KOÇJMUN 2025
Commitment to Innovation

# RESEARCH REPORT

## UNITED NATIONS OFFICE FOR DISARMAMENT AFFAIRS

## PROMOTING INITIATIVES OF MARITIME SECURITY IN THE RED SEA AND GULF OF ADEN

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## Basic Overview of the Issue

The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden are two of the most strategically important, yet unsafe maritime routes in the world. They contain the Suez Canal and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, both of which are important links connecting together the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, and different parts of Europe, Western Asia and Africa. In addition, over 10% of global seaborne trade and 9% of global oil traffic passes through these regions annually, which is why security in these regions is of utmost importance.

During an era of increased globalisation throughout the world, it is vital to recognize that these sea lines are necessary for the supply of essential goods, the trade of petroleum, and the provision of humanitarian aid- which is exactly why worrying implications arise, when considering how susceptible they are to naval threats. These security challenges include piracy, terrorism, human trafficking, arms smuggling, and most dangerous of all in recent decades- militarization by non-state actors such as Yemeni Houthi rebels. The geographical nature of these straits makes them particularly vulnerable to being exploited for military or political purposes.

These concerns are all interconnected, which is why they cannot be addressed in a vacuum. State instability, geopolitical rivalry and foreign intervention must all be considered to reach effective solutions, along with recent developments- such as Yemen's collapse during its civil war, which has made it possible for armed groups to abuse its proximity to the Red Sea in order to harm both regional and international powers.

## Explanation of Important Terms

*Maritime Security:*

Collaboration between several states, done in order to ensure that a sea zone remains safe, secure and devoid of threats like piracy, armed robbery, illegal fishing, smuggling, terrorism and trafficking.

*Piracy and Sea-Borne Armed Robbery:*

Piracy has been defined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

(UNCLOS) as the crime of hijacking a private ship or ship-like vessel on the high seas for illicit purposes. When committed within the jurisdiction of a state, this offense is placed on the same level as armed robbery.

*Bab el-Mandeb Strait:*

The 20-mile-wide strait between Yemen and Djibouti, that connects the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Its blockage or closure would lead to an international crisis, due to its significance for world trade.

*Freedom of Navigation (FON):*

A term in international customary law that permits all naval vessels to freely navigate any region within the high seas, without being obstructed by any state or regional power.

*Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs):*

Groups that utilize armed violence during times of conflict in order to further their political or ideological agendas, without being recognized as part of a state or international body. Houthis, for instance, are one such armed group that are particularly important when discussing maritime security.

*Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA):*

As defined by the International Maritime Organization (IMO), maritime domain awareness is an effective understanding of everything associated with the high seas that could impact safety, security, global trade or the environment.

## Detailed Background of the Issue

### A. The Rise and Fall of Somali Piracy

Somali pirates were involved in hijacking hundreds of ships within the region, and pilfering hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of goods and currency, from 2008 to 2012. Piracy threatened shipping lanes, increased insurance costs, and resulted in historic levels of mobilization of the navies. The international community responded with:

Combined Task Force 151 (CTF-151): Multilateral European Union naval task force

for anti-piracy operations.

EU NAVFOR Operation Atalanda: European Union-led operation to deter and disrupt piracy.

NATO Operation Ocean Shield: Provided escort defense support to ships and carried out lead maritime operations.

These measures, along with the use of private armed shipboard security detachments and additional application of BMP Best Management Practices, caused pirate activity to decrease then disappear. Underlying causes of Somalian coastal pirating—pirate impoverishment and government control breakdown—remain unaddressed.

### B. Yemen Conflict and Maritime Militarization

The intensification of the 2015 Yemen Civil War added a new dimension of danger at sea when the Houthis began attacking vessels in the Red Sea by using drones, sea mines, and explosive boats. They have attacked oil tankers, warships, and merchant ships. The attacks disrupted shipping lanes and elicited international military reactions, which are being commanded by the United States, United Kingdom, and Saudi coalition. Second, the attacks have also had geopolitical consequences. They suspended humanitarian aid to Yemen, one of the world's most dire humanitarian crisis countries, and contributed to food insecurity and outbreaks.

### C. Escalating Geopolitical Competition

The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden are hotspots for competitive geopolitics. America, China, France, and Japan all have a presence. Turkey, Russia, and UAE spent billions of dollars on Red Sea ports and bases. Each involves accidental attack risks and takes up space for cooperative security activities.

## Major Parties Involved

### *Yemen (Houthi Movement):*

The Houthis possess huge swathes of Yemen and have been successful in closing down maritime trade. Ongoing bombing of travel routes with sophisticated weapons by them illustrate the potential to close down international travel.

### *Saudi Arabia and UAE:*

These have heavily invested in the naval bases and are themselves directly intervening in the Yemen war. They set up bases and conducted anti-piracy patrols but otherwise discouraged interventionism by East African countries.

### *Somalia:*

It boasts a very long coastline but weak ability to control it, and is still a focus of maritime illegality. Political and economic issues have slowed the realization of a federal coast guard.

