



Bab al-Mandab Strait Amid Terrorism Greed and Countering Efforts

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Bab al-Mandeb Strait is one of the most important waterways in the world. It is a pivotal point between the continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe, accounting for about 12% of global navigation, with about 25,000 naval vessels passing through it annually, mostly very large crude carriers (VLCCs) and commercial shipping vessels linking East and West. However, this strait has become coveted by many terrorist groups and organizations that have exploited the surrounding tensions in neighboring countries to compromise its security and abuse it to finance their crimes. This has mobilized regional and international powers to confront these groups and protect their trade and economic interests.

Maritime Terrorism

As the movement of global trade across the seas increased, maritime terrorism significantly increased. The threat of Bab al-Mandeb Strait is considered a national threat to the countries bordering the Red Sea, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan, Yemen, Jordan, Djibouti, Palestine, and Eritrea. Terrorists resort to piracy or seizure of ships by force, demanding large sums of money in exchange for their release and for their crew's release, or threatening navigation by attacking those ships with missiles or drones, or using booby-trapped boats and naval mines. Therefore, there are similarities between the crime of terrorism and several other crimes. The crime of "maritime piracy" has further repercussions and means of implementation surpassing all criminal acts committed in international waters, especially if such inhumane crimes are carried out within the scope of a strategic strait and an important waterway such as the Bab al-Mandeb.

Attention should be paid to the repercussions of the correlation between the ferocity of security clashes led by the international coalition against terrorist groups on land and the expansion of those groups and dragging their battles to safe strategic seaways,

which represent the arteries of the major global flow of commerce, where about two-thirds of the world's oil production and 90% of global trade pass through straits, especially Bab al-Mandeb Strait. The disruption of navigation in the strait amplifies the negative impacts on security, peace maintenance, and the global economy. These occurrences have adverse repercussions on international maritime transportation, consequently influencing global trade, which impacts economies worldwide.

Growing Terrorism

Considering the international escalation of terrorist operations in strategic waterways, the risks to maritime security in Bab al-Mandeb Strait, for example, are not only posed by terrorist groups that are located in the countries bordering this waterway. Rather, the establishment of an alliance between these groups on both sides of the strait poses a huge security challenge for the international community in general. The Yemeni and Somali coasts bordering the strategic strait have witnessed massive terrorist acts, including al-Qaeda's bombing of the US Navy destroyer Cole in 2000, and its targeting of a French oil tanker in the Gulf of Aden south of Bab al-Mandeb. Investigations in recent years have revealed that foreign fighters have moved between Boko Haram, Somalia's al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda and Daesh through the Bab al-Mandeb Strait and the Red Sea under false identities. There was also the massive and steady movement of African migrants, using small naval boats, in an adventure akin to unequivocal death. Terrorist groups began smuggling operations through the strait. The smuggling of weapons, drones, missiles, military equipment, money, and fighters was detected in cooperation with a network of smugglers over multiple stages. Given the escalating political and military tensions in Red Sea riparian nations including Somalia, Yemen, Sudan, Djibouti, and Eritrea, smuggling may become more prevalent in future.

Precarious Conditions

Maritime piracy has increased significantly in recent decades. Perhaps the precarious conditions in the countries of the Horn of Africa are a major cause leading to a higher frequency of these crimes, although some of the goals of piracy are purely economic. However, they fall under acts of terrorism that jeopardize the safety of navigators and ships, terrorize individuals, and seize private and public property. Some piratic operations have political goals that pirates seek to achieve on the ground. This prompted shipping companies to take precautionary measures, including increasing the additional financial burden of insurance on ships and individuals, as well as

potential losses in carrying out piratic operations and bargaining for exorbitant ransoms for their release.

The threat posed by maritime piracy in Bab al-Mandeb Strait lies in the emergence of an alliance between its gangs and terrorist groups. Reports have shown that al-Qaeda's al-Shabaab terrorist group in Somalia receives about 20-25% of the gains earned by Somali pirates, in exchange for the freedom granted to operate near the Somali coast. As piracy has spread in this region, the UN Security Council has issued several important resolutions over the past two decades, including Resolution No. (1816), in which it calls on countries and various organizations to send naval forces to the waters adjacent to the coasts of Somalia and its extensions in the western Indian Ocean to address these crimes.

