

U.S. Military Command Organization and the Red Sea

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. **PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.**

1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 14-05-2021			2. REPORT TYPE FINAL		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) N/A	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE U.S. Military Command Organization and the Red Sea			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A		5b. GRANT NUMBER N/A	
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A		5d. PROJECT NUMBER N/A	
			5e. TASK NUMBER N/A		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A	
6. AUTHOR(S) Muhmmad Furqan			7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Writing & Teaching Excellence Center Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER N/A	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) N/A		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) N/A	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release; Distribution is unlimited.						
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES A paper submitted to the faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the curriculum. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.						
14. ABSTRACT While the interconnectedness of countries surrounding the Red Sea has significantly grown in recent years, U.S. military organizations have not taken action to adequately address this development, frustrating U.S. attempts to achieve strategic objectives in the region. As such, it is incumbent upon AFRICOM, as the combatant command most fit to handle the Red Sea arena, to assign CJTF-HOA to conduct a mission analysis to determine the command changes necessary to address the Red Sea region. This paper first examines the Red Sea region and its recent increase in interdependence, particularly after 2015 and in light of the 2017 Gulf Cooperation Council crisis that metastasized throughout the region. Next, the paper explains the current U.S. military command organization in the region and the shortcomings therein. Finally, the paper concludes by proposing that AFRICOM assign CJTF-HOA to conduct a mission analysis in support of the former assigning a subordinate command responsibility for the entire Red Sea region. Assigned the appropriate geographic responsibility and given the requisite command relationship with CENTCOM, this subordinate command will provide unity of effort for the Department of Defense in the region, greatly improving the U.S.'s ability to conduct coordinated, effective action throughout the Red Sea arena and enabling the achievement of U.S. strategic objectives.						
15. SUBJECT TERMS (Key words) AFRICOM, CCMD, COCOM, Combatant Command, Red Sea, Command Organization, Command and Control, C2						
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT N/A	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 18	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Director, Writing Center	
a. REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	b. ABSTRACT UNCLASSIFIED	c. THIS PAGE UNCLASSIFIED			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code) 401-841-6499	

Acronyms

AFRICOM: U.S. Africa Command

AOR: Area of Responsibility

CCMD: Combatant Command

CENTCOM: U.S. Central Command

CJTF-HOA: Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa

DOD: Department of Defense

EARSCOM: East Africa and Red Sea Command

FGS: Federal Government of Somalia

FMS: Federal Member States

GCC: Gulf Cooperation Council

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

GPC: Great Power Competition

HOA: Horn of Africa

HQ: Headquarters

JOA: Joint Area of Operations

JP: Joint Publication

JTF: Joint Task Force

UAE: United Arab Emirates

UAS: Unmanned Aircraft Systems

UCP: Unified Command Plan

Introduction

While the interconnectedness of countries surrounding the Red Sea has significantly grown in recent years, U.S. military organizations have not taken action to adequately address this development, frustrating U.S. attempts to achieve strategic objectives in the region. First, it must be noted that Red Sea arena is significantly more interrelated today than in the past. As such, the command organization of yesteryear does not suit the needs of the region today. In addition to the cross-sea ramifications emanating from the ongoing war in Yemen, since 2015 rivalries between Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have been playing out directly in the Horn of Africa (HOA)—particularly in Sudan and Somalia. From military alliances to private investments, the 21st century has shown that countries on the east and west banks of the Red Sea truly form one intertwined region. Second, despite this fact, the Department of Defense (DOD) has made no changes to address the new dynamics of the region and, consequently, has no command postured to meet the challenges of the combined HOA and Red Sea operating areas. The 2020 Unified Command Plan (UCP), like all its predecessors since 2008, divides the Red Sea and its bordering nations between the geographic combatant commands (CCMDs) of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) and U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). And since 2002, only one subordinate command at the operational level has been assigned responsibility for any portion of the Red Sea region: Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA). However, as has been true since its inception, CJTF-HOA’s sole focus is on “countering violent extremist organizations in East Africa.”¹ And while AFRICOM has a mission and command vision well suited to the complexities of the Red Sea, neither it nor CJTF-HOA currently has the needed command organization or command relationships to properly address the region.

¹ CJTF-HOA, “About the Command.”