### *Djibouti and Eritrea:*

Geopolitically located at the entrance of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Djibouti is an archipelago of foreign extraterritorial bases and a global hub of surveillance.

### *Iran:*

Besides accusations of backing and supplying the Houthis through strategic support, Iranian action also translates to seaborne strategic challenge and regional instability.

### *United States and Allied Navies:*

Maintains presence at sea to safeguard commercial maritime trade and discourage Houthi violence

### *European Union and NATO:*

Maintains sea capacity building and counter-piracy patrols.

### *African Union (AU) and IGAD:*

Regional bodies, in their pursuit of cooperation and security of Red Sea littoral states.

## Chronology of Important Events

| **Date** | Description of Event |
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|---|---|
| **2008 – UNSC Resolution 1846** | UNSC Resolution 1846, the military intervention against piracy off the coast of Somalia is authorized. |
| **2009 – Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCOC)** | Signed for the promotion of regional cooperation in tackling with piracy and improving the security of maritime. |
| **2010 – UNSC Resolution 1918** | Enhanced and strengthened legal regimes in states prone to encounter piracy and promoted a bigger cooperation in countering piracy. |
| **2015 – Yemen Civil War Intensification** | The Houthis started attacking the Red Sea, to the vessels, leading to the escalation of maritime insecurity. |
| **2016 – Houthi Attacks** | International shipping routes are disrupted through the attacks escalated on oil tankers, merchant ships, and military vessels. |
| **2017 – Jeddah Amendment to the DCOC** | Expanded the Djibouti Code of Conduct to determine other relevant and jeopardizing maritime risks such as human trafficking and illegal fishing. |
| **2021 – UNSC Resolution 2608** | Called for increased collaboration and measures to enhance the security of the maritime trade routes and overcome maritime crime in the Red Sea. |

## Relevant International Documents

- UNSC Resolution 1846 (2008): Sponsored anti-piracy operations : S/RES/1846 (2008)
- UNSC Resolution 1918 (2010): Strengthened legal regimes in pirate-prone states were demanded : United Nations Security Council Resolution 1918
- UNSC Resolution 2608 (2021): Reiterated demands for increased collaboration to combat piracy and maritime crime.
- Djibouti Code of Conduct (2009) and Jeddah Amendment (2017): Capacity building at

the regional level and information protocols: Djibouti Code of Conduct and Jeddah Amendment

## Past Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Past attempts to resolve maritime insecurity in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden have included numerous multilateral endeavours like **UNSC Resolutions 1846 (2008)** and **1918 (2010)**, which allowed international marine operations to combat the piracy issue in the region. Key military initiatives included **CTF-151**, **EUNAVFOR Operation Atalanta**, and **NATO Operation Ocean Shield**, which were impactful in the prevention of piracy between 2008 and 2012. However, the main reasons of piracy, such as economic difficulties in Somalia and state control corruption, were left largely unresolved. In spite of these attempts, naval insecurity still continues, especially with the escalation of maritime militarization by non-state actors such as the Houthi rebels, which end up complicating the given security efforts in the region.

## Solution Alternatives

A. Regional Institutional Strengthening:

Establishing a Red Sea Maritime Coordination Centre to coordinate naval patrols, intelligence sharing, and joint exercises centrally and the expansion of the Djibouti Code of Conduct mandate to encompass control of non-state actors is required.

B. Capacity Building:

Investing in long-term coast guard patrolling and maritime law enforcement and financing the development of maritime operations centres with real-time satellite tracking capability would improve the capacity of maritime security. Also, extending naval academy and technical school capacity to Somalia, Yemen, and Djibouti would be helpful.

C. Legal and Judicial Reforms:

The states should be assisted in passing new maritime security legislations to UNCLOS standards. Regional courts or special tribunals for prosecution of piracy and trafficking can be established. Additionally, initiate the capacity building of judges and prosecutors on maritime

crimes.

D. Develop legal fishery industry:

Initiate coastal communities' employment development programs to sever the link with illegal economies. Increase transparency of port operations to signal the end of corruption.

E. Environmental Conservation and Climate Resilience:

Create a Red Sea Marine Conservation Project. Train local fishermen in sustainable practice. Locate hidden dumping and oil spill pollution.

F. Multilateral Action and Diplomatic Action:

Promote the development of a Red Sea Maritime Security Compact among Arab League members, African Union, and the UN. Promote inclusive diplomacy among the Gulf states and African coastal states. Use an emergency hotline between warships in deterrence of surprise escalatory contact.

Security in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden is not a question of more ships but of intricate, multilateral policy based on sustainable development, secure legal orders, regional solidarities, and partnership. Weakness is not a strength but a problem. If properly managed, it is a model of trans-regional cooperation at sea. If not, it is a staging area for future conflict and economic displacement. The United Nations Security Council needs to vote this threat not only as a regional security threat but as one of global economic order, world law, and human dignity. The mechanisms are in place. Collective political will, determination, and open dialogue now are required to progress toward an open, safe, and secure maritime future for everyone

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## Useful Links

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