnerable to destruction when located in active combat zones. Second, documenting structural damage and combating the illicit trafficking of cultural property requires coordinated action by local authorities and international partners. The report details how cultural heritage objects, which were securely packed in crates for a UNESCO-funded renovation project right before the outbreak of war, became potential targets for looting and illicit cross-border trafficking. In other sources, it was reported that truckloads of artefacts from the National Museum were removed by the RSF to western Sudan and some items that may have been taken from the National Museum collection were also offered for sale on eBay and by phone.

The authors demonstrate how archaeologists and museum professionals became the primary frontline defence through voluntary interventions and self-organisation. Methodologically, the paper provides an empirical case study of emergency cultural preservation within an active, non-international armed conflict. It demonstrates that when formal state ministries fail during a civil war, the responsibility of safeguarding a nation's historic capital naturally devolves to decentralized, autonomous community networks.

WHAT THE RED SEA MEETINGS ARE REALLY DISCUSSING?

THE EDITORIAL TEAM

Recent meetings on maritime security have revealed a conversation still trying to find its center. The UN Security Council has spoken about collective responsibility, international law, and protection of shipping. Technical workshops have focused on port procedures and institutional readiness. Regional dialogues have turned toward political competition, development, and the difficulty of building cooperation among actors who do not share the same interests. These are not separate conversations, but rather fragments of a larger debate over what security should mean in practice.

THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL: A CONVERSATION STILL TAKING SHAPE

At the Security Council's high-level debate held on 20 of May, 2025, the focus was cooperation. States discussed attacks on vessels, piracy, trafficking, maritime infrastructure, and the need to strengthen legal and operational collaboration. The discussion returned repeatedly to the issue of capacity: many coastal states are expected to manage complex threats with limited capacities, inadequate

information systems, and weak coordination among institutions.

The meeting did not produce a new regional arrangement. Its contribution was more modest but nonetheless consequential; It reaffirmed that maritime threats cannot be addressed by one state acting alone and that security depends on information-sharing, joint enforcement, training, and legal cooperation.

The Council returned to the issue on 11 August, 2025 under the title “Maritime Security: Prevention, Innovation and International Cooperation to Address Emerging Challenges.” This time, the language shifted from response to anticipation. Participants discussed surveillance, early-warning mechanisms, digital technologies, cyber risks, and maritime-domain awareness. Nonetheless, behind the emphasis on innovation lay a troubling concern: institutions are often responding to events only after they have already escalated.

The discussion also returned to the vulnerability of merchant crews. Ships are often described through the language of cargo, trade, and routes, but attacks are first endured by people working aboard them. That concern became the focus of the Arria-formula meeting organised by Greece, India, and the Philippines on 21 November, 2025.

IMO WORKSHOPS: THE WORK THAT HAPPENS AWAY FROM CONFERENCE TABLES

The International Maritime Organisation (IMO) workshops held in Aden and Djibouti in January 2025 were concerned with a different kind of security: the daily work of keeping ports functioning when institutions are under pressure. In Aden, the focus was on Port Facility Security Plans. Participants worked through questions that rarely make headlines: how responsibilities should be divided, how vulnerabilities are recorded, how personnel respond to an incident, and how security procedures can be maintained in a conflict-affected setting.

The Djibouti workshops focused on security assessments and planning. Participants addressed risk identification, agency coordination, inspection procedures, and the adaptation of security plans as conditions change. The work was technical, but its implications were political. A port is only as prepared as the institutions responsible for it, and those institutions rely on trained staff, functioning communication channels, clear authority, and resources that are often in short supply.

IN AMMAN: COORDINATION, BUT AMONG WHOM?

This question surfaced in Amman on 23 April 2025, when the Maritime Security Forum held a coordination session involving the Red Sea, Bab al Mandab Strait, and the Strait of Hormuz. The meeting was convened by Norway’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Arab Centre for Security Studies and International Affairs (ACSIS), and the University of Jordan. Its premise was that there is no shortage of initiatives, naval missions, political statements, or interested governments. The difficulty is that they do not necessarily operate in coordination.

Participants examined coordination, crisis communication, freedom of navigation, and de-escalation. Yet coordination is never merely technical. It involves deciding whose information is trusted, whose priorities take precedence, and which actors are included when the rules are made.

