



# Research Report

Security Council (SC)

Issue 2: Addressing maritime security threats and piracy in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa

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# Introduction

**Maritime security** threats and piracy have been a pressing issue in the Red Sea and **Horn of Africa** region since the very beginning of the construction of the **Suez Canal**: a channel connecting Europe to Asia through the Red Sea, making it a crucial trade route globally. The region has faced tensions, stemming from territorial maritime battles between Egypt and its former Colonial powers over the nationalisation of the Canal, to Somali pirates between the early 1990s and late 2010s. The current threat the Red Sea is exposed to lies under the Yemeni militia known as the **Houthis**. Additionally, **the organized military group from north Yemen** is responsible for the civil war, and later on Proxy War, in Yemen which further deepens the tensions within the Red Sea, as Yemen lies on its coast.

Attacks that occur in the Red Sea and pose a great threat to maritime security include anti-ship missiles, **naval mines**, and explosive drones aimed at commercial vessels. The attacks are fatal as they affect the global economy, along with causing civilian casualties and further disrupting the political climate among bordering states. The attacks are so severe that the Red Sea is now largely avoided as a means of transportation for goods. Instead, commercial ships are obliged to reroute from under Cape of Good Hope in order to travel the distance between Europe and Asia. This reroute extends traveling time greatly and in return causes a rise in energy prices, along with posing a greater threat to climate warming from the staggering use of fuel. In conclusion, the maritime security threats in the Red Sea pose an international threat to the economic balance, jeopardize civilian lives and further destabilize fragile bordering states.

# Definition of Key Terms

## Maritime Security

Maritime security is the protection of ships, ports, and ocean routes from threats such as piracy, terrorism, smuggling, and armed conflict to ensure safe and lawful use of the seas.

## Piracy

The practice of attacking and robbing ships at sea.

## Horn of Africa

Peninsula region on the Eastern point of the African continent, consisting of the countries Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia; borders the Red Sea

## Suez Canal

Encyclopaedia Britannica (n.d.): “Suez Canal, sea-level waterway running north-south across the Isthmus of Suez in Egypt to connect the Mediterranean and the Red seas. The canal separates the African continent from Asia, and it provides the shortest maritime route between Europe and the lands lying around the Indian and western Pacific oceans. It is one of the world’s most heavily used shipping lanes.”

## Houthis

The Houthi movement are a Yemeni armed political and military group that emerged from northern Yemen and currently control significant territory, including parts of the Red Sea coast, and are involved in the ongoing Yemeni civil war.

## Naval mines

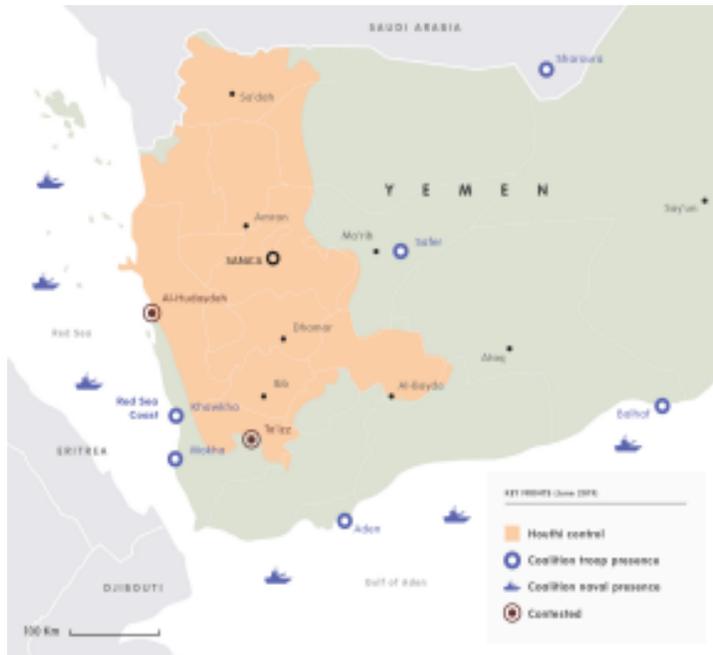
Naval History and Heritage Command (n.d.): “Self-contained explosive device placed in the water deemed to destroy submarines and surface vessels.”

## Background

**Maritime security** threats have been present in the Red Sea as long as the existence of the Suez Canal. Constructed between 1854 and 1869 as a means of creating a direct naval passage between Europe and Asia, the Suez Canal remains the fastest route connecting the aforementioned continents and is therefore crucial for trade and transportation (*SCA - Canal History*, n.d.). In the early years after its construction, namely in 1888, the Suez Canal was declared a neutral waterway to all ships—in peace and in war (*SCA - Constantinople Convention*, n.d.). However, due to the relevance of the Canal, the region faced a conflict known as the Suez Crisis. The Suez Canal was primarily controlled by the British Empire as it was its main route for trade and colonial supervision, but was later on nationalized by Egypt in 1956. The nationalization of the Canal led to Colonial powers—Britain, Israel, France—intervening to regain control. This conflict was a great threat to global trade and **maritime security** and is therefore an example of the fragility and importance of the Red Sea region on an international scale.