Action must be taken now to rapidly rectify this negligence. It is incumbent upon AFRICOM, as the CCMD most fit to handle the region, to assign CJTF-HOA to conduct a mission analysis to determine the command changes necessary to address the Red Sea arena. As the commander of AFRICOM noted in his 2021 Posture Statement to Congress, “a secure, stable, and prosperous Africa—aligned with the U.S.—is an enduring American interest.”² If the U.S. continues to address the Red Sea arena in a piecemeal fashion, it will continue to both fail to achieve its strategic objectives and fail to further its interests in the region. It is essential that the changes include, at a minimum, an AFRICOM subordinate assigned a joint area of operations (JOA) that contains the Red Sea and all the related East African and Middle Eastern countries. Additionally, AFRICOM would be remiss if it did not empower this subordinate with an appropriate command relationship with CENTCOM to enable operations across CCMD geographic boundaries. Taken together, these actions will enable the DOD to expeditiously address the inherent seam in the UCP that the Red Sea region represents.

The Red Sea Region

The Red Sea arena is significantly more interrelated today than in the past and, as such, the command organization of yesterday does not suffice for the needs of today. The Red Sea is a key waterway of strategic importance. Bordered by five states on the African coast and four on the Middle Eastern side, the Red Sea is host to 10% of global trade each year.³ As shown in Figure 1 on p. 3, the Red Sea is an enclosed sea connected to the Mediterranean Sea in the north via the strategic chokepoint of the Suez Canal. Reaching a maximum width of only 190 miles wide in the vicinity of Massawa, Eritrea, the Red Sea narrows to about 16 miles at a second

² Townsend, “Statement of General Stephen J. Townsend.”

³ Veiga, “Suez Canal blockage.”



Figure 1 - The Red Sea Region

Source: Adapted from Vertin, *Great Power Rivalry in the Red Sea*

strategic chokepoint at its southern end, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.⁵ The Red Sea is a small waterway containing two strategic chokepoints that are critical for the movement of both global trade and military forces. Of note, it is surrounded by states that have varying levels of stability which could negatively affect access through the region. Conversely, this region also contains close U.S. partners, like Saudi Arabia the U.S.’s largest foreign military sales customer,⁶ and states with immense potential for increased economic engagement, like Ethiopia—Africa’s second largest country by population and which saw greater than 9% yearly GDP growth from 2010 to 2019.⁷ Considering this, the Red Sea region is poised to be crucial to the U.S.’s ability to accomplish strategic tasks like “nurtur[ing] ... our economy” and preventing adversaries from “inhibiting access to the global commons, or dominating key regions.”⁸

The transnational movement of migrants and refugees in the Red Sea arena is a key display of the interrelation in the region that necessitates it be treated as a single entity. For example, in spite of the civil war in Yemen, migration to the Arabian Peninsula has continued unabated from East Africa. In 2018 and 2019, almost 300,000 migrants from Ethiopia and Somalia travelled to Yemen—160,000 of whom made the voyage in 2018.⁹ This is comparable to the numbers seen on the Libya to Italy route during the “migrant crisis” that the European Union faced. From 2014 to 2017 that route saw an average of 156,000 migrants crossings per year with a high-water mark of 181,000 in 2016.¹⁰ The East African migrants provide an important link between the two sides of the Red Sea. The ultimate destination of the migration is Saudi Arabia, and the goal of most migrants is finding high-paying jobs to be able to support relatives back in

⁵ “Red Sea.”

⁶ “U.S. Relations with Saudi Arabia.”

⁷ “The World Bank in Ethiopia”

⁸ Biden, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, 9.

⁹ IOM Regional Office for the East and Horn of Africa, *A Region on the Move*, 44.

¹⁰ Kuschminder, “Once a Destination for Migrants.”

their home countries through remittances.¹¹ Remittances form an important part of the economies in East Africa. On average, remittances made up 2.8% of the GDP in countries in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2019.¹² In the East African portion of the Red Sea region, the percentage ranged from 0.5% in Eritrea to 9.5% in South Sudan for an average of 3.7% in the region.¹³ Migrants, and the money they generate, form an important link between the countries throughout the Red Sea arena. In addition to these continuing traditional interactions, though, the dynamics of the interplay between states in the region have evolved in recent years.

Starting around 2015, a dramatic shift in geopolitics has deepened the interconnectedness of the Red Sea states, once again, highlighting the need to deal with the region as a whole. Since 2015, Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE have built or agreed to at least nine new bases and ports in Eastern Africa.¹⁴ This is in addition to the new bases on the western coast of Saudi Arabia¹⁵ and in Yemen.¹⁶ A major instigator of all this expansion has been increased military requirements due to the Saudi led intervention in the Yemeni civil war. Furthermore, the fallout from the 2017 GCC crisis has led to what has been described as a “zero-sum competition” in the Red Sea with Turkey and Qatar pitted against Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.¹⁷ One place where this game has played out is in Somalia, to the detriment of the country’s national cohesion.

The decision by the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) to remain neutral in the GCC Crisis brought it into conflict with the UAE and underscores the fact that the U.S. command

¹¹ IOM Regional Office for the East and Horn of Africa, *A Region on the Move*, 44.

¹² “Personal remittances, received (% of GDP).”

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Carson et al., *Final Report and Recommendations*, 6.

¹⁵ “Saudi defense minister announces construction of a naval base in Jazan.”

¹⁶ Vertin, *Red Sea Rivalries*, 4-5.

¹⁷ Carson et al., *Final Report and Recommendations*, 24.

organization is not setup to deal with these intraregional issues that cross UCP boundaries. When the GCC crisis began in 2017, Somalia declined to take sides. This did not sit well with the UAE, who decided to prioritize its support to the sub-national Somali Federal Member States (FMS) to achieve its objectives. This can be seen in the 30-year concession the UAE received from Somaliland, one of the FMS, that the UAE used to justify its 2018 groundbreaking on expansion work at the port of Berbera.¹⁸ This work was accompanied by a parallel agreement for an Emirati military base at the same location.¹⁹ These actions, among others, were taken in the face of protest from the FGS and notification from the U.N. that the UAE's port and base agreements in Somalia were in violation of an arms embargo.²⁰ As one group of scholars noted, actions by the UAE and Saudi Arabia have “undermin[ed] cohesion in a country that is a byword for state collapse.”²¹ How can a command promote security and stability in Somalia, or regionally, if that command cannot deal with the causes of instability that originate from the eastern half of the region? This is the task that AFRICOM faces.²² Moreover, Somalia is just one area where Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been at odds with east African nations.²³

The foregoing geopolitical machinations serve to highlight how interlinked the Red Sea region is. It will be exceedingly difficult for any organization to engender stability and promote development in East Africa if the corresponding Red Sea states in the Middle East—to include Egypt—are not dealt with at the same time.

¹⁸ Vertin, *Red Sea Rivalries*, 3.

¹⁹ Mosley, “Ethiopia’s Transition,” 19.

²⁰ Vertin, *Red Sea Rivalries*, 4.

²¹ Carson et al., *Final Report and Recommendations*, 25.

²² United States Africa Command, “About the Command.”

²³ See Mosley, “Ethiopia’s Transition,” 22-24 for an analysis of the dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia concerning Nile flow rights. Mosley also examines Ethiopian issues with Saudi Arabia and the UAE arising from Ethiopia’s political intervention in Sudan in 2019.

The U.S. Military in the Red Sea Region

Despite the fact that the Red Sea region has grown more interdependent, the DOD has made no changes to command organization to address the new state of the region and, thus, has no command postured to meet the region's challenges. AFRICOM has responsibility for a geographic area encompassing all of Africa except Egypt. Egypt, along with Middle Eastern and Southwest Asian states, is assigned to CENTCOM. This demarcation between the two commands in East Africa is a seam between the CCMDs. This is a well-established issue that pre-dates the current delineation of area of responsibilities (AORs) between AFRICOM and CENTCOM. In fact, CENTCOM campaigned for creating AFRICOM as a sub-unified command that reported to both U.S. European Command and itself to address this very issue.²⁴ Instead, the HOA was removed from the CENTCOM AOR and given to AFRICOM when the latter was stood up. This decision only served to shift the seam in the UCP northeast to the Red Sea.

AFRICOM is unique among the CCMDs which makes it the best suited to address the Red Sea. This uniqueness was a conscious decision made during the command's formation. For example, in April 2008 when creating the mission statement for the command, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, and AFRICOM agreed to insert a clause in the mission statement to ensure that the interagency nature of the command was made explicit.²⁵ While the exact wording has changed, the current mission statement still reflects this heritage: "U.S. Africa Command, with partners, counters transnational threats and malign actors, strengthens security forces and responds to crises in order to advance U.S. national interests and promote regional

²⁴ Drea et al., *History of the Unified Command Plan*, 95.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

security, stability and prosperity.”²⁶ To expound upon this uniqueness, AFRICOM explains its purpose as follows:

The single most important focus then [upon establishment], as it is today, was developing enduring partnerships. The creation of AFRