

Red Sea crisis - looming threat of World War III

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Geographical importance

Red Sea lies between the two continents of Africa and Asia; it also lies between Europe and Asia. It is called heart of the area and the link between two worlds. As a vital international waterway, Red Sea also provides a line of communication from the Far East to the Mediterranean and to the North Atlantic. In terms of commercial importance it serves a bridge between the richest areas of Europe and Far East.

Being a natural border between the eastern coast of Africa and the Western coast of Arabian Peninsula, it is a vital route for the transportation of oil through *Bab el Mandeb* in the south to the Suez Canal in the north. Its importance will remain as long as oil remains a primary source of energy. As the Suez Canal replaced the route of commercial vessels round the Cape of Good Hope, Red Sea became a vital navigating route.

Strategic importance

Red Sea assumed strategic importance after it became one of the main routes for transportation of Gulf oil from the East to Europe, especially when the Saudi kingdom decided to use the Red Sea route instead of the Gulf for security reasons. It serves as a major trade outlet for the coastal states especially Sudan, Ethiopia, Jordan and Israel. There are strong indications of rich mineral deposits in the sea in addition to its great fishing potential. Along its coast, lie some of the key countries in the Arab, Islamic and African worlds. Besides all this, it serves as a line of communication for the military forces between their home countries and their bases in different parts of the world



Source of conflict

The most important issue that has persistently bedevilled peace and tranquillity in the Red Sea region for more than half a century is Arab – Israel conflict. From the day one of the State of Israel, the Arabs have thought it an illegal, hostile, and expansionist existence over the Arab land (Palestine).¹ Israel considers free navigation through the Red Sea essential to its trade, communication, and security with Asian and African continents. The founders of the State of Israel had insisted on including the Southern Negev Desert and its outlet on the Gulf of Aqaba within the projected Jewish state.²

Given Egypt's unfriendly attitude, Israel feared that Egypt could someday close the navigation through the Suez Canal. Hence, Israel needed an alternative to the Canal in the outlet of the Gulf of Aqaba. Israel's access to the Red Sea has been crucial in Israel's foreign policy. Tel Aviv actively supported anti-Arab movements in Africa, especially Southern Sudan and Ethiopia, by offering them military training, advice and arms. Israel and Ethiopia opposed the complete Arabization of the Red Sea.³

Thus the source of conflict in the Red Sea lies simply in Palestinians wanting disappearance of the state of Israel ---- the illegal occupant of their lands ---- while Israel created by virtue of a mandate of big powers wants its survival ensured against the hostilities of the Muslim States in the Middle East, Iran in particular.

Iranian axis

In retaliation to Hamas' unprovoked brutal attack on a border village in Israel on October 7, 2023, in which about 1200 innocent Jews --- men, women and children were massacred in cold blood and about 240 taken as hostages ---, led to the outbreak of fighting in Gaza Strip. So far this war has taken the lives of thousands of people besides razing to ground of a large number of habitats. Israel has refused to accept ceasefire despite plea by the stakeholders.

As the fighting intensified and casualties began to pile up in Gaza and ceasefire all elusive, it was obvious that the Red Sea commercial waterway would be threatened. A peculiarity of contemporary geopolitical strategy is that some countries want to settle their score with an adversarial entity by raising proxies and not coming in open confrontation. Iran is one such country, which has *Hamas* in Palestine, *Hezbollah* in Lebanon and *Houthi* in Yemen as its proxies. Iranian arms, funding, advice and strategic input are made available to them. Consequently, these militant outfits, parading as “liberators of Palestine” are actually the armed brigands indoctrinated with anti-Israel jargon.

With Iran's tacit support, the rebel Shia Houthi of Yemen took over the reins of the government in a coup of 2014-15 that saw the ouster of Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi.⁴ The Houthi regime

dovetailed its regional policy to that of Iran, meaning anti-Israel, anti-Saudi, and anti-America. A poster of the rebels was as this: (The God is great; Death to America; Death to Israel; Curse on the Jews, and Victory to Islam)

Controlling the access to the Red Sea and using its capability to monitor the movement of vessels across the Red Sea, the Houthi posed naval threat to Israel for which free movement across the Red Sea was vital. The apprehension was that the impact of an explosive situation in the region would escalate and reach the vulnerable shores of the Red Sea. More loyal than the king, the Houthi Shia militants of Yemen armed and funded by the theocratic regime in Tehran, engineered attacks on commercial vessels moving across the Red Sea and bound for destinations spread over the Far East to Europe. The Houthi argued they would attack vessels with Israeli connections.

Warships in action

The US and UK moved a small protective naval force to the Mediterranean and Red Sea to offset a threat to commercial vessels. On November 19, 2023, the Houthis captured a Japanese-operated cargo ship *Galaxy Leader* and its 25 crew members. The ship has ties to an Israeli businessman. The *CBS News* of January 10, 2024 said that 60+ missiles and drones were shot down over Red Sea since October 2023. All these were fired from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen. It added, “18 drones, 2 anti-ship Cruise missiles and one ant-ship ballistic missile were fired at About 9.15 p.m. local time (on 9 Jan) by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels were successfully shot down,” the US CENTCOM reported. The projectiles were shot down by a “combined effort” of fighter jets from the aircraft carrier USS *Eisenhower* and the missile destroyers USS *Gravely*, USS *Laboon* and USS *Mason* along with the UK Royal Navy destroyer, the HMS *Diamond*. Tuesday’s (9 Jan, 2024) strikes marked the 26th such Houthi attack on Red Sea shipping lanes since November 19,” CENTCOM said. The Houthis claim they are targeting Israeli-linked or Israel-bound vessels to protest the ongoing war on Gaza. However, they have frequently targeted vessels with tenuous or not clear links to Israel as well.

