

Study | December 2022

The Bab Al-Mandab Strait

The Features of International and Regional Competition
From South Yemen's Perspective

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An expert in analyzing media discourse

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South24 Center for News and Studies



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Introduction

The Bab Al-Mandab is one of the most important maritime straits in the world due to its important geopolitical location in the Middle East. It is very rich not only in the energy resources which are considered the lifeline for Europe, the US and the world, but it is also full of geopolitical, religious and ethnic conflicts. This is in addition to the consequences of the greed and influence of major global and regional forces which look for a foothold and to ensure doctrinal or political or economic influence in this region.

The competition has intensified among the superpowers in the world and the region to gain a foothold in the strategic strait and its surroundings. This is related to the growing global strategic importance of the Bab Al-Mandab in transforming energy amid the superpowers' endeavors to approach the energy resources in the Middle East. This is linked to the emergence of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis and the decision taken by Europe to boycott Russian energy resources.

This study provides a comprehensive reading about the reality of the international and regional competition on the Bab Al-Mandab Strait and the reasons behind it from the views of experts in the Arab world and South Yemen. The study independently aims to provide a detailed reading about the official and unofficial stances towards the international and regional conflicts over the Bab Al-Mandab Strait. This takes into consideration in the Southerners' historical geopolitical eligibility to control the strait and the Gulf of Aden and to what extent they realize this feverish international and regional competition along with using it to achieve their own goals.

In order to understand this competition over the Bab Al-Mandab and draw a comprehensive picture about the state of polarization in the strait between the world's major powers and some regional countries, the researcher resorted to the critical discourse analysis methodology to analyze the local, Arab and foreign media discourse about this, whether in the form of press articles or analytical studies or news and tv reports in addition to some interviews with journalists, writers, researchers, strategic experts and governmental officials.

The importance of this paper is that it employs the Arab and non-Arab media discourse to provide an important reading of the state of conflict and the big international and regional undisclosed polarization which hides behind economic or service or humanitarian pretexts. This is related to growing concerns that such a conflict could lead to another world war. It also highlights the emergent force in South Yemen under the umbrella of the STC which is a strong ally to important regional countries that serve as a source for their efforts to confront the Iranian expansion in the region, especially in the Arab Peninsula. Moreover, this paper demonstrates to what extent hard efforts exerted by Southerners who seek for a pivotal and active role regarding important waterways such as the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Sea. Additionally, they seek to understand the current international state of conflict in this geostrategic region and introduce themselves as being influential allies who can secure and protect it.

This paper began with a summary representation about a media discourse regarding the Bab-Al-Mandab's geopolitical aspect. It then embedded some excerpts from writers and media platforms about the strait's strategic importance. Afterwards, the study presented a media discourse that tackled the strait's situation during the last century's Cold War. It then provided some patterns of what were circulated about the international and regional competition over the strait. Finally, the paper provided Southerners' reading about the state of international and regional polarization in the strait's region.

The research led to a number of important conclusions. For example, it concluded that the international and regional presence in the Bab Al-Mandab Strait hides behind pretexts which conceal the real purposes. Moreover, it clarified that hegemony is the real purpose of these conflicting countries and that the regional forces' struggle in the region is an ideological, political, and intra-influential one. The research also concluded that the Southerners are aware of all details about the international and regional competition over the strait. They realize their right to secure it from all forms of threats as well as the possibility of benefiting from this conflict to serve their national South Yemen issue.

The geopolitical aspect of the Bab Al-Mandab Strait

The Bab Al-Mandab Strait is located in the Red Sea's southern part. It is a natural strait which does not exceed 32 km. It was formed due to the divergence of the two blocks of South Arabia from East Africa. Researcher Mahmoud Abdi said that "the abstract geographical concept of the Bab Al-Mandab is the 150 km distance between the strait to the north and its connection with the Gulf of Aden in the south. Thus, there are four countries overlooking it: Yemen from the east, Somalia, and Djibouti from the south and southwest, and Eritrea from the west".¹

In a report by London-based Al-Ghad on July 27th, 2018, journalist Siham Abdulqader said that "the Bab Al-Mandab Strait connects the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. It is bordered by Yemen from the east and Eritrea and Djibouti from the west. The strait's width is about 30 km. It is located in the path of the Yemeni island of Perim. Navigation also passes through the western part of the strait because it is the widest one, with a width of 25 km and a depth of 310 m. As for the eastern part of the strait, it is not suitable for international navigation due to the narrow waters in it, as it is 3 km wide and 30 m deep in the deepest area."²

In that regard, a report by the Abu Dhabi -based Sky News Arabia on August 11th, 2018, indicated that the Bab al-Mandab, which connects the Red Sea and the Suez Canal on the one hand, and the Gulf of Aden and the Strait of Hormuz on the other, is located on the maritime borders of Yemen from the east and Eritrea and Djibouti from the west. Its width is about 30 km from Ras Menhali on the Asian coast to Ras Sayan on the African coast.³

¹ The History and the Future of the Bab Al-Mandab, Mahmoud Abdi [Thmanyah](#)

² Report: the Strategic Importance of the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, [Al-Ghad TV](#)

³ The Arab Coalition takes measures to protect the navigation in the Bab Al-Mandab, [Sky News Arabia](#)

Pictures show the geopolitical aspect of the Bab Al-Mandab Strait taken from a report by Sky News Arabia.⁴



⁴ The Arab Coalition takes measures to protect the navigation in the Bab Al-Mandab, [Sky News Arabia](#)

The strategic importance of the Bab Al-Mandab Strait

There are many TV reports, articles and press investigations which discuss the importance of the maritime Bab Al-Mandab Strait. Some examples of these reports, articles and interviews with strategic affairs experts were embedded. Mahmoud Abdi said in his article entitled "The History and Future of the Bab al-Mandab" that the maritime straits "sit on the throne of strategic importance for the countries" when talking about maritime shipping. Their importance increases as the shipping industry is one of the oldest and biggest tools of international trade. Thus, the straits can be considered vital points "to pump bloods in the global economy". Abdi stressed that the straits play very sensitive roles in the prosperity of countries and people as well as in determining the place of the beneficiary countries overlooking them⁵ on the economic and political levels as they represent "strategic and political weight.