MOMBASA SECURITY STRATEGY WORKSHOP

The Mombasa workshop in July 2025 approached the issue from another angle. It was organised around an effort to look beyond the immediate crisis frame, bringing infrastructure, logistics, climate, political competition, and regional governance into the same conversation. That wider framing was useful because it made room for the conditions that rarely appear in emergency statements: how ports are governed, how investment reshapes political influence, and how climate and economic strain deepen insecurity.

FROM SOUTH EGYPT TO THE HORN: THE POLITICAL QUESTIONS RETURNING TO THE SURFACE

The roundtable “A Sea of Opportunity: Security and Development Across the Red Sea,” held in February 2026 through the Aswan Forum Cycle, made an argument that should not have been controversial: security cannot be detached from development and political stability. Participants discussed institutional resilience, economic opportunities, conflicts, and the need to connect security measures with longer-term regional cooperation.

The launch of the Horn and Red Sea Security Forum in the same month pointed in a similar direction. It created a platform that brings researchers, policymakers, and regional specialists into ongoing

exchange. The test for such a space will be whether it can sustain critical discussions when the immediate urgency of a crisis fades, and whether it can include voices beyond governments and security institutions.

GULF-HORN RELATIONS IN THE RED SEA DIALOGUES

The Red Sea Dialogues webinar of 4 June 2026 focused on Gulf-Horn relations, under the title “After the Fire: Will Gulf Countries Cooperate or Compete for the Red Sea?”. Speakers examined the political consequences of investment, port agreements, military relationships, and shifting alliances. The discussion did not assume that greater external engagement automatically produces stability. Instead, it asked whether the present moment is



fostering cooperation or opening new fronts for competition.

The Ankara forum on 18 June 2026 continued this institutional shift. Its participants discussed maritime law, risk reduction, freedom of navigation, regional coordination, and threats involving chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear materials. The idea of a regional maritime risk council emerged as one possible mechanism for sustained cooperation.

The proposal carries promise, but it also raises a question that no institutional design can avoid: would such a body simply coordinate states and external powers, or would it create room for the societies, workers, researchers, and local authorities living with the consequences of maritime insecurity?

WHERE THE DEBATE STANDS

The meetings show an agenda becoming broader, even if not yet deeper. There is greater attention to prevention, institutional capacity, seafarers' welfare, regional dialogue, and the connection between security and development. But the discussions still tend to move more easily toward technical solutions than political ones.

They are better at identifying risks than confronting the conflicts, inequalities, and struggles over authority that sustain those risks. The value of the current moment lies in the fact that these questions are now present in the room. The task ahead is to ensure that they are not pushed aside once the language of coordination and crisis management takes over again.



REVIEWS AND CRITIQUES

BETWEEN CULTURAL PARTICULARITY AND TRANSFORMATION:

HADENDOWA SONGS IN EASTERN SUDAN

Mohamed Adam Suleiman Abu Al-Bashar

Photography : ISSAM HATIEZ

Dr. Mohamed Adam Suleiman Abu Al-Bashar: Faculty of Music and Drama Sudan University of Science and Technology

This paper examines the music of the Hadendowa people in eastern Sudan. Its central premise is that eastern Sudan possesses a distinctive musical culture in terms of its forms, melodic structures and rhythmic patterns. This music represents one of the most significant cultural resources capable of enriching Sudan's broader musical landscape. Building on this premise, the study collected and documented popular song forms, according to their types and social functions, seeking to preserve them and facilitate their study alongside traditional oral methods of transmission.

The research adopts a descriptive methodology. It introduces the field of study, the Beja homeland, and presents several concepts related to the Tebdawi language (also referred to as Bedawiyet) in eastern Sudan. It also discusses song forms, classifications, performance occasions, and thematic messages, including those associated with celebrations, labour, war, funerals, and reconciliation.

The paper reviews women's songs, the motivations for composing them, their performance styles, and their social roles. It also explores men's singing traditions, addressing *dobeit* both linguistically and conceptually; "Bi Bob" singing and its accompanying rhythmic percussion as forms of collective singing; and "Al-Kul" songs, urban singing, and their leading performers.