The Red Sea and **Horn of Africa** regions came under threat again after the collapse of the Somali central government in 1991 (*Menkhaus, 2003*). The political instability in Somalia made it fragile to **piracy** attacks and illegal fishing along its coast on the Red Sea. The initial **piracy** attacks in the Somali waters of the Red Sea were claimed to have the motive of “safeguarding” the waters, however these attacks were targeting commercial ships carrying goods between Asia and Europe. The United Nations Security Council was deeply involved in countering these attacks. Resolution 1816 was passed in 2008 and called for the authorization of foreign naval forces to enter Somali waters to combat **piracy** (*UNSC, 2008*). The UNSC’s interference had temporarily suppressed the rising tensions in the area and promoted the collaboration of member states to combat multinational issues, in this case, **maritime security** threats.

**Maritime security** threats in the Red Sea had begun to rise again in 2015 and remain present to



this day. The cause of these attacks stems primarily from the Yemen Civil War. These **piracy** offenses differ from the previous ones as they are predominantly politically driven rather than being solely for economic gain. In 2014, the civil war in Yemen emerged from tensions between the **Houthis**, a northern Shia military group, and the central government, with the **Houthis** seizing the capital of Sana'a and forcing the pre-existing government to flee

*(Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).*

The **Houthis** had furthermore expanded their operations by targeting **maritime** traffic in the Red Sea and **Horn of Africa** region through attacks including: anti-ship missiles, **naval mines**, and explosive drones aimed at commercial vessels (Al-Dawsari et al., 2024). What differentiates these attacks in particular from previous attacks is not only their technological advancement, but also their motive. The **Houthis** have claimed that their **maritime** attacks have mainly been against the state of Israel in order to show their support for Palestine in the pressing conflict (Al-Dawsari et al., 2024). However the attacks of the military group have been on a larger scale than solely targeting Israeli ships. The **maritime Houthi** attacks have targeted several commercial ships and have therefore caused civilian casualties, with the first being in March 2024 on the MV True Confidence Ship which caused the lives of 3 crew members (Larsson, 2024). The scale of the **maritime** threats and **piracy** had triggered a response from the West, namely the United States of America. In coalition with Saudi Arabia and Israel, the USA imposed restrictions on Yemen in an attempt to halt the attacks in the Red Sea, however this coalition had only raised the tensions between the nations and has further motivated the **Houthis** to pose and aim their attacks against the aforementioned states.

The attacks pose a great threat and disruption in global trade as the Red Sea, predominantly the

#### Vessels re-routing

Attacks by Yemen's Houthi militants on ships in the Red Sea are disrupting maritime trade through the Suez Canal, with some vessels re-routing to a much longer East-West route via the southern tip of Africa.



**Around the southern tip of Africa**  
Around 11,800 Nautical miles  
in a 35-day trip

Sources: LSGC, Planet Labs, MapofNews, Shoel Klare Kalsha  
Reuters Staff • Dec. 18, 2023 | REUTERS

Suez Canal, serves as the main route for all means of commerce, with 30% of container shipping and 15% of worldwide trade having to pass through these regions to reach their destinations (International Transport Forum & Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024). Currently, ships have to detour around Cape of Good Hope in order to avoid the Red sea region. This detour adds up to 15 days of travel time which in retrospect require not only more fuel, but more labour.

The increase of fuel usage directly affects the

rise of prices of the transported goods, staggering oil and energy prices, along with further contributing to carbon emissions. Jacobsen (2024)

# Major Countries and Organizations Involved

## **International Maritime Organization**

The IMO develops global maritime safety regulations, tracks piracy incidents, and helps countries strengthen maritime security capacity.

## **Yemen**

Stands central in the issue of maritime security threats as the civil war in Yemen has caused the Houthi militia to launch, and continue to launch, attacks into the Red Sea.

## **Somalia**

One of the first outlets of modern piracy, spanning from 1991 until the early 2010s. Somalia's collapsed government has weakened its coastguard safety and therefore allowed for piracy attacks to take place in its bordering Red Sea coastlines.

## **Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia leads the coalition fighting the Houthis in Yemen and has major oil exports that pass through the Red Sea. It supports stronger maritime security to protect its economic and national security interests.

## **United States of America**

The United States plays a major role in protecting shipping lanes through naval patrols and military coalitions. It supports Saudi Arabia and Israel and seeks to maintain freedom of navigation and global trade stability.

## **Israel**

Israel relies on Red Sea access for trade through its southern port of Eilat. It is also a political target of the Houthis, who have attacked ships in solidarity with Palestinians.

# Possible Solutions

## **Assistance Programs**

The implementation of assistance programs for fragile member states along the coast of the Red Sea can ensure a strengthening of their coast guard, port security and further assist them in combating piracy. This provides a long term, slow paced, solution that can ensure an efficient eradication of the pressing issue.

## **Safe Corridors/Maritime Safety Zones**

To protect commercial shipping and prevent civilian casualties, the implementation of high security zones can help ensure a safe route and protect crucial passages such as the Suez Canal and Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

## **Non Member State Negotiation**

Negotiation with non member state bodies like the Houthis can lead to agreements such as, but not limited to, ceasefires and guarantees of aforementioned safe passages within the Red Sea territory.

## **Targeting the Root Cause**

Address the issues of which piracy stems from such as illegal fishing due to unemployment. These issues can be tackled by means of targeted aid, trade agreements, or local development programs.

## **Enhancing (Regional) Naval Cooperation**

Encourage joint patrols or information-sharing initiatives among Red Sea and Horn of Africa coastal states (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Egypt, Djibouti) with international partners like the USA and EU navies.

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