Abdi pointed out that the Bab Al-Mandab may be "on top of the most important maritime straits" in the modern era. It was undoubtedly the most important one during the old ages for its role to connect the world's east with the west. There had been attempts by old maritime forces to substitute the Bab Al-Mandab Strait by circling the African continent through the Cape of Good Hope. The latter's value declined after the opening of the Suez Canal in the late 19th century. Abdi indicated that the Bab Al-Mandab was used as the main waterway to move most of the energy and goods produced by the three continents of the old-world including Asia, Africa, and Europe. It has served as an influence key for the major powers to extend their influence in the course of the economy and international strategic relations.⁶

On the other hand, writer Mervat Zakaria spoke about the strategic importance of the Bab Al-Mandab in her study entitled "The Economic Consequences of Iran's Threats to Close the Bab Al-Mandab Strait" published by the Arab Center for Studies on July 31, 2018. She said: "the Bab Al-Mandab is among the most important straits in the world. Its importance has increased due to its connection with the Suez Canal and the Strait of Hormuz. The Gulf exports and the products which come from East Asia pass through it as well as oil tankers". She added that its importance has not been derived from the international competition

⁵ The History and the Future of the Bab Al-Mandab, Mahmoud Abd (previous source)

⁶ The History and the Future of the Bab Al-Mandab, Mahmoud Abd (previous source)

between East and West over it but through its connection with the Suez Canal in addition to its regional position which led to regional competition among the countries to control it.⁷

Regarding the Bab Al-Mandab's importance for oil, Seham Abdulqader said in her report on Al-Ghad Channel: "The Bab Al-Mandab has gained its importance in the oil world from the amount of oil passing through it, which is estimated at about 3.5 million barrels per day". She added that closing the strait will force oil tankers to move around the African continent through the Cape of Good Hope instead of passing through the Suez Canal. This will lead to a massive hike in the costs of transporting oil. The report pointed out that due to the strategic importance of the Bab Al-Mandab, Iran has sought through the Houthis in Yemen to use the Bab Al-Mandab card to pressure the international community and carry out its threats of preventing oil exports via it.⁸

Similarly, a Sky News Arabia report said that about 25000 giant ships and oil tankers pass through the Bab Al-Mandab each year towards Europe, Asia, and the US. This is equivalent to 4.8 million barrels of oil and its derivatives per day according to the US Energy Information Administration for the year 2016. This makes this strait the fourth busiest oil lane in the world. The report pointed out that what has increased the importance of the Bab Al-Mandab is the width of its ship transit channel, which is located between the island of Perim (Mayyun) [in South Yemen] and the African mainland. This allows various ships and oil tankers to cross the lane easily on two opposite and diverging axes.⁹

Furthermore, Al-Jazeera said in a report on October 2nd, 2015, that "the number of ships and giant oil tankers passing through the Bab Al-Mandab Strait in the two directions exceeds 21000 per year, or 57 per day."¹⁰ Former Yemeni Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Yamani told Al-Arabiya channel on the "The Other Dimension" program (Al Boa'd Al-Akhar) on October 23 rd., 2021, that the Bab Al-Mandab Strait transports more than 30 percent of petroleum products, derivatives, and oils to different regions of the world.¹¹

⁷ "The Economic Consequences of Iran's Threats to Close the Bab Al-Mandab Strait" published by [the Arab Center for Studies](#)

⁸ Report: the Strategic Importance of the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, previous source

⁹ The Arab Coalition takes measures to protect the navigation in the Bab Al-Mandab. Sky New Arabia (previous source)

¹⁰ The importance of the Bab Al-Mandab Strait geographically and strategically, [Al-Jazeera Channel](#)

¹¹ The Other Dimension | The Competition of Regional and Global powers to control the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Horn of Africa (previous source), [Al-Arabiya Channel](#)

The truth upon which everyone agrees is that despite the difference in some statistics and the variant ways by which these parties look at the strait, everyone agree that the Bab Al-Mandab has massive strategic importance in the economic field for all countries in the world including those located on both sides of the strait or the Red Sea countries and even regional countries.

Pictures show the reasons behind the strategic geography of the Bab Al-Mandab Strait taken from a Sky News Arabia report.¹²



¹² The Arab Coalition takes measures to protect the navigation in the Bab Al-Mandab, Sky News Arabia (previous source)



The Cold War

We can go back to the global Cold War in the last century by which the world was divided into two poles, the Socialist one led by the Soviet Union and the Capitalist one led by the United States. This will help us know how the position of the Bab Al-Mandab Strait was in this era of human history and to briefly see the form of the polarization that dominated the world which split into two poles. Moreover, we would know who seized control over the strait during this important era of the struggles among the superpowers. This is relatively similar to our current era with one difference related to the multiplicity of competing powers and the emergence of new powers that did not exist during the Cold War.