The study arrives at several conclusions, most notably that the singing culture of the Hadendowa community in eastern Sudan has a clear and distinctive character, reflected in the following findings:

- Dobeit singing is the origin of the widely used term *dobeit*, which describes quatrain poetry performed through chanting.
- Each type of singing serves a specific social function.
- The song texts contain no references to the Red Sea, suggesting that the Beja's relationship with pastoralism and agriculture is stronger than their connection to the sea.
- Singing plays a role in both peace and war, as well as in tribal reconciliation.

Sudan is distinguished by its ethnic and linguistic diversity, which has enriched Sudanese culture in both literature and the arts. Melodic and vocal forms vary across ethnic communities: each group has distinctive musical modes of expression that can be readily recognized, reflecting the group's cultural identity and environment. The Qur'an refers to the diversity of languages and colours in the verse:

"And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and your colours. Indeed, in that are signs for those who know."

— Qur'an, Surat Al-Rum, 30:22

This diversity also extends to artistic expressions rooted in language.

This study examines the Hadendowa, one of the principal ethnic communities of eastern Sudan, that has long preserved its singing heritage and its associated social, political, and religious meanings. The study is limited to singing, while noting Hadendowa's connection to the *basankob*—the *tambur*—a stringed instrument that accompanies vocal performance. It documents a musical tradition within the community in which every clan or lineage possesses its own distinctive melody or string pattern, performed during both festive and mournful occasions and serving a symbolic function related to the local security and territorial integrity. Its performance is prohibited to non-native lineage, indicating the continued vitality of musical traditions despite the influence of urban culture in the region over the past two decades.

The study is based on fieldwork conducted in eastern Sudan. It aims to introduce the culture of the region and, in particular, the Hadendowa singing heritage, while highlighting its value as a reference for researchers and other interested audiences.

GEOGRAPHY OF THE STUDY

The study area lies in the Red Sea and Kassala States in the far east of Sudan. It is bordered to the north by Egypt; to the south by Gedaref State and the Atbara River; to the east by the Red Sea; and to the west by Northern State and River Nile State.

Its southeastern border extends toward Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Red Sea State features an arid climate, with winter rainfall along the coast and summer rainfall inland. Kassala State is generally dry in winter, with rainfall occurring during the summer.

THE HADENDOWA AND ITS LINEAGES

It is often difficult to gain a comprehensive understanding of all sources of a community's culture. However, examining an ethnic group's physical environment, economic activities, and tribal composition can help identify some of these foundational sources. In this context, the Hadendowa are one of the largest Beja ethnic communities in Sudan. They are divided into five principal lineages, from which numerous branches descend.

Pastoralism is their predominant economic activity, alongside agriculture and trade in certain areas. Some Hadendowa lineages have been known for distinctive economic and social roles in particular towns, including Port Sudan.

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

The Tebdawi language, also known as Bedawiyet, has linguistic overlaps with neighboring languages, including Tigre in southern areas, alongside Sudanese colloquial Arabic. As the community evolved and intermarriage increased, Arabic and religious vocabulary were incorporated into Tebdawi, while the language retained its distinctive morphological characteristics.

This reflects the depth of Hadendowa's historical contact with traders and formal institutions of government. Songs also contain certain borrowed foreign words, such as *super*, which is pronounced locally as *suyobar*.

LANGUAGE PHONETICS AND MELODIC CHOICE

Differences in environment and geography, including varied landscapes such as plains, mountains, and forests, contribute substantially to shaping melodic choices and song forms that are reliant on the spoken word, or what may be termed "the language of the people." (vernacular) Through the phonetic distinctiveness of their language, listeners can identify the songs of each ethnic group by its unique linguistic character, even when rhythmic patterns vary.

The phonetic differences between Tebdawi, Arabic, and other languages have endowed Tebdawi with distinctive melodic dimensions, setting it apart from other Sudanese musical traditions. Although its tonal colour may appear similar to some melodies of the Horn of Africa, owing to similarities in environment and geography, patterns of linguistic stress remain a decisive factor in shaping melodic form.

Roper noted the significance of stress in Beja poetry, explaining that its effect is linked to the nature of rhythm and that stress is more evident when a poetic line is recited than when it is written (Roper, M., 1927, p. 148).

In sung language, stress is a central element in determining rhythmic and melodic choices. The rhythmic structure of language and poetry guides the overall construction of a melody by connecting the phonetic properties of words to their internal rhythm. On this basis, stress serves as a safeguard that preserves the vital features and distinctive character of the sung language.