Route change

The Houthi threat is not a small matter because it has the potential to assume dangerous dimension. The immediate outcome of Houthi belligerency in the Red Sea is that it has forced the shipping companies to bypass the route and divert around South Africa’s Cape of Good Hope. This has significantly added to journey times and cost. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said that the action was “necessary and proportionate” to protect global shipping. German shipping group Hapag Lloyd decided to avoid Suez Canal, opting for

the longer route around the Cape of Good Hope. Maersk, a Danish counterpart, announced a similar decision.

Looming clouds of world War

The seriousness of the consequences of threatened international waterways for commercial and other vessels is reflected in the address of US National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, made at the World Economic Forum in Davos. He said that the US has worked with the international response to new aggression in the Middle East, in the Red Sea reckless attacks by the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels, including the use of anti-ship ballistic missiles threatening navigation in one of the most vital waterways. More than 50 nations have been affected in the nearly 30 attacks. Our defensive action followed extensive multi-national coordination among 44 nations, who condemned the attacks besides the UN Security Council. He added, “We are not looking for a regional conflict; we seek to stop the spread of conflict and create the conditions for de-escalation.”⁵

Some political quarters, taking an alarmist view of the threats posed to the freedom of movement across the international waterways of great importance, believe that the situation developing in the Middle East, especially the Red Sea region, has all the potential to lead to a World War. Stakes are high no doubt and a single wrong step can lead to catastrophe. In a scenario of World War, the Palestinian issue will get submerged under the debris.

No doubt, the stakes are high. But there are strong reasons why a World War is unlikely to erupt. The Palestine – Israel issue has been hanging fire for nearly seven decades. There have occurred numerous armed clashes between the stakeholders but none of those ended up in a world war. The volatile situation was de-escalated through the intervention of responsible world powers. In the present case, efforts are underway at various levels for putting an end to the fighting. We find its reverberations in the above-mentioned speech of the US Secretary of State. President Biden has said that he wants de-escalation of hostilities in the Gaza and Red Sea region. China and Russia, both have spoken of ceasefire in the Middle East, and both think that the two independent states formula is the viable one to ensure peace in the disturbed Middle East.

Russia’s priority lies with military operations in Ukraine and China has enormous commercial interests in the Middle East. For example, take the case of Chinese investments in Egypt alone between 2018 and 2019; Egypt received around \$28.5 billion in Chinese investments, making it the biggest recipient of Chinese investment in the Arab world. In March 2023, Egyptian authorities announced a \$2 billion investment project by the Chinese company Xinxing Ductile Iron Pipes. The project will build iron and

steel mills in the industrial zone of Ain Sokhna. China has been Egypt's largest trading partner for eight years in a row. In November 2023, China exported \$1.42 billion and imported \$52.5 million from Egypt, resulting in a positive trade balance of \$1.37 billion.

At the same time, not only the US and its allies but China and Russia also lay stress on the freedom of navigation in vital waterways. Pirates have been trying to disrupt free navigation in the Arabian Gulf and western Pacific but the huge movement of the navies of big powers in the region is strong enough to deal with this nuisance. India, for example, has moved no fewer than ten warships into the region as a security measure against the pirates.

War in our times means a nuclear war or the extinction of human and animal life besides the total annihilation of earth's flora and fauna. No nuclear country can take the risk of initiating the Third World War because they know the consequences.

Conclusion

For prompting the two warring sides --- Israel and Palestine --- to gear up for peace talks, it is important that the proxies raised by Iran or other countries should be disarmed and wound up. This will give the stakeholders space for talking the possibilities of a negotiated formula. The Palestinians have to be there and so will be the Israelis. Under the aegis of the UN a global working group has to be constituted to suggest the workable formulae for resolving the Palestinian issue. Both sides will have to make some sacrifices, soften the respective hardened stands, and accept dialogue as the only workable instrument for bringing peace to the region. Iran has to restrain diehard elements at home that ardently subscribe to hate syndrome. The cult of hatred must come to an end. The process of normalization of Israel-Arab relations and the initiative for the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a 7,200-km (4500 mile) long multi-mode network of ship, rail, and road route for moving freight between India, Iran, Azerbaijan, Russia, Central Asia and Europe must be resumed without loss of time.

¹ *Strategic importance of the Red Sea*, Turki Al-Anazi published by US Army War College, Pennsylvania, 2001. P. 10

² Abdullah A. Al-Sultan, *The Red Sea and the Arab-Israel Conflict*. (Cairo: Arab Affairs, 1991) 93.

³ Muhammad Z. Al-Mugarbi; *The Conflict of Strategies in the Red Sea*. (Cairo: Arab Affairs; 1991) 54

⁴ "[Yemen rebels announce takeover](#)". *BBC News*. February 6, 2015.

⁵ World Economic Forum, Davos, January 16, 024