Adverse Repercussions

Ensuring the safety of maritime navigation in Bab al-Mandab Strait has become a major regional and international concern. The strait between the Arabian Peninsula and the conflict-ridden Horn of Africa has become an arena for regional rivalry and a springboard for piracy, human trafficking, and terrorism.

Many vessels of all nationalities have come under constant attack and threats in the past few years. Saudi Aramco oil shipments were assaulted in 2018 while transiting through the strait. Red Sea riparian countries such as Somalia and Yemen have become safe havens for pirates and terrorist organizations, such as the Houthi group, al-Qaeda, and its branch al-Shabaab.

The recurrence of these crimes increases the adverse effects and serious repercussions on international peace and security, given the extent of the damage directly inflicted on the global oil trade. The strait controls access to multiple oil terminals and pipelines, including the SUMED pipeline, to divert them to the southern tip of Africa, thereby increasing transit time and cost, in addition to obstructing the flows of European and Southern African oil destined for Asian markets through the Suez Canal and Bab al-Mandab .

The repeated occurrence of these crimes or the implementation of planned closures could lead to significant changes in global trade and maritime transport, which would weaken the economies of the countries bordering the strait. This could turn the Red Sea into a zone of regional and international conflict and intervention, which could, in turn, lead to the internationalization of the issue, the loss of sovereignty and wealth by the

riparian countries, a record rise in global energy prices, the destruction of the European and global economy, and the creation of a perfect environment for the growth of terrorist groups and factions in several regions, including the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa.

Praiseworthy Efforts

The Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb region has become increasingly complex in the past years, prompting the relevant international organizations to take a series of decisions to combat piracy and terrorist crimes in one of the most important waterways in the world. The UN Security Council has adopted several important resolutions, including Resolutions no. (1816), (1838), (1844), (1851), (1918), and (2442), which provided countries with various tools to address these crimes.

Despite the importance of these decisions aimed at undermining and combating piracy and terrorist acts, the idea of military readiness for any potential threats was not lost upon the international community, such as conducting training, qualifying soldiers, and establishing international military blocs, including the joint naval forces, which include about 34 countries headquartered in Bahrain, and setting major tasks for them; five joint task forces fall under it: the 150th force concerned with maritime security and combating terrorism, the 151st anti-piracy force, the 152nd force for security cooperation in the Arabian Gulf, and the 153rd force for security cooperation in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, to provide protection for commercial ships.

Given the geostrategic importance of Bab al-Mandeb Strait, the efforts exerted regionally or internationally did not stop there. Riparian countries agreed to adopt Saudi Arabia's initiative to establish the Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden consisting of Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, Djibouti, Somalia, and Eritrea. The establishment of this "bloc" was announced in December 2018 with the aim of security and economic cooperation, protection of water resources, and coordination of political stances in regional and international forums to serve the interests of member countries and protect global trade and international navigation.

Future Insights

The importance of the waterway of Bab al-Mandeb imposes on riparian countries many forms of cooperation that would achieve common interests on the one hand, and regional and global security on the other. In this respect, the following can be proposed:

- Monitoring the movements of terrorist groups operating in the strait, and limiting arms trafficking and the movement of fighters and acts of piracy of all forms and means.
- Supporting political, economic and security stabilization in countries bordering Bab al-Mandeb Strait and the Red Sea, and supporting their legitimate governments, since the stability of navigation in the strait is a shared responsibility.
- Further reinforcement of the maritime border security capabilities of riparian countries to counter any acts compromising the safety of navigation in the future, and to raise the combat capabilities of soldiers.
- Identifying the gaps in the fight against terrorism, and eliminating and uprooting terrorist groups in cities and ports overlooking the Red Sea, due to their continuous targeting of navigation.