The researcher observed that rhythmic stress in many Hadendowa songs, particularly those sung in Tebdawi, often begins on the weak beat, referred to locally as *Lavary*. Delayed accents, known as syncopation, are also common. This feature is one of the distinguishing characteristics of songs performed by Tebdawi speakers and corresponds with certain complex rhythmic patterns, such as the *Kul* rhythm:

Thus, folk songs and music differ from urban songs and music, which commonly rely on a written poetic text by a known author. Folk song is also distinguished by considerable flexibility and a broad capacity for addition and omission according to the needs of its audience. Although the Beja generally have celebrated oral poets, their texts are not usually written down; rather, they are preserved through oral circulation and transmitted from one generation to another.

SONG FORMS

Among the Hadendowa, singing plays an active role in most areas of life, including education, celebrations, labour, war, and mourning. Their song forms are predominantly performed collectively, a distinguishing feature of singing in nomadic and rural settings. Their melodies tend to be simple, built around a single melodic phrase repeated throughout the dance, locally known as al la'ba ("the game" or the play). In this way, the songs fulfil their intended compositional function.

Nabila Ibrahim affirms this concept, noting that one of the most significant functions of living folk song is its contribution, alongside other forms of popular expression, to revealing the patterns through which popular society is constructed (Ibrahim, 1974, p. 224). Walid Munir likewise states in "The Art of the Collective" that folk song is a form of creativity inherently characterised by collectivity. It therefore appears as a collective ritual, emerging as a tangible expression of a particular moment in life and performing an expressive, functional role in contexts of love, marriage, and labour (Munir, 1989, p. 294). Thus, Hadendowa singing is not limited to entertainment or amusement; rather, it embodies the accumulated practical knowledge and experiences of nomadic and rural life, as well as the urban connections associated with them.

TYPES OF HADENDOWA SINGING WOMEN'S SONGS

In Beja society generally, singing became established among women before men. It appeared in songs of celebration, lamentation, and horsemanship, all of

which are performed collectively. Most of their texts are composed during the occasion itself, according to the circumstances of time and place. Among the best-known Hadendowa women's song forms, named after their rhythmic patterns, are the Kabur, Sira, and Kul songs.

KABUR SINGING

Kabur songs are vocal forms performed by women during celebratory occasions, such as weddings and circumcision ceremonies. They resemble sira songs, associated with the daluka drum, although their accompanying rhythmic pattern differs from the sira or daluka rhythm familiar to many Sudanese communities. Their rhythms are comparatively spacious and slow, organized in a compound metre combining two beats with three beats:

(2+3 = )

Their lyrics praise the qualities of the bride's and groom's families, describe the husband's generosity and courage, and celebrate the bride's beauty. They are accompanied by ululation.

ULULATION

The researcher observed that ululation among Hadendowa women, as well as in other areas of eastern Sudan and the Horn of Africa, shares the same performance features. This differs from the better-known forms of ululation found elsewhere in Sudan. This observation calls for closer attention to the characteristics of this ululation, which may indicate a possible historical or cultural connection requiring further research, particularly regarding its similarities to ululation practices in North Africa despite the geographical distance.

The widespread form of ululation recognised in many Sudanese cultures consists of producing a vocal sound from the mouth resembling a trill. It commonly comprises two musical tones moving from low to high through the movement of the tongue. The speed of the ululation and the length of its sustained sound vary from one region to another, depending on the nature of the occasion and the performer's degree of emotional engagement with the event.

By contrast, the ululation accompanying Hadendowa celebration songs is based on one sustained sound or single pitch, broken into rapid articulations controlled by the tongue. The supporting movement for producing it runs from the front to the back of the mouth rather than from right to left, giving it a strong and resonant quality. Its function is to express joy, raise the morale of participants, and generate enthusiasm.

An ululation pattern:



MELODIES IN KABUR SONGS:

The melodies of Kabur songs are characterised by the simplicity of their melodic structures. Their melodic phrases generally do not exceed four measures (rhythmic units), except in rare instances. These melodies are numerous and varied, accompanied by the Kul rhythm, the most widely known rhythm in Hadendowa singing culture, while some melodies are performed to the Sira rhythm. All of them are marked by repetition in performance, particularly during the procession to the bride's house, known as Doubani (Suleiman, 2002, p. 62).

MOURNING SONGS (MANAHA)

This form of singing is associated with women and is performed upon the death of the clan member, a practice common in many parts of Sudan. Among the Hadendowa, however, it has particular features: the sung text depends on the age and gender of the deceased. Accordingly, women extol the deceased person's achievements, generosity of character, and companionship. What is sung for an elderly man differs from what is sung for a young man or a boy (Suleiman, 2002, p. 62).

The researcher obtained this description from oral informants, as it was not possible to observe a live example of mourning songs because they are tied to the of death contexts. The account therefore relies on informants' descriptions of the nature and characteristics of these songs. This strict commitment to performing songs and other forms of musical creativity only on their designated

occasions demonstrates the Hadendowa's respect, as well as that of most other ethnic communities in the Beja region, for inherited oral singing conventions and their observance. They do not violate the rules that preserve their musical culture and protect it from trivialisation through circulation and performance outside its proper context. This applies particularly to women's songs in pastoral and village settings, which have not been absorbed into the ethnically diverse environment of the city.

WOMEN'S SONGS IN URBAN SETTINGS

Women's songs migrated to the urban settings through the voices of male singers. Because women's collective participation is not possible in such settings in the same way that it is in the countryside, where women's singing is confined to women-only gatherings. As a result, it became common for men in the urban centres to perform these songs, owing to the different urban social dynamics compared with those of the countryside.

The researcher observed that women's songs are widely sung by performers, whether they are Hadendowa or from other communities. Their urban performance, however, differs from their performance in rural or pastoral settings. In the city, the performance is individual rather than predominantly collective, particularly at wedding celebrations accompanied by musical bands. The audience participates through dancing, as a form of collective engagement with the singing.

Because urbanites are exposed to diverse artistic forms, the performance styles of women's songs have evolved over time. Musical instruments have replaced the collective female voices, known as shayalat, the collective female chorus that used to repeat lines after the lead singer. This indicates that urban singers reshape the melodies of women's songs in response to urban audiences' needs and artistic tastes. The flexibility of folk songs, and their capacity for additions and omissions, facilitates this process, making them readily adaptable and open to reshaping without altering the song's essential character, melody, or message.

Both the artist Mohamed El Badri and the artist Hamada Sinkat performed some women's songs. Their additions were particularly evident in their vocal-performance styles, while the original melodic forms were retained. Examples include Al-Kul, performed by Mohamed El Badri, and Sira Sada, performed by Hamada Sinkat in 1999.



The melodic model above represents the song “Sira Sada.” It is built on a recurring melodic phrase, led by the female singer and answered by the shayyalat chorus. When the artist Hamada Sinkat performed it, however, he replaced the voices of the shayyalat with organ accompaniment while preserving the original melody.

MEN'S SINGING AND PERFORMANCE

DOBEIT

Dobeit is a word from the Tibdawi language meaning unmetered singing that is performed without rhythmic accompaniment, whether from percussion instruments, handclapping, or stamping feet on the ground. It may sometimes be accompanied by the basankob instrument.

The word dobeit is derived from doba, meaning groom or bridegroom—a boy. Its feminine counterpart is todoba, meaning bride—a girl. The word dobani refers to the place of play or celebration—the wedding gathering. From this comes the term dobeit, associated with free-form singing based on a particular type of poetry known as habit.

Just as every type of Hadendowa song has its own poetic form, dobeit also has distinctive formats and structures. It is generally poetry preserved orally. Among the Hadendowa, as well as other Tibdawi-speaking groups, dobeit includes both short and long poetic forms, classified according to the number of lines. It may consist of two to four lines—known as habit fidak girmi—and usually focuses on





a single theme. This is the prevalent form in both the rural and urban settings of the Hadendowa. There is also a third form consisting of three lines and all these forms constitute complete units of meaning (Suleiman, 2002, p. 64).

FORM AND LANGUAGE

Each Hadendowa song type or form has its own specific performance methods and artistic techniques. Dobeit is among the most prominent singing forms in eastern Sudan. Its technique involves two singers competing in dobeit on a single subject, each developing the description according to their eloquence and expressive ability. This form is known as mujada'a (poetic dueling).

Mujada'a is common among dobeit poets, or practitioners of what is also known as murabba'at, from the far northwestern region of Darfur to eastern Sudan, with the latter forming the focus of this paper. Another type of murabba'at is performed by a solo singer, unlike mujada'a, and is often associated with longing for one's homeland, singing to the beloved, or describing the beauty of nature.

The dobeit form relies primarily on the Tibdawi language, though it sometimes incorporates Arabic words, particularly names and terms that have no equivalent in Tibdawi.

Dialect is often a decisive factor in determining the rhythm of a poetic line, since the placement of stress within the syllables of the same word varies from one dialect to another when dialects branch from a single language (Shehata, 1990, p. 54). The Hadendowa, however, have a single style that differs from the styles generally associated with Sudanese Arabic dialects.

Hadendowa dobeit addresses themes of pride, courage, generosity, lineage, the beloved, and the homeland. Although singers praise the beloved's character and qualities, they never state her name or make any indication that might identify her. Within Hadendowa society, mentioning the name of one's beloved, or the name of any woman, is

considered a serious disgrace.

BI BUB SINGING

Bi Bub is one of the best-known dances of the Hadendowa and most Beja groups. In the past, it was performed to the sounds of the basankob instrument. Over time, songs came to accompany the dance and became known as Bi Bub songs. It is a distinctive collective dance performed in triple meter. Participants jump upward and then strike the ground with their feet on the points of strong stress.

Bi Bub singing and dancing are usually performed during wedding celebrations (dobani), births, and circumcisions. The researcher observed that participation in the Bi Bub dance is not limited to a particular age group: children and adults alike take part in pairs. One striking characteristic of the dance is the intense state of musical ecstasy and excitement that overtakes the participants, sometimes causing some of them to faint. In such cases, the singing does not cease until the last dancer lying on the ground regains consciousness. One Bi Bub melody is: Harir wa Reet:



SOLO SINGING

Hadendowa became familiar with solo singing in the mid-twentieth century. Influenced by urban culture, especially the male-dominated songs broadcast by Sudanese Radio, they began using the basankob instrument to accompany singing. This encouraged them to adopt a similar approach while retaining their own cultural distinctiveness. Solo singing accompanied by the basankob thus emerged in urban settings, whereas singing in rural areas continued to preserve its collective character.

Both Bamkar of Port Sudan and Bashtil of Hayya informed the researcher that, in the past, singing was an activity exclusively associated with women,

while men's role was limited to dancing. Until relatively recently, the use of the basankob had been confined to mirhat music (Suleiman, 2002, p. 67).

A number of performers made a clear contribution to spreading this form of singing and establishing a new performance style through the use of the basankob. Among the best known was Adam Shash, regarded as the first performer to sing and record his songs for Omdurman Radio. Other prominent artists included Ahmed Daytek, Ahmed Umhail, Adam Kor Hami, Ali Olel, and Mohamed El Badri (Suleiman, 2002, p. 67).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, new singing voices emerged and further enriched the tradition established by the early pioneers. These were urban singers, as the urban centres had become a repository for melodies and musical forms arriving from the countryside and pastoral regions. Songs increasingly acquired instrumental introductions based on the melody of the opening line, the principal musical idea. This may be preceded by a degree of improvisation within the melodic framework. The rhythmic pattern is first established, followed by instrumental music that prepares the singer to begin. See the opening music in Example 1, then the music that leads into the singing in Example 2.

Song: Ihab Doni

Song type: Folk/popular song

Singer: Mohamed El Badri

Accompaniment: Musical ensemble, including string and wind instruments

Performance: Red Sea Song Festival, Port Sudan, 15 June 2003

Time signature: 3/8

Rhythmic pattern:

Mashy al-Jamal ("the camel's walk")





From Basankob to the Organ: Transformations in Musical Accompaniment in Beja Singing

Most singers display similar styles of vocal performance, a similarity attributable to the phonetic characteristics of the Tibdawi (Bedawiet) language. A song typically begins with a melodic introduction played on the basankob instrument. The singer then starts to perform, while the voice is accompanied by music organized around a rhythmic pattern, with melodic interventions at points of vocal prolongation where the singer concludes a musical phrase. The music then returns to the introductory melody. The singer repeats the melody many times, using different words on each occasion, without departing from the framework of the original melody.

Some songs, however, are characterised by a diversity of melodies and rhythmic patterns. This applies particularly to songs accompanied by the basankob. Yet some singers are now accompanied by musical ensembles that use Western, or European, instruments, often as substitutes for the basankob. The ensemble performs the main melodic phrase, and the singer takes up the vocal line from its conclusion. In this way, the ensemble has sometimes replaced the shayyalin (the supporting chorus) and at other times the basankob itself. Despite this shift, singers have remained attached to their musical heritage in all its elements: poetry, melodies, and rhythmic patterns.

The emergence of the electronic organ, programmed with sounds of different musical instruments and rhythmic patterns, has appealed to a generation of young Beja singers. They have incorporated it into song accompaniment, especially at wedding celebrations in urban settings, particularly Port Sudan. This has weakened the presence of the basankob as an accompanying instrument and has also diminished the role of the musical ensemble. It has furthermore had an adverse effect on the

distinctive tonal character of the Beja singing.

CONCLUSION

This paper sought to shed light on some aspects of the singing culture of the Hadendowa, one of the Beja communities in eastern Sudan. It introduced the field of the study and described its geographical and demographic characteristics. It also described the Hadendowa's livelihood activities, the branches of the tribe, and their principal areas of settlement. The paper presented the principal components of singing in the Hadendowa setting, highlighting its place in their lives as part of a broader objective: collecting, classifying, and documenting Hadendowa song forms.

The study examined several concepts specific to the Tibdawi language in eastern Sudan, showing the significance of the language's phonetic features and their role in guiding melodic choices, shaping the tonal character of melodic phrases, and constructing the rhythmic patterns that accompany singing and dance. It presented song forms, genres, occasions, messages, and expressive functions, including songs associated with celebrations, labour, war, and mourning. Since these genres are predominantly collectively performed, they fall within the category of folk song, possessing characteristics consistent with scholarly criteria for classifying folk music.

The study also addressed several rhythmic patterns in women's songs, including the circumstances of their composition, their performance practices, and their social functions. It covered Kabur songs, their melodies and rhythms, as well as ululation and its performance style. It also referred to women's songs in urban settings and the transformations they have undergone. In addition, the study examined men's singing, explaining dobeit linguistically, terminologically, and semantically, alongside Bi Bub singing and its rhythmic pattern as a form of collective song. It further discussed Kul songs and their rhythmic pattern, presenting selected melodic examples and rhythmic structures. The paper also addressed urban singing and its pioneering performers.

The paper achieved its main objectives, particularly the documentation, notation, and preservation of the various song types of the Hadendowa community in eastern Sudan, making them easier to study and engage with beyond oral transmission. It also aimed to notate rhythmic patterns and preserve them from external musical influences, especially the programmed rhythms of modern keyboard instruments, or electronic organs, whose mechanical and mathematically regulated nature does not take cultural particularities into account. The research reached a number of conclusions, most notably that the singing culture of the Hadendowa group in eastern Sudan has distinctive characteristics, including:

- Dobeit singing, which is the origin of the term dobeit commonly used by those who work with murabba'at, four-line vernacular poems, and perform them through vocal recitation.
- Each genre of singing has its own social function.
- The absence of references to the Red Sea in song texts, indicates that the Beja's connection to pastoralism and agriculture is stronger than their connection to the sea.
- Singing plays a role in peace and war, as well as in tribal reconciliation.

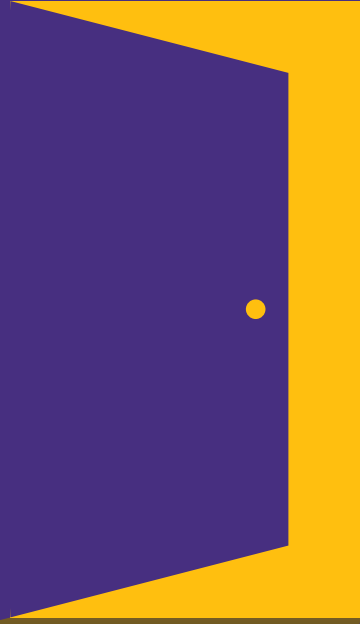
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PHOTOS FROM THE FIRST ISSUE





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