In a study published by the Arab Center for Studies and Researches on Jan 1st 2020, Dr Jamal Abdulrahman Rustom said that since World War II, the US has engaged in a “secret war” in the south Suez area in the Red Sea against British control. The US was able to establish a base in Eritrea before the latter’s independence from Ethiopia. The base served as a strategic starting point for the Americans in the Red Sea area. Rustom added that “due to the importance of the Red Sea region for the US and to protect its interests and military activities, Washington reached an agreement in 1978 with Kenya and Somalia by which it enjoyed “facilities in the two states”.¹³

¹³ Regional and international competition in the Red Sea and its impact on the security of the riparian states, Dr. Jamal Abdul Rahman Rustom, [Arab Center for Studies and Research](#)

As for the opposite side of the US expansion, Rustom said that the Soviet Union “extended the bridges of cooperation with Egypt” to secure a strategic position given the important Egyptian location on the north of the Red Sea. Regarding the south of the Red Sea, the Soviets focused on befriending South Yemen. This led to signing a treaty of friendship and cooperation between the two countries in 1979. Prior to that, the Soviet Union signed a treaty with Somalia.¹⁴

In this regard, writer Ibrahim Abu Nawar said, in an article published by the Arab Center for Studies on Aug 12th 2015, that the Soviet Union (today Russia) enjoyed maritime privileges in Aden and Socotra since the independence of South Yemen from Britain and the establishment of the People's Republic of Yemen. These concessions were shrunk after the Yemeni Unity in 1990 which came concurrently with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the deterioration of its allies around the world including the Yemeni Socialist Party which ruled South Yemen at that time.¹⁵

Military and strategic expert Fayez Al Doueiri told Al-Jazeera's the “Arab Reality” program (Al-Waqi Al-Arabi) on September 14th 2015 that during the pre-unity era, the area of Ras Menhali and Jabal Al-Sheikh Saad in the eastern side of the Bab Al-Mandab Strait was belonging to North Yemen while Perim island (Mayyun) was under the control of South Yemen. In the 1970s, North Yemen enhanced Ras Menhali and transformed it into a military region including fortifications that absorb the size of a combat squad. “This was due to fears that South Yemen and its allies, namely the Soviets may invade it to control Ras Menhali”.¹⁶

He added that after the unity between North Yemen and South Yemen, Ras Menhali and Mayyun became under the control of the unified Yemen. The Yemen Republic established an “airstrip for regular planes and not vertical ones”. Thus, the Yemeni control on the Bab Al-Mandab became more effective because the coastal fortifications at Ras Menhali achieved partial control over the Bab al-Mandab. However, when the unified Yemen controlled Mayyun, it

¹⁴ The same source

¹⁵ The Forgotten Al Nuaim Island.. From Historical Isolation to a Major Strategic Center. Ibrahim Aby Nawar, [The Arab Center for Researches and Studies](#)

¹⁶ The Arab Reality, the Bab Al-Mandab, the Importance and the Local and Regional Bets([Al-Jazeera Channel](#))

became able to close the Bab Al-Mandab by using Katyusha rockets, artillery, or gunboats.¹⁷

The Yemen War

Yemeni Journalist Naji Al-Harazi spoke with Journalist Wadie Mansour in “Our Issues” (Kadayana) Program in Al-Ghad Al-Mushreq channel on August 24th, 2022, about the US’s enhancement of its military presence in the Bab Al-Mandab and the Gulf of Aden. He indicated that the Bab Al-Mandab, the Gulf of Aden, and the Arabian Sea have been areas of competition between the US, Russia and China and that there was a global war of fleets before the outbreak of the war in Yemen. The US has concerns about the Russian presence in the region and the possible development of its confrontation with Russia due to the latter’s inability to resolve the war in Ukraine. He added: “We should not forget that the whole area has been under surveillance for eight years or more in reference to the maritime blockade imposed by the Arab Coalition on the Yemeni coasts due to concerns related to the Iranian support of the Houthis.”¹⁸

On the interests which can be attained by the Yemeni from this US presence in the Bab Al-Mandab and the Gulf of Aden, Al Harazi claimed that the US and the world’s interests in the Yemeni coasts will be useful for Yemen and those who run the Yemeni affairs. He justified this by saying that “there is no independent country” meaning that Yemen does not control its regional waters or skies amid the ongoing war there.¹⁹

For his part, Mahmoud Abdi said -during his aforementioned article- that with the outbreak of the current civil war in Yemen, the level of security threats in the Red Sea and the Bab Al-Mandab has duplicated, especially “with the emergence of the Iranian greedy ambitions by linking the Bab Al-Mandab with the Strait of Hormuz through its Houthi allies”. For him, Iran attempts to exploit it as a pressure tool in order to impose its will which aims to achieve regional hegemony. Abdi added that this led to the involvement of the neighboring Gulf States, the growing pace of militarizing this region and the engagement of new

¹⁷ The same previous source

¹⁸ Our Issues/ Will the STC be Able to End the Hotbeds of Tension in South Yemen’s governorates, [Al-Ghad Al-Mushreq channel](#)

¹⁹ The same previous source

parties in the military conflict. This is especially related to the Houthi use of Mayyun as a pivotal military location since the beginning of their deployment. However, they were driven out by the Saudi-led Arab Coalition. Thus, a UAE military base was established on the island.²⁰

As part of the impact of the Yemen war on the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, and in an article published in Independent Arabia on March 1st 2022, journalist Issa Nahari quoted former US intelligence official Norman Roule as saying that the Houthis' seizure of the Emirati ship "Rawabi" sends a message that they can stop the trade movement in the Bab Al-Mandab in a way that constitutes a serious threat on the global economy security.²¹

Considering the Arab Coalition's secure of the Yemeni water and the UAE role on particular, Sky New Arabia broadcast a report in 2015 about the Bab Al-Mandab Strait in which it said that the task of securing the Yemeni coasts which extend for more than 2000 km is not an easy one and that the maritime forces affiliated with the Arab Coalition control the vital locations there. The report added that months ago, the Emirati warship known as Al Dhafra and other ships headed towards the Bab Al-Mandab Strait and the regional water of Yemen in a task to "impose a maritime blockade on Yemen under the request of the internationally recognized government. The report quoted an officer in the Emirati warship as saying: "We are currently deployed in the Bab Al-Mandab area to prevent smuggling weapons, explosives and prohibited items to the Yemeni areas". In reference to the ship's crew, the report said: "The daily tasks of them include monitoring the Yemeni coast all the time by using modern technologies provided by this ship in addition to air surveillance. This includes the suspicion cases towards the cargo of any ship or vessels that refuse to respond to the calls of the Coalition force".²²

The Sky News channel's report quoted a soldier from the UAE Navy as saying: "We are the raid team. We are currently on Mayyun Island in the Bab Al-Mandab Strait. Our duty here is to inspect any suspicious ships. We search for prohibited items, weapons, and explosives. This is our duty as we are the team assigned to the storming operations in the maritime sector". He indicated that the

²⁰ The History and the Future of the Bab Al-Mandab, Mahmoud Abdi [thmanyah](#)

²¹ Former US intelligence official: China is a possible Gulf ally to deter Iran, [Independent Arabia](#)

²² Exclusive photos. A view of the the Bab al-Mandab Strait, [Sky News Arabia](#)

maritime blockade imposed by the Coalition deprives the Houthis- at that time- from using ports such as Al-Hodeidah and Al-Mokha in transferring the military reinforcements and receiving weapons from abroad.²³

Moreover, the report indicated that these maritime forces helped in securing other important ports such as the Port of Aden which is used by the Arab Coalition to deliver humanitarian aid to the Yemenis. One soldier of the Emirati maritime campaign said: "The Arab Coalition which consists of several countries has several pieces along the Yemeni coast. This has led to safe and smooth international navigation in the Bab Al-Mandab Strait". The report pointed to the participation of military pieces from different countries in securing the Bab Al-Mandab Strait. The report stressed the presence of huge military bases for most of the major countries in the two sides of the strait.²⁴

A multipolar world

In this important part of this paper, the researcher provides descriptive pictures for the features of the international and regional competition over the Bab Al-Mandab Strait. This is achieved by presenting studies, press articles, statements, journalistic statements, and TV interviews with a number of researchers, journalists, analysts and officials. This illustrated the identity and the reasons behind this regional and international competition over the Bab Al-Mandab in a multipolar world between the superpowers in the world and the region. This competition has been recently "fueled" by the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Talking about the features of the competition in the Red Sea, Dr Jamal AbdIbrahim Rustom said that the competition and the international and regional conflict around water, oil and resources, the Arab-Israeli conflict -which is experiencing a state of calmness and proximity between some Arab parties and Israel- the Iranian threats and the current counterterrorism war make the Red Sea region within the circle of competition and the regional-regional or the regional-international or the international-international conflicts due to its geopolitical importance.²⁵

²³ The same previous source

²⁴ The same previous source

²⁵ Regional and international competition in the Red Sea and its impact on the security of the riparian states (previous source)

Rustom pointed out that there are declared goals and other undisclosed ones for the regional and the international forces who compete in the Red Sea and the Bab Al-Mandab in particular. The declared goals include protecting the freedom of the maritime navigation, accompanying oil tankers and commercial ships, combating piracy, protecting the special interests of these forces, fighting terrorism, supporting the international peace and the establishment of bases to carry out military missions. The undisclosed goals of these international and regional forces are represented in controlling resources and markets as well as seizing the strategic and troubled areas in addition to the interference in the internal affairs with different pretexts. This also includes penetrating the African continent, imposing military and security hegemony, monitoring other parties in the region, and lessening its impact.²⁶

Former Foreign Yemeni Minister Khaled Al-Yamani told “Al-Arabiya channel” that there is a state of international and regional polarization in the Bab Al-Mandab and the Horn of Africa. He said that one can’t separate the South Red Sea from the Horn of Africa. This takes into consideration that it is a region which has the same strategic dimension for international navigation considering the international aspirations to expand influence in the region. Al-Yamani believes that the poverty of the countries bordering the Bab al-Mandab Strait from the Red Sea’s western side “Africa” has pushed these states to provide facilities for the superpowers in the form of trade facilities, but they have strategic dimensions.²⁷

Responding to a question by the announcer about the reason which made the Horn of Africa’s states host all this number of the foreign military bases, Al-Yamani attributed that to the extreme poverty and the inherited regimes in the region as well as the corruption. He cited “Djibouti” as an example where the French base there was transformed to a” pattern that produced other cases of military bases”. He mentioned the Chinese military base which has gained “massive facilities” due to what has been provided by China to Djibouti. Al-Yamani indicated that China looks at its base in Djibouti as being part of a big project “the Belt and Road” which has economic and trade purposes as it seems

²⁶ Regional and international competition in the Red Sea and its impact on the security of the riparian states (previous source)

²⁷ The other dimension | The Other Dimension | The Competition of Regional and Global powers to control the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Horn of Africa (previous source), [Al-Arabiya Channel](#)

at first glance. According to Al-Yamani, China wants to tell the world about its strong presence in the region.²⁸

As for the impact of this international and regional competition on the Bab Al-Mandab area, Al-Yamani pointed out that the region will pay a heavy price in the future as a result of this competition. He added that the region's countries have to "settle their situation and to set red lines for the world's movements within their strategic space". He indicated that the competition in the Horn of Africa is not a conflict on international trade but "a conflict of strategies" to expand influence over the Horn of Africa and the Bab Al-Mandab. Al-Yamani stressed that there is military presence for Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. He also hinted about a Spanish and German presence as part of the French forces in Djibouti. For her part, journalist and the program's hostess Muntaha Al-Ramahi pointed to the presence of 16 military bases for foreign countries in Djibouti including Turkey, France, China, Israel, and Iran.²⁹

The United States

On the backdrop of the international competition over the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, US President Joe Biden said during the Security and Development Summit held in Jeddah on July 16th, 2022: "We will not walk away and leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia, or Iran" in reference to the US presence in the Middle East. As for international navigation in the region, Biden said: "The United States will not allow foreign or regional powers to jeopardize freedom of navigation through the Middle East's waterways, including the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab al Mandab,".³⁰ He added that "the free flow of commerce and resources through the Middle East is the lifeblood of a global economy. And when nations adhere to international rules, it works. So, my administration has made it a priority to protect those vital waterways".³¹

²⁸ The other dimension | The Other Dimension | The Competition of Regional and Global powers to control the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Horn of Africa (previous source), [Al-Arabiya Channel](#)

²⁹ The other dimension | The Other Dimension | The Competition of Regional and Global powers to control the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Horn of Africa (previous source), [Al-Arabiya Channel](#)

³⁰ The speech of US President Joe Biden during the Security and Development Summit in Jeddah, [Sky News Arabia](#)

³¹ The same previous source

In this regard, the Saudi Press Agency "SPA" said during Biden's visit to the kingdom that "KSA and the United States stressed the importance of maintaining the free commerce movement, via the strategic international waterways, especially the straits of Hormuz and the Bab al Mandab". The statement added that "the two countries strongly welcome the recently established Combined Task Force 153 to focus on the security of the Bab Al-Mandab Strait in the Red Sea in particular."³²

Russia

In his article entitled "Russia in the Red Sea: The Contradictions of War and Peace" on March 11st 2022, writer Mohammed Abdulkarim Ahmed said that Moscow sought to reach an agreement with the Djiboutian government to establish a military base which will be basically used by the Russian forces. The article indicated that the talks between 2012 and 2013 included negotiation about the area of land expected to be allocated to the base, as well as the size of the expected Russian investments in this country. The writer pointed out that the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis ended those negotiations, limiting the Russian presence to cooperation with the relevant authorities in combating piracy in the Red Sea.³³ However, Khalid Al-Yamani believes that the Russian presence in the Horn of Africa will remain and spread in the region.³⁴

In this regard, Dr. Jamal Rustom said that the matter of establishing bases and Arab outlets in the warm waters is a vital demand of the Russian foreign policy to serve and secure its interests and goals in different areas within the world. He added that Russia can't currently play the role previously played by the Soviet Union in the field of the international influence conflict. This is although Moscow seeks to restore the Soviet Union's areas of influence in the Arab and African countries such as Sudan, Palestine, and Yemen by establishing a system which protects its interests. He illustrated that Russia has ambitions towards the Red

³² A Saudi-American statement about some issues including Iran, Tiran Island and Yemen, [CNN Arabia](#)

³³ Russian in the Red Sea: Contradictions of War and Peace, Mohammed Abdulkarim Ahmed, [Al-Akhbar](#)

³⁴ The Other Dimension | The Competition of Regional and Global powers to control the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Horn of Africa (previous source)

Sea and the Horn of Africa to serve its goals in East Europe and alleviate the severe sanctions imposed on it after its war with Ukraine.³⁵

China

Dr Rustom said that the “Belt and Road” initiative declared by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 is considered the most ambitious geopolitical and economic program in the world since the Marshall Plan that was implemented on the European continent after World War II. The Belt and Road Initiative aims at establishing land and maritime routes which link East Asia and the Indian Ocean. It includes more than "80 countries" in Europe, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa.³⁶

He added that China opened a base in Djibouti in the Bab al-Mandab Strait region. It is China's first foreign naval base and includes "10,000 soldiers" with the aim of protecting Beijing's "large and growing" interests in the region. Additionally, this helps in fueling the ships participating in peacekeeping operations and humanitarian missions on the coasts of Yemen and Somalia in particular. He said that the base is designed only for peaceful purposes and has nothing to do with military expansion.³⁷ However, Al-Yamani believes that the “Belt and Road” project is related more to military purposes rather than commercial and economic ones³⁸ as previously mentioned in this paper.

Regional powers

Mervat Zakaria said in her aforementioned book that Iran historically tried to play a strong role through security issues or by holding control on the straits. Iran has the Strait of Hormuz, but because of its "narrow area" it believes that it is strategically less important than the Strait of Bab Al-Mandab. She indicated that Iran "formulates its strategies towards the two straits at once" in a way that enables it to be an important regional force at the global level regarding holding

³⁵ The Other Dimension | The Competition of Regional and Global powers to control the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Horn of Africa (previous source)

³⁶ The same previous source

³⁷ The same previous source

³⁸ The Other Dimension | The Competition of Regional and Global powers to control the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Horn of Africa (previous source)

control over the energy resources and the foreign trade of the major countries in the four continents.³⁹

In this regard, Dr. Rustom said that since the early 2010, Iran has sought to enter and exist in the Red Sea's circle to "seize control on the Arab Gulf and the Red Sea". He added that Iran has long aspired to find a foothold in the region to achieve its "imperial dream". It believes that its naval presence in the Gulf of Aden would protect the communication forces in this region by taking into consideration that all countries which sail their commercial ships and oil tankers via the Red Sea take measures to secure them. It also seeks to guarantee the Houthi support in Yemen as being one of its proxies. Rustom indicated that Iran enhanced its presence in the Red Sea by establishing a military base on the Eritrean coast and building a center to supply Iranian ships passing through the Red Sea. It was also able to gain presence and facilities in Djibouti.⁴⁰

Likewise, commenting on the Iranian greedy ambitions in the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, Al-Yamani said that the Iranians explicitly expressed that they not only want to "choke" the Strait of Hormuz and control it, but they also want to seize the keys of the Bab Al-Mandab to control it also. He added that the Iranian "hostile" activity towards the ships is nothing but messages from Tehran that they are in the Red Sea, and they became a difficult number there.⁴¹

In the context of the regional competition over the Bab al-Mandab Strait, especially the Iranian Israeli conflict, a report by CNN Arabic, published on August 2nd, 2018, indicated that the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stressed the importance of Israel's maritime activity. He pointed out that the sea gives Israel many opportunities and increases the size of the State of Israel as well as a large amount of power. Netanyahu added: "If Iran tries to close the Bab al-Mandab Strait, I am convinced that it will find itself in the face of an international coalition determined to prevent it from doing so. This coalition will include the State of Israel with all its wings".⁴²

³⁹ "The Economic Consequences of Iran's Threats to Close the Bab Al-Mandab Strait" (Previous source)

⁴⁰ Regional and international competition in the Red Sea and its impact on the security of the riparian state (previous source)

⁴¹ The Other Dimension | The Competition of Regional and Global powers to control the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Horn of Africa (previous source)

⁴² Netanyahu warns of the consequences of closing the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, [CNN Arabic](#)

Rustom pointed out that the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea have special economic and security importance for Israel. He added: "One of the most important steps of Israel's strategic vision to end its isolation was to penetrate the Arab world by controlling the Red Sea,".

Furthermore, Israel is preparing for the possibility of expanding unrest in the Bab Al-Mandab Strait and confronting Iranian deployment plans in two military bases, one in Yemen and the other in Syria.⁴³

Regarding the regional presence in the Horn of Africa and the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, Al-Yamani confirmed that Turkey has a presence in Somalia and wants to expand to Suakin in Sudan. He also referred to the presence of both Egyptian and Saudi naval military fleets in the Bab Al-Mandab Strait.⁴⁴

How do Southerners read the international and regional conflict on the Bab Al-Mandab Strait?

Southerners now have their own reading and different point of view regarding international and regional competition over the strategic Bab Al-Mandab Strait. This is due to South Yemen's geopolitical control eligibility on the Bab Al-Mandab Strait region in the past, during the last century's Cold War and even currently amid the disintegration of the one Yemeni state. This also in light of the new reality imposed by the Southerners by holding control on the geography of the former Democratic Republic of Yemen. Moreover, there is a remarkable regional and international support towards the Southern forces in combating terrorism and maintaining the stability of South Yemen's governorates that overlook the maritime shipping lanes. This is related to the perspective of partnership with the regional surroundings and the international community in important files in Yemen and the Red Sea, such as maritime piracy, the illegal immigration of Africans to Yemen, confronting the expansion of the Houthis and their allies, and fighting terrorism on Yemeni soil. This is based upon the principle of exchanging interests and benefits that prevail in relations and dealings between countries of the world.

⁴³ Regional and international competition in the Red Sea and its impact on the security of the riparian state (previous source)

⁴⁴ The Other Dimension | The Competition of Regional and Global powers to control the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Horn of Africa (previous source)

Southern Transitional Council (STC)

As for the official South Yemen's view regarding the international and the regional conflict in the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, Aidrous Al-Zubaidi the President of STC and the PLC Member who is considered the top of the political and military power in South Yemen answered a question during an exclusive interview with the Saudi-owned channel "Al-Hadath" on Jan. 20th 2022 about the role played by the Southerners to maintain the maritime navigation in the Gulf of Aden. He said that the "Southerners" told their allies in the Arab Coalition that they need coast guards not naval forces at this stage in order to secure maritime navigation in the Bab al-Mandab Strait, the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea. He added that the South Yemen's people suffer from the illegal immigration of Africans to their lands adding that "terrorists" cross the Horn of Africa to Yemen via the maritime coasts. Thus, he said that South Yemen's people need coast guards to prevent the African immigration and the Houthi piracy by the Houthis in the Red Sea.⁴⁵

In a previous interview conducted by Sky News Arabia channel with Al-Zubaidi, he commented on the piracy operations carried out by the Houthis in the Red Sea. He said that the Southerners contacted Saudi Arabia and the UAE for that purpose and demanded to activate the role of coast guards. He illustrated that the STC believes that piracy for the Houthis is a matter of principle to blackmail the ships passing via the trade maritime route to seize revenues to continue the war.⁴⁶

Al Zubaidi believes that the "first and last" threat against the maritime navigations is the Houthi threats regarding the Bab Al-Mandab which is considered a strategic goal for the Houthis and Iran. He pointed out that Iran plans to control the Bab Al-Mandab like it dominates the Strait of Hormuz. This is considered as a red line by South Yemen, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt.⁴⁷

The Southern researcher

In a brief reading of the general scene in the Red Sea region, "South24 Center" published an analysis paper by writer and researcher Farida Ahmed on August

⁴⁵ An exclusive interview with Major General Aidrous Al-Zubaidi the STC President in Yemen, [Al-Hadath channel](#)

⁴⁶ An interviews with Major General Aidrous Al-Zubaidi, [Sky News Arabia](#)

⁴⁷ The same previous source

18th. She said that the rapid developments of the Russian-Ukrainian war have greatly affected the economies of many countries with the rise in energy and food prices. This affected the "supply chains in the world", which made Western countries, led by the US, "rearrange their balances and interests" with some oil-exporting countries in the region like Saudi Arabia in particular.⁴⁸

On the reaction of the regional countries towards the international competition in the Red Sea region, Farida Ahmed said: "Unlike the confused international path, there are many reactions of the regional counties based upon their economic, security and military priorities including the countries overlooking the Red Sea". She added that "Council of Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden" announced its intention to arrange a summit in the Saudi city of Jeddah to develop "practical mechanisms and strategic commitments towards internal security threats" that threaten one of the most important waterways in the world.⁴⁹

The writer asked about the reasons behind the international and regional interest in the Red Sea. She attributed this to the ramifications of the Russian-Ukrainian war which include re-promoting the establishment of a Russian base near the Sudanese city of Port Sudan on the Red Sea. This indicates "the readiness to rearrange international influence on the Red Sea and the international community's concerns towards the threat of terrorist groups and the Houthis against the navigation movement there."⁵⁰

Farida Ahmed concluded her paper by saying that there are "signs" about moving the international and regional conflict to the Red Sea. She added that the Saudi-led Arab Coalition forces in Yemen should "balance their positions and relations with local allies," such as the Southerners in particular, who control important coastal sites overlooking the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandab Strait, which, she said, would reflect positively on "preserving and securing international shipping lanes."⁵¹

⁴⁸ The Red Sea: Another Strategic Point Nominated for a Bigger Conflict, Farida Ahmed, [South24 Center for News and Studies](#)

⁴⁹ The Red Sea: Another Strategic Point Nominated for a Bigger Conflict (the same previous source)

⁵⁰ The same previous source

⁵¹ The same previous source

The Southern intellectual

In the context of how South Yemen's intellectuals read the international and regional competition over the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, Journalist Wadie Mansour the host of "Our Issues" program on the Abu Dhabi-based Al-Ghad Al-Mushreq channel interviewed South Yemen's journalists Nabil Saeed, Salah Bin Laghbar and Yasser Al-Yafei on August 25th, 2022. He said that the US has increased its focus on ensuring maritime security and the navigation stability in the Red Sea through the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Gulf of Aden. It made this by the deployment of naval forces known as "common duty". Mansour asked about the goal behind the growing US presence in the Gulf of Aden during this period. He told his guests that "The US expressed its desire to protect the Bab Al-Mandab and the Red Sea, but is the goal behind these naval forces limited to this point? Are there other things?"⁵²

Answering the latter's question, Bin Laghbar said that the US's enhancement of its naval forces in the Red Sea is related to its desire to reduce the capabilities of Iran and its arms in the region as well as Tehran's conflict with Israel. He added: "There is a link here. There are reports which confirm that Sanaa is a source of threat for Israel."⁵³

In this context, journalist Nabil Saeed expressed his belief that there is an international desire to secure the Red Sea region, the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandab Strait in light of the Houthi threat to the region, and the Yemeni government's lack of control over these land and sea areas in general.⁵⁴

In reference to the international dimension of the presence of the US troops in the Red Sea and the Bab Al-Mandab, Wadie Mansour asked whether "there is a belief that the matter is beyond the Yemen issue? Such as the Russian crisis. It may be related to Iran. However, there is a big and escalatory disagreement between Russia and the West. It is probably linked to the US-China crisis and so on".⁵⁵

Al Yafei believes that the deployment of the American and British troops in the Red Sea Coasts, the Gulf of Aden and Yemen's territorial waters is not new and

⁵² Our Issues/ Will the STC be Able to End the Hotbeds of Tension in South Yemen's governorates (previous source)

⁵³ Our Issues/ Will the STC be Able to End the Hotbeds of Tension in South Yemen's governorates (previous source)

⁵⁴ Our Issues/ Will the STC be Able to End the Hotbeds of Tension in South Yemen's governorates (previous source)

⁵⁵ The same previous source

that these forces have been present in the region for years under the pretext of fighting piracy in the Red Sea. He added: "However, this time is different. There is a conflict which has a regional dimension in the Middle East and an international one". Al-Yafei indicated that the desire to control important and sensitive locations in the world stirs an American-Russian-Chinese conflict and that there is a link between this US presence in the Bab Al-Mandab Strait and the latest crisis in Taiwan as well as the Russian-Ukrainian war in Ukraine.⁵⁶ He believes that the most important drivers of this US presence include the American Iranian nuclear weapons negotiations, the threats between Israel and Iran, the weakness of the Yemeni naval forces, and the continuous smuggling of weapons from Iran to the Houthi group. He added that "All these factors have strengthened the presence of US forces in the region."⁵⁷

Salah Bin Laghbar expressed his belief that the US is in a state of political confrontation with China and Russia. Therefore, the US wants to enhance its points of strength. He added: "Washington was superior in the air force and the very intensified naval deployment. However, Russia began to balance this during the last years. The US wants to enhance its remaining superior point which is the deployment in seas, oceans, and straits". Bin Laghbar indicated that the US's focus on the Bab Al-Mandab Strait in particular is because it is a troubled region.⁵⁸

He said that Europe and the US are experiencing an energy supply crisis due to the war between Russia and Ukraine and the suspension of oil and gas exports from Russia. Thus, these countries seek to secure energy supplies in the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, which is considered one of the most important waterways for oil and gas in the world. Al-Yafei summarized the actual reason for this presence by saying: "Yemen's location is the reason for all the crises it is going through, because its location has not been exploited well by national forces, and therefore it became a conflict ground."⁵⁹

Salah Bin Laghbar believes that the Yemenis will benefit from this presence. He added that the US and Britain always seize the weapons coming to the Houthis from Iran as well as secure the Yemeni coasts from the maritime piracy threats

⁵⁶ The same previous source

⁵⁷ The same previous source

⁵⁸ The same previous source

⁵⁹ Our Issues/ Will the STC be Able to End the Hotbeds of Tension in South Yemen's governorates (previous source)

which previously inflicted the biggest damages to Yemen. Due to the absence of a Yemeni state's control over its coasts, any Houthi attacks against the ships on the Yemen costs will increase the costs of insurance and taxes imposed on the ships and which will consequently lead to blatant price hike".⁶⁰

On the other hand, Al Yafei believes that the task to secure the Gulf of Aden and the Bab Al-Mandab Strait should be assigned to the forces in the liberated governorates. He means South Yemen's provinces after training these troops and providing them with weapons.⁶¹ Nabil Saeed pointed out that regardless of how the Yemeni people benefit from this US presence in the Gulf of Aden and the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, Yemen is currently a stateless country or a semi-state under Chapter VII since 2011.⁶²

The Southern strategic analyst

Regarding South Yemen's strategic reading for the reality of the international and regional conflict in the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, an episode of "the Southern Scene" program in the AIC HDTV (Adan Al-Mustaqila Channel) on September 14th, 2022, discussed the Southern forces war against the AQAP in Abyan and the US calls for the "importance of South Yemen's stability". Writer and political analyst Nassr Harhara answered a question delivered by the host about whether an international decision has been taken to secure South Yemen from terrorism. He said: "There is a common emerging interest for the US and Western countries to spread stability in the region". He added that the US and the West have tended to rely on the region to secure their oil and gas needs after boycotting Russian oil and gas due to the Ukraine war. Therefore, "they are trying- by establishing security and stability in this region- to get part of their needs from it."⁶³

He stressed that China also has interests to make security and stability prevail due to "the Silk Road". Its developed economy depends a lot on this region,

⁶⁰ The same previous source

⁶¹ The same previous source

⁶² The same previous source

⁶³ The Southern Scene/The Threat of the Terrorist AQAP Organization to Target the Southern Forces.. Secrets and Dimensions ([Adan Al-Mustaqila Channel](#))

especially regarding its relations with Saudi Arabia and Africa. He believes that the region is on the verge of a "new situation."⁶⁴

Commenting on the conflict among the regional forces, Harhara said that "there are political forces in the region who are engaged in leadership disputes including Israel, Iran, and Turkey. All these forces want to compete with Egypt". However, he added that things changed a lot during the recent months. "Since the beginning of this year, the situation has changed completely as Turkey changed its policy and engaged in an open relationship with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Likewise, Israel wanted open relationships with the Arab states⁶⁵" he said in reference to the normalization process with some Arab countries.

In his response to a question from announcer Walid Bakdada about how South Yemen benefited and used those international "poles" which began to emerge in the region to serve project of restoring "South Yemen State", analyst Hussein Bin Atef stressed the need for Southerners to exploit the state of competition and international polarization over the region. He said that the Southerners pay the price of such clashes due to the important location of South Yemen which overlooks the Arabian Sea and the Bab Al-Mandab Strait and through which more than 30% of the global oil exports pass.⁶⁶

Bin Atef believes that "STC has to put its hand in the right place to benefit from all the coming steps to serve our issue".⁶⁷ He indicated that the Southerners have to exploit the global and regional interest in the important geographical location of South Yemen which overlooks the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Bab Al-Mandab Strait. According to him, they should employ this global interest to serve the South Yemen issue and restore their state which is the demand of its people.

⁶⁴ The same previous source

⁶⁵ The same previous source

⁶⁶ The same previous source

⁶⁷ The same previous source

Conclusion

At the end of this paper, the researcher extracts some important conclusions which demonstrate the features of the international and regional competition. They show the Southerners' reading of this competition, the tacit conflict over the Bab Al-Mandab Strait and to what extent they benefit from this conflict and employ it in favor of their local issues:

- The big international and regional presence in the Bab Al-Mandab and the Horn of Africa conceals its real intentions as it hides behind some pretexts. These countries justify their presence through carrying the slogans of fighting piracy, smuggling and terrorism as well as the logistic supplies. However, they actually hide their real purposes behind their presence. This includes the desire to dominate and expand influence for political goals in the first place. Moreover, the superpowers and even the regional forces assert their influence in these strategic areas by signing security and economic agreements with poor states which overlook the strait and the Horn of Africa.
- The political, economic, security and ideological conflict among the regional forces in the Middle East is not far from the Bab Al-Mandab Strait. All competing forces are looking for a foothold and a role to play in the strait to pressure the international and regional society in order to accept their policies like what Iran has done. We have to take into consideration the reality of the strong link between the three important straits in the Middle East including the Suez Canal, Bab Al-Mandab and the Strait of Hormuz. Thus, controlling more than one waterway by a regional country is a serious domination in the Middle East. This is what Iran has sought after seizing control on the Strait of Hormuz. It supports its Houthi allies to open a loophole for it in the Bab al-Mandab Strait. It aims to enhance its control over the region and impose its conditions in any negotiations with the international community regarding Tehran's nuclear ambitions.
- On the other hand, the Southerners are largely aware of the scale of the international and regional presence in the Bab Al-Mandab Strait and the

pretexts which conceal the aspirations of superpowers and regional powers to control and dominate the region. The Southerners are also aware of the great importance of the geopolitical location which is close to the most important energy sources in the world. It controls important waterways that serve as a lifeline of the global economy such as the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Bab Al-Mandab Strait.

- The Southerners succeeded in penetrating the regional-regional conflict in the Middle East through allying with the Saudi and Emirati -led Arab Coalition countries and through forging good relationships with Egypt. These states constitute a regional axis which competes with Iranian, Turkish, and Israeli ambitions. The southerners also succeeded in gaining the trust of the international community through the fruitful efforts made by their local forces in combating terrorism in Yemen with international blessing.
- The Southerners appreciate the Arab Coalition's role in maintaining security in the Bab Al-Mandab Strait and the national coasts. Furthermore, they aspire for more military support from the Coalition to implement the task of securing the national waterways and coasts against any dangers that surround them. These include piracy, African immigration, and Iranian support for the Houthis along the sea. This can be achieved by establishing a Southern coast guard force, at least, and developing its relevant capabilities.
- The Southerners address the regional and international competition over the Bab Al-Mandab Strait with a high degree of rationality, balance, and objectivity regarding the calls to benefit from it. The South Yemen's discourse which- analyzed by this research- confirmed the need to exploit this international and regional competition to make gains. This would serve South Yemen's desire to solve their issue and to achieve their demand of restoring their former state.
- This study recommends South Yemen's foreign policy makers to give the Bab Al-Mandab Strait more space in the foreign Southern political discourse. They should stress that Southerners are able to secure the

waterways affiliated with them in the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Gulf of Aden with regional partners. It also recommended exploiting the international desire to impose stability in South Yemen to create partnership opportunities with the international community in various security and economic fields.

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An Expert in Analyzing Media Discourse

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