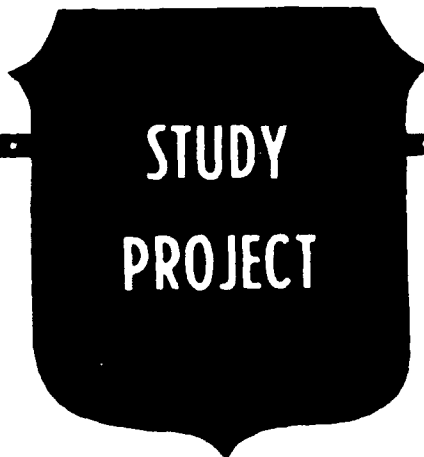


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THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE BAB AL-MANDAB STRAIT

BY

COLONEL STAFF HUSSAIN AL-YADOOMI  
Yemen Armed Forces

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THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE BAB AL-MANDAB STRAIT

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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## ABSTRACT

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# THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE BAB AL-MANDAB STRAIT

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Due to the increasing attention given to the Red Sea, as if rediscovered, the Red Sea appears to the viewer as if it were a delicious meal that suddenly emerged from underground causing the powers to swarm around it and gain access to advantageous ground, where, if they reach over, they can get hold of everything.

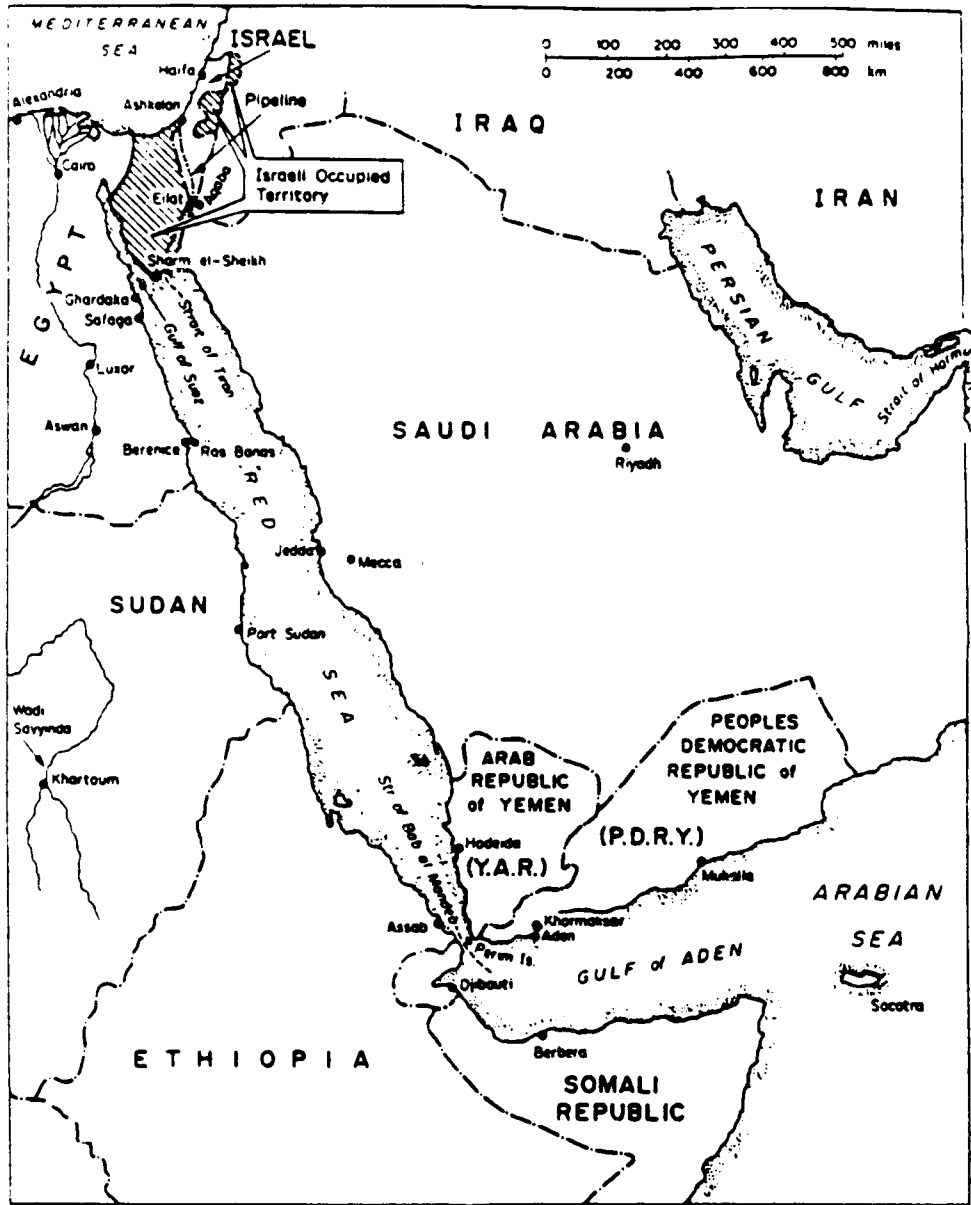
The Red Sea is a part of the shortest and fastest waterway between the East and the West with considerable geopolitical advantages and characteristics that have always made it a main frontal point around which revolve struggles, confrontations and maneuvers. It is as well an arena for the great powers' competition, for realizing their increasing ideological, economical, political and military interests.

Therefore the history of the Red Sea can serve as an ideal summary of the history of international relations which, since early times, has been based on the balance of power among influential countries. Such balance deals with the analysis of situations in the light of requirements and needs. The treatment shall mostly have a geopolitical nature.

The importance of the Bab al-Mandab Strait comes from the importance of the Red Sea. The Red Sea is the western gate connecting the Indian Ocean with the Red Sea which cuts the water route between Europe and the Arabian Peninsula by seven to ten days saved because ships do not have to go around east coast of Africa and the Cape of Good Hope.

The purpose of this paper is to indicate the geopolitical importance of the Bab al-Mandab Strait and to analyze the situation in the region focusing on its importance to Western and Eastern countries. Another purpose is to indicate the positions of countries in the region.

THE RED SEA AND THE PERSIAN GULF





CHAPTER II  
AREA OF STUDY

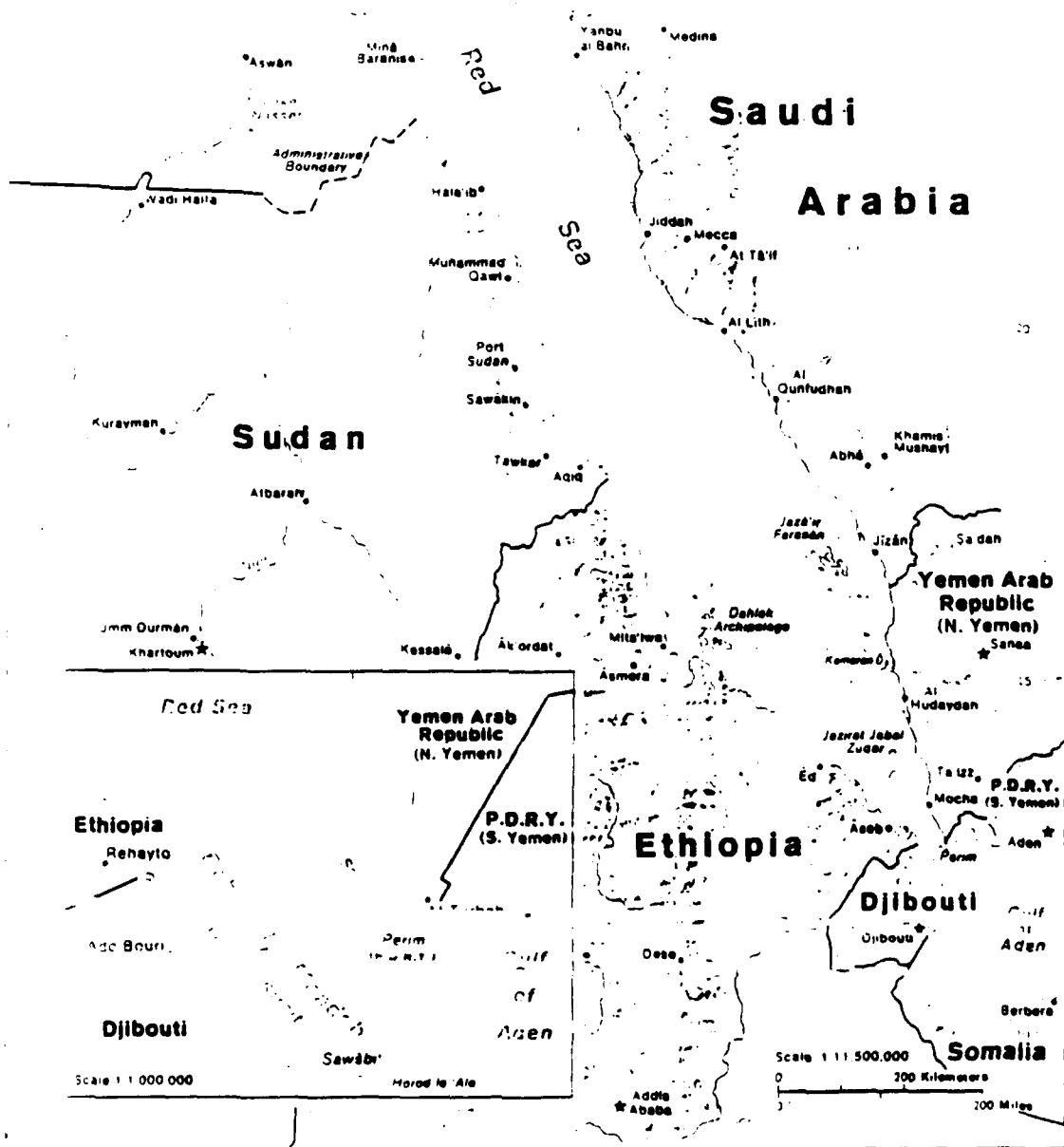
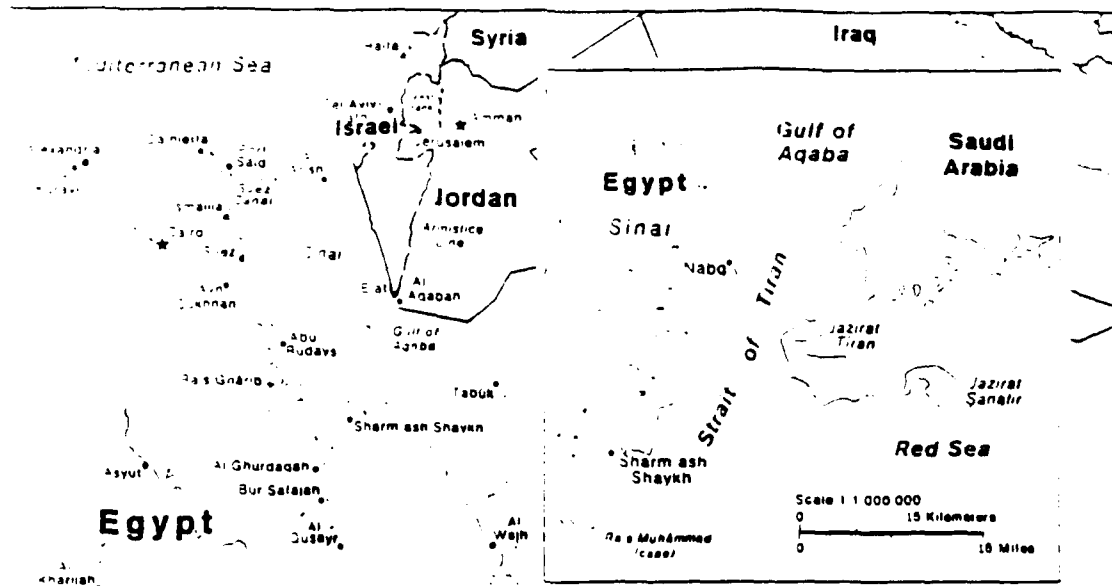
The Bab al-Mandab Strait is located at the farthest southwest point of the Arabian Peninsula, and across from it is the coast of Africa. The Arabia Peninsula and Africa are separated by a distance of only 22 miles. The Strait connects the Red Sea with the Indian Ocean and is bisected by Perim Island.<sup>1</sup>

The Bab al-Mandab Strait is bordered by four countries: Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula side, and Djibouti, Ethiopia and Somalia on the African side. Somalia is added because it is bordered by the Gulf of Aden, the natural entrance to the Red Sea through the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

From the geopolitical point of view, the Bab al-Mandab Strait looks wider than its 22 miles, because its importance it is not limited to the political units that border the Strait, but goes beyond this to include the political units which are politically, economically, militarily or strategically connected in some way or other to the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

On the other hand, it can be equally said that the industrialized West European countries have geopolitical requirements in the Red Sea, because they mainly depend on the Gulf petroleum to meet their energy needs. Furthermore, a country like the Soviet Union can also be included in the geopolitical range of the Red Sea, because the Red Sea is the shortest route that links its Black Sea ports with its fleet in the Indian Ocean, a fleet which plays an important role in the Soviet naval strategy. Also, the United States of America is not excluded from the Red Sea's geopolitical space because through it passes the Gulf petroleum, the production and trading of which are monopolized by the American companies.

THE RED SEA



### THE GEOPOLITICAL CHARACTERISTICS

The Bab al-Mandab Strait represents the bottleneck of the Red Sea. It is where its width does not exceed 22 miles. Furthermore, the island of Brin Mune (Perim Island) divides the strait into two corridors. The one to the east is about two miles wide, and the other one, the western corridor, is about 16 miles in width. The eastern corridor is not used for the big ships or for international navigation because it is narrow and its depth is about 85 feet. The eastern corridor is often used by small boats between Thobab port in Yemen, and Berbera in Somalia, Djibouti, Assab in Eritrea.

The western corridor is the main passage of the Bab al-Mandab Strait. It is used for international navigation. It is deeper and wider than the eastern corridor. Its depth is about 990 feet. The bottom of the Strait is covered by rocks, but there is a hill which emerges above the surface of water in the form of Perim Island.

As mentioned before the Bab al-Mandab Strait is bordered by four countries. There are some islands around it in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. These islands belong to different countries as shown in the table below:

<u>Name of Country</u>	<u>Number of Islands</u>	<u>The Important Islands</u>
Yemen	5	Perim, great and small Heneish and Zukur in the Red Sea and Socotra Island on the Arabian Sea
Djibouti	2	Siba and Molela Islands on the Gulf of Aden
Ethiopia	4	Dahlak, Fatmp, Halek and Domeira Islands on the Red Sea
Oman	2	Masira and Kuria Muria in the Indian Ocean

The water of the Red Sea is distinguished by relatively high temperatures compared with other seas, even those which are situated at the same latitude. Normally the temperature of surface water (above 600 feet depth) is affected by the temperature of contacting air, and the temperature of the deep water (under 600 feet) remains fixed as it ranges from 18 °C in the north of the Red Sea to 23 °C in the south. The temperature of the Strait is very high during the summer, with ranges between 26.5 °C to 43 °C with high humidity and between 19 °C to 32 °C in winter with medium humidity.

The Red Sea is considered among the most salty bodies of water in the world.

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The historical dimension is undoubtedly regarded as a significant part of any serious scientific study that deals with any currently established geopolitical fact. Without such historical depth, the events relevant to such established fact simply become fabricated events that are not subjected to geopolitical analysis, which only deals with recurrent events.

This is because, if history repeated itself, this will only be through geography. Therefore, the follower of the history will immediately notice that there are recurrence of many similar significant events. However, if one contemplates such events carefully, he will notice some kind of difference between such events that seem as if repeated, a difference in terms of degree not in terms of quality.

To demonstrate this the role of history in the Bab al-Mandab area can be divided into the following phases:

##### The First Phase (Early Times--15th century)

It is the amphibious phase where the Red Sea was simply an internal sea between the Arabian Peninsula and African lands which maintained their connection and extensions across the sea. This was usually evident near the Suez on the north and on the south between Aden and the port of Berbera in Somalia and Djibouti, and also between Al Mukha in Yemen with Asseb in Eritrea. The Red Sea was a principal route for trade from the East to the West. Trade goods were carried on the Red Sea and overland on caravans to the Mediterranean Sea where they were picked up by ships operated by Venice and Genova.

### The Second Phase (15th century--1869)

It is the phase which started the Portuguese discovery of the route around Africa to the Indian Ocean, and into the Red Sea through the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandab Strait. That was in the 15th century. This route became the main sea route that connected the East and West. This route dominated the trade that used to pass through the old route through the Bab al-Mandab. The old route became of minor importance, limited to coastal trade. The result of this was a great transformation--human movement and the currents of human civilization almost ceased to pass through the Red Sea. The value and importance of the ports and countries of the Red Sea deteriorated.

Therefore, this period which followed the discovery of the circum-Africa route witnessed increasing interest from France and Britain. France tried to revive this route by obtaining a concession stipulating a reduction of custom duties on its goods that pass through Egypt. Its interest in this route was developed by working on excavating a canal across the Suez from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. England continued to use the old route that linked her to her largest colony, India, especially in transporting supplies and passengers between India and England while specifying the waterway for trading.

The efficiency of the circum-Africa route increased after the introduction of steam ships early in the 19th century. They were more efficient than sailing ships which depended on the propelling force of the wind.

### The Third Phase (1869-Present)

The next phase starts with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. This canal connected the water routes between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea through the Red Sea. This meant that the connection between

the East with the West was greatly shortened. This purely maritime connection reoriented the navigational line of communication to the Red Sea. The Red Sea became more powerful and important than it had been as an overland route. After it had become the shortest and quickest route between the East and West, the Suez Canal shortened the distance between them by nearly a half in some instances and by nearly two-thirds in the others. For example, the distance between Kuwait and Liverpool was reduced from 13,500 miles around the Cape of Good Hope to about 7,000 miles via the Red Sea. The distance between Singapore and Liverpool was also reduced from 15,000 miles via the Cape of Good Hope to about 9,100 miles through the Red Sea.<sup>2</sup>

Undoubtedly, this new maritime route contributed to the modern industrial and cultural leap which by Western Europe, the Industrial Revolution, until it reached overindustrialization. This maritime route brought the distance nearer between European countries and the sources of raw material and their export markets in Asia and Africa at the cheapest costs and shortest time.

Since the 1930's, which is the beginning of the flow of petroleum from the Persian Gulf, an essential change has occurred in the function of this maritime route. It was transformed from a waterway for goods and passengers to a primary oil artery through which passes the most important strategic commodity in today's world—oil.

## CHAPTER III

### THE POWER SITUATION

From the geopolitical characteristics, it is evident that all features, aspects and characteristics of the Strait, which is the southern gate of the Red Sea, also applies to the Red Sea waterway which connects the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean Sea. This strongly affirms the Red Sea's geopolitical identity because of its elongated form, limited width and intermediate position the fulfills the linkage. The identity of the Red Sea as a world navigation route has imposed itself in spite of negative characteristics such as high temperatures, severe drought and the scarcity of deep-water ports that serve this navigational route. In the past these negative characteristics handicapped navigation, but they do not at present constitute a major obstacle to progress in the technology of sea navigation.

Moreover, the Red Sea is a first-class sea corridor among world navigational routes because of the percentage of oil out of the total of the world oil traffic being carried through it in unarmed tankers. One of the primary duties of the international community is to act as an alert guardian to ensure that the Bab al-Mandab Strait is available to all navigation and at all times.

The Strait is important as the southern gate of the Red Sea, and the Red Sea has always been a focus of interest for the different powers. Therefore, it is important to study the attitudes of the different powers toward the Red Sea, and to distinguish among them in the light of their needs and demands.

### THE ARAB BLOCK

The Arab Red Sea coasts geographically constitute about 90.2 percent of the total length of the Red Sea coasts and the Gulf of Aden. The Red Sea is



almost placed in the midst of the Arab community area whether geographically or nationally. It is the main and only sea outlet for many Arab countries, especially for Jordan, ████████, Djibouti and the Sudan. The Red Sea is the main corridor through which Arab petroleum flows to export markets. The economies of most Arab countries depend mainly on petroleum exports, which represent 93 to 100 percent of the total exports of some Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen and Bahrein. The potentiality of the presence of mineral resources, such as silver, copper, iron and lead, on the bottom of the Red Sea, increases the importance of the Red Sea both in the geographic and national concepts. That links the importance of the Bab al-Mandab Strait with the importance of the Red Sea economically through which pass over 40 percent of the total world oil traffic tankers.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of the strategic importance of the Red Sea to the Arabs and their geographical control of its coasts, there is no clear cut and effective Arab strategy toward this area. The foreign and hostile powers were left to control the world balance through controlling this important regional area of the world. It seems that the negativity of the Arab Community is not limited to the absence of a clear cut formula toward the Red Sea.

A most telling example for Arab Community's negative attitude toward the Red Sea is the end of some Arab islands of the Red Sea, such as Sanafir, Tiran, and Small Heneish which came under the military control of Israel by name of Ethiopia (the Yemen and Ethiopia still negotiate the small Heneish Island problem).

The increasing interests and demands of the Arab Community in the Red Sea requires that community to adopt a unified and clear Arab policy toward this important strategic corridor without being simply content with declarations of

intentions and good wishes. There the need to build a naval fleet to realize a balance between the demands and the possibility of achieving them. The necessity for adopting an effective attitude toward the struggle over the strategic coast of the Horn of Africa, which was regarded as an extension of the Middle East struggle between Arabs and Israel.

#### THE ISRAEL-ETHIOPIA BLOCK

It can be said that both Israeli and Ethiopian demands in the Red Sea have begun to meet and coincide since the call to make the Red Sea an Arab lake as part of an Arab strategy to stop the Israeli activity in the Red Sea. It became clear to both Israel and Ethiopia, the only non-Arab countries in the Red Sea, that this call represented a direct threat to their national interests.

In spite of the fact that the Israel's coast does not exceed seven miles. Israel has strengthened it to serve her as a breathing outlet especially when the Suez Canal was closed to Israeli shipping and made its Mediterranean outlet unable to carry Israel to the Afro-Asian regions. After controlling the Tiran Strait and being allowed to pass through the Suez Canal, Israel's main problem regarding the Red Sea normally lay in the Bab al-Mandab Strait when the Arab Israel War took place in 1973 and Egyptian and Yemeni forces closed the Strait to Israeli navigation.

As for Ethiopia, the Red Sea is the only outlet that links her to the outer world. This sea outlet is represented by ports on the Eritrian coast, including Musawa and Assab ports. The danger that threatens Ethiopia lies in the demand of the population living on this coast for their independence which could mean the separation of the coastal region from the rest of Ethiopia, and the return of this Ethiopia to being a landlocked country cut away from the outer world.

Israel's interests meet with the Ethiopian interests when the Arabs become the common enemy of both. The Arabs are in this traditional struggle with Israel, and the Arabs also support the Eritrian people. The Arabs call to make the Red Sea a purely Arab lake. The strategic meeting between Israel and Ethiopia manifested itself in various patterns of coordination and cooperation against the separation of Eritrea and breaking her ties with the Arabs. This means that the Arabs will try to tighten their grip over the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

Israel supports Ethiopia in various economical and military fields especially after American arms shipments to Ethiopia ended in April 1977. In return, Israel obtained strategic concessions, including the use of Eritrian ports for her trade with inland African countries such as the Congo, Central Africa and South Sudan; in establishing naval military bases in the Islands of Forma and Haleb, and two bases in the northwest Eritrea and right on the Sudan border. Israeli aircraft can take off directly from the bases and fly to Israel. Israel uses Domeira Island for surveillance and reconnaissance. This island is situated only 20 miles from Perim Island.

Israel seized the Yemeni island of Small Heneish at the entrance of Bab al-Mandab. There they built a communication station. The Eritrian situation, along with its strategic weight, has led to complicating the geopolitical situation in the southern Red Sea area.

Eritrea's controlling strategical position has made the interests and attitude of Israel coincide with the attitudes of the Soviet Union and Cuba toward Addis Ababa.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE WORLD POWERS

#### THE WESTERN BLOCK

The Red Sea has remained for a long period of time a Western area of influence. It had been a route for spices, until it became an artery for crude oil. By virtue of its island nature or semi-island nature it offered the West the opportunity to embark at an early time on the field of colonialism and gain superiority as a naval power. When traditional colonialism withdrew from this area a vacuum existed and offered other powers the opportunity to fill it.

The geopolitical nature of the Red Sea that makes it unfit for stationing war ships especially aircraft carriers and submarines which constitute the main strike force of the United States' fleet. The West resorted to depending on the conservative regimes in the Red Sea as well as the use of petrodollars an instrument to achieve Western goals and maintain its interests. This undoubtedly forms a hole in the Western strategic network in the region because such strategy depends in the first place on political factors and elements which are liable to change from time to time especially since existing regimes in the Red Sea area are unstable and always liable to national, progressive and radical currents. An example of this was the conversion of Addis Ababa, until recently was a fortress for Lybian influence to leftist Marxism after the downfall of the conservative regime of Haile Selassie and the coming of the progressive regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam.

The Red Sea in the Western politics is the main artery that carries Persian Gulf oil to Western industrialized nations which suffer from an energy shortage. They mainly depend on Gulf petroleum to run their factories, warm their houses and direct their economy by investments of petrodollars. The

main goal of the American military forces in the region is to ensure an uninterrupted flow of oil to Western nations and to safeguard Western petroleum companies operating in the Gulf area to guarantee the contributions of these companies the balance of payments.

This underlines the importance of the Bab al-Mandab Strait which has been favored with a prestigious position in Western strategy as being an important base for control and command of petroleum as well as the route for transporting it. Persian Gulf petroleum flows to Western countries through or from the Red Sea to Europe and West Asia. In all cases it passes through the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

The United States has stationed a giant naval force in the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, and the Red Sea, comprising aircraft carriers, destroyers and nuclear submarines. It also has several naval and air bases that serve these naval units. The bases around the area are as follows:

- o Masira Base: It is situated in Masira Island opposite to the coast of Oman Sultanate on the Indian Ocean. A naval base used to support nuclear submarines in the Indian Ocean.

- o Diego Garcia Base: An air and naval base in the island of Diego Garcia situated to the south of the Maldiva Islands. It commands the oil routes between the Red Sea and the Cape of Good Hope. It is considered as one of the most important bases in the Indian Ocean for the strategic bombers as well as being the largest communication station in the Indian Ocean.

- o Caneo Base: Caneo is the largest communication station in the Red Sea even outside the United States. The importance of this station lies in the fact that it is situated at a height of 7,500 feet, north of Asmara, the capital of Eritrea. Expanding this large station was a main factor for Washington's adherence to continue its alliance with Ethiopia at present.

o Massawa Base: It is a giant base for the warships of the United States' 7th Fleet. There are as well, facilities in the ports of Hodayda and Teddah in the Red Sea.

The purpose of these bases is to protect U.S. interests in the Middle East in general and in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea in particular. Their strategic interests are basically centered on the use of the naval facilities on the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean to support military operations either in peacetime or wartime. They also support free navigation through the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab, and to make sure of continuing the flow of the Gulf oil to U.S. allies in Europe. Soviet influence in the region U.S. to appear in the region to counter the Soviets which, threaten its interests and security of the waterway for U.S. navigation.

#### THE FRENCH IN THE REGION

Like other West European countries, France has a strong interest in freedom of navigation along the sea routes surrounding the Horn of Africa. In the past, moreover, France had been heavily dependent on the imports of oil from the Persian Gulf.

Despite the declining importance of the Bab al-Mandab as a conduit for France's oil supplies, this strait remains important, since it lies astride the fastest route to French territories in the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific. Since the French military presence at Djibouti, France has the ability to respond more rapidly to threats in the Bab al-Mandab than any other. The French Indian Ocean Squadron is normally based in Reunion, but often visits Djibouti. It usually includes 12 combatant ships and aircraft carriers. The French garrison at Djibouti numbers 4,500 troops, supported by

a squadron of 12 fighters. This concentration of French military power near the Strait of Bab al-Mandab is probably more than enough to counter any likely threats to the latter's security.

The French military presence in Djibouti, moreover, appears to be secure, for without it, Djibouti would probably cease to exist as independent state. Indeed, when Djibouti gained independence in 1977, it was widely assumed that without the retention of a French military garrison, Djibouti would become engulfed in a war between Somalia and Ethiopia, which have conflicting interests in that country. With a population of only 400,000, Djibouti is heavily dependent on French budgetary and technical assistance. There are over 10,000 French citizens, including 6,300 military personnel and their dependents, residing in Djibouti.<sup>4</sup>

#### THE SOVIET UNION IN THE REGION

The history of the region around the Bab al-Mandab Strait was dominated for more than a century by the imperial policy of Great Britain and the colonialism of Italy. The infant Soviet state, its ideology reinforcing Russian antipathy to British power, looked to revolution in the colonial empires as the historically ordained fate of this area, as in so many others. A more concrete expression developed toward the end of World War II, when Moscow suggested to its allies that the former Italian colonies of Somalia and Ethiopia be placed under Soviet trusteeship.<sup>5</sup>

The Soviet Union's initial interest was apparently to challenge British imperial influence as colonialism waned. Gradually in the midst of consolidating its own imperial ambitions, Moscow assigned this effort added importance. Soviet planners understood the potential utility of air and naval facilities, and of a military presence in general, lastly the Soviet involvement growing in East Africa, Arabia and the Indian Ocean.

The value of the region also became manifest, during the war in Southeast Asia when Soviet supplies to North Vietnam were shipped through the Red Sea passing through the Bab al-Mandab Strait. The closing of the Suez Canal between 1967 and 1976, demonstrated the canal's vulnerability to blockade in the future. The Soviets still sought assured access to this narrow waterway linking the southern end of the Red Sea with the Indian Ocean. Increases in Soviet presence during the late 1960's-early 1970's coincided with British evacuation from the sensitive areas as the Persian Gulf and South Yemen. It appears that the importance of the region to Soviet policymakers was limited neither to the utility of the maritime route nor to countering British influence.

As early as the late 1950's, U.S. development and deployment of submarine-launched Polaris A-3 missile systems was of major concern to the Soviet Union. Soviet planners realized that the northern sectors of the Indian Ocean provided a good location for the deployment of such weapon systems aimed potentially at the USSR and China. In addition, Moscow appears to have assumed that the People's Republic of China (PRC) regional ambitions in Africa and the region would inevitably conflict with Soviet interests.

#### THE SOVIET UNION IN YEMEN

Within the framework of its growing interests and involvement in the Middle East, the Soviet Union concluded a treaty of friendship with the Imam of North Yemen on 1 November 1955. The proponents of Marxism-Leninism in Moscow had nothing in common with the medieval ruler of this impoverished state except their mutual desire to expel British influence from the region. The Soviets were therefore willing to provide the Imam with arms denied him by the West at Britain's insistence.



During the following two years, in accord with a trade agreement of March 1956, eight ship loads of small arms, antiaircraft guns and tanks were delivered. After the 1962 revolution in North Yemen, which overthrew the Imam's regime and established the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), and during the Civil War which ensued, Soviet aid increased dramatically, reaching a total of \$92 million by 1965. In addition, several hundreds of Soviet advisers were involved in military training. The USSR competed with the PRC for agricultural and industrial aid projects in North Yemen.<sup>6</sup>

After the British departure from its strategic positions, specifically from South Yemen, and the emergence there of the radical wing of the National Liberation Front as the backing element in the Marxist regime of independence. This later became the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). It resulted in close ties with the USSR. Indeed, shortly after having disappointed the YAR's expectations for military aid, the Soviets, responded favorably to some of the PDRY's requests. By mid-1972 they were reported to have delivered two squadrons of MIG-17 aircraft and to have trained 60 South Yemeni pilots.

The turning point in USSR-PDRY relations appeared to have occurred in late 1972 during President Salim Rubayyi Ali's visit to Moscow. The meeting having been thoroughly prepared in advance by a large high-level delegation, dealt with the entire range of bilateral relations including military, economic, technical, political and cultural cooperation. The arrival of a large number of Soviet military experts in Aden, and a follow-up visit to Moscow by PDRY Premier and Defense Minister Ali Nasir Muhammad were initial indications of success. The level of Soviet military aid, which by 1974 was estimated to have totaled \$114 million, provided tangible evidence that strong relations were established.

The reasons for Soviet involvement became manifest early by a major Soviet effort to acquire naval facilities in PDRY and to emphasize greater Soviet control over the port of Aden and the port of Mukallah. That these had become important to the Soviet navy is evidenced by the frequency and duration of visits ashore by Soviet personnel to maintain forces and facilities on the Island of Socotra, which became the most important naval base for the Soviet's fleet on the Indian Ocean. Its airfield provides a potential base for reconnaissance and other aircraft, also the Khormaksar airfield in Yemen and others.

#### THE SOVIET UNION IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

The Horn of Africa nominally embraces Sudan, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia and Kenya, but that part which most resembled a horn is Somalia. It is an area of enormous strategic importance forming the southern shore of the Gulf of Aden and jutting out into the Indian Ocean at the point part by which must flow the majority of the oil routes from the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Thus a grip on the Horn means an ability to cut that route and the lifeblood of most of the West and Asia. The Horn has, for centuries, been the scene of wars, turmoil and suffering, but it is an area whose significance has not been fully understood. It is not appropriate to attempt any historical sketch of the countries of the Horn, except in so far as the past contributes to the present.

The Horn of Africa is the region of some 750,000 square miles and a population of about 40 million. Until the late 19th century no clearly defined borders separated the various regional entities. Those which were finally established perpetuated Ethiopian expansion into the Danakil region, Somali territory and a strip of land along the border with Sudan. By that time France controlled Djibouti and built a railroad to Addis Ababa, while

Italy established a colony in what is now Eritrea and divided Somalia with Great Britain.<sup>7</sup>

#### THE SOVIETS IN SOMALIA

The British having been the preeminent regional power until the mid-1960's, traditionally sympathized with the Somalia vision of national reunification. After being offered Western aid in equipping an armed force of 5,000 men sufficient only for internal security, Somalia accepted a Soviet offer of a \$32 million loan and assistance in equipping and training a 10,000 strong armed force, compared with Somalia's total military budget of \$3.9 million in 1964.<sup>8</sup> While the United States was involved in the Vietnam War, President Johnson decided to cut off aid to Somalia. Prior to these developments, Moscow supported certain Somalia policy positions—anticolonialism and opposition to foreign bases in Africa and to aggressive military alliances.

The major involvement in Somalia was undertaken when Moscow's difficulties with Sudan and Egypt (leading to the expulsion of Soviet advisers from both) as well as increased Chinese competition underlined the importance of a friendly progressive regime in Somalia.

Close Soviet-Somalia relations brought about the transportation of Somalia's Kismayu train and Barbera port into the Soviet Union's main base facilities in the region. The investment of Barbera port had been worthless since the beginning when the Soviets enjoyed access to port facilities in Yemen, and prior to being evicted from their Egyptian bases on the Red Sea.

#### THE SOVIETS IN ETHIOPIA

The Soviet's involvement in Ethiopia began after the coup against Emperor Haile Selassie headed by Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam in February 1977. Since that time the country became known as a Democratic People's Republic.

The Soviet Union, however, was already anticipating major internal changes in Ethiopia, the tangible evidence of Soviet anticipation was that Soviet media carried on an almost daily basis detailed reports of demonstrations and strikes in Addis Ababa and the countryside.

When the inevitable coup materialized, Moscow lost no time in expressing enthusiastic approval and in pointing out the historical significance of the revolution. After the revolution took over the Soviets supported the new leadership. Ethiopia's response was a few days later when it was announced that Ethiopia would turn to socialist countries for its arms and to improve relations with the USSR.

## CHAPTER V

### THE YEMEN ATTITUDE TOWARD THE DISPUTE BETWEEN THE WEST AND EAST OVER THE BAB AL-MANDAB

The geographical location of the Bab al-Mandab Strait, and its importance as the southern gate of the Red Sea increased world attention to it and like a delicious meal caused world powers to swarm around it. The growing geopolitical importance of the Bab al-Mandab, and to the important location of the Republic of Yemen, geographically and politically, put it in a position of causing the powers to swarm to gain access to it as important ground at the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

Historically, Yemen had been a primary target for many nations since the 15th century. Yemen, as have other countries around the Red Sea, especially around the Bab al-Mandab Strait, has been involved in many conflicts because of the strait, and faced many occupations. Since the 15th century until the present many international powers tried to gain control of this strait to protect their interests from the others, as we have discussed before.

#### THE REPUBLIC OF YEMEN'S ATTITUDE

The ROY is doing its best to enhance its relationship with all countries around the Red Sea region, especially those countries which share the Bab al-Mandab Strait, in order to establish the security of the strait and separate it from international conflicts.

On the other hand, the ROY appreciates the conflicts on the Horn of Africa. It tries its best to participate in solving these problems by arranging agreements with all concerned countries within the framework of international law. However, Yemen tries to secure the strait since it is the strategic passage in southern Red Sea, which connects the East of the world

with the West of the world which will result in political, economical and military advantage to all nations.

The ROY is concerned if the Red Sea or part of it, especially the Bab al-Mandab Strait becomes occupied by an outside force. Such occupation will affect the security of Yemen as well as all other countries around the region. Yemen has a specific military advantage because this strait is considered as a part of its territorial waters, and in fact, it affects its security. For that reason Yemen tries to coordinate its military efforts with all countries sharing the strait with it, and also with the countries that have interests in the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

The policy of Yemen is defined in Article Number Five in the first chapter of the Yemen Constitution which says,

The government ensure to function in accordance with the United Nation's charter and universal announcement of the human right and under the charter of the Arab League and the international law that in general recognized.

As far as economic goals are concerned, Yemen wants to establish facilities for all ships crossing the strait in order to enhance its economic resources. These facilities are essential to heavy ships crossing the strait to Asia, Africa and Europe.

Yemen's political interests are that as Yemen considers the strait as very important in the sense that it connects it with all outside countries, especially the industrial countries and superpowers, which no doubt want freedom of navigation through the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

According to Yemen policy as a member of the nonaligned countries, it does its best to keep the Strait of Bab al-Mandab outside any international or regional conflicts, and to prevent any side from using it for military purposes against others, as is agreed by all countries which share the use of the strait.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

The Bab al-Mandab Strait had been important in trade between India and Europe as the transit checkpoint, but since the opening of the Suez Canal and connection of the Red Sea with the Mediterranean Sea, it has become very important to all international countries as a southern gate of the shortest and quickest waterway that links the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean Sea, the Eastern and Western parts of the world. The increasing attention given to the Red Sea, an arena of the great powers' competition, attention given to the Strait of Bab al-Mandab as the southern entrance to the Suez Canal which is the northern entrance to the Red Sea.

As the Arab-Israeli conflict continues, Israel will still be concerned with having free navigation in the Red Sea, in particularly through the Bab al-Mandab, which is the only outlet through which Israel can go to its markets in Africa and Asia. After the Israeli tanker Coral Sea was attacked in the strait in 1971, and the blockade on the Bab al-Mandab Strait in 1973 in front of the Israeli navigation by Arabs during the October war, Israel will pay particular attention to its interests in this area.

The Soviet Union has paramount interests in the region. These interests are multiple, and some of them are essential to the Soviet national security. The region is the Soviet's southern sea route which is the shortest waterline of communication opened the navigation route between its European ports in the Black Sea and Indian Ocean, where it has its naval fleet, instead of going through the Mediterranean Sea into the Atlantic Ocean and around Africa. The Suez route makes it easier for the Soviets to support its navy and air force in peacetime and during the wartime.

The Soviet Union also has its trade relationships with other countries in Africa and Asia, and it wants to preserve that waterway for its trading ships. On the other hand, the Soviets want also to control the navigation on the Red Sea against the West especially the Europe to which the oil flows from the Gulf countries for Europe's energy and industry, whenever the Soviets feel it is important to them. Finally, the USSR's interest is to counter U.S. and European influence in the region.

However, the United States also has its interests in the region like others. The United States' strategic interests are basically centered on the following objectives:

- o First, the use of facilities ashore to support US military operations in southwest Asia and the Indian Ocean in peacetime and in wartime contingencies;

- o Second, freedom of international navigation through the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab Strait;

- o Third, continuing the flow of the Persian Gulf oil to allies in Europe through the Bab al-Mandab; and

- o Finally, countering the Soviet influence in the region and securing the waterway against the Arab radicalism for changing the Red Sea to an Arab lake.

In addition, Western European states have a strong interest in freedom of navigation through the Red Sea. According to some estimates about 40 percent of the Persian Gulf oil that is earmarked for Western Europe is shipped through the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

The states in the area do not approve of the presence of foreign bases or forces on their territories because they see double danger in such an action which makes the area an arena for international conflict between the two great



powers. The presence of one party's forces on their territories will consequently antagonize the other. It may also lead to elements allied with that party to stir up disturbances, instabilities and revolutions.

Therefore, some states prefer to keep away from such pacts and not to fall under a foreign hegemony foreign military presence was eliminated and the Middle East area was freed from foreign military bases.

## ENDNOTES

1. Mordechai Abir, Sharm al-Sheikh- Bab al-Mandab: The Strategic Balance and Israel's Southern Approaches, p. 7.
2. Ministry of Defense Military Researches Authority: Egypt and Middle East, An Overview on Contemporary Problems, Part 1, p. 134.
3. Abdel Majid Farid: The Red Sea, p. 108.
4. Naval War College Review, Vol. XLIII, Nr. 4, Sequence 332, Autumn 1990, pp. 21-22.
5. Nimrod Novik: On the Shores of Bab al-Mandab, Soviet Diplomacy and Regional Dynamics, p. 1.
6. Ibid., p. 4.
7. Ibid., p. 23.
8. Ibid., p. 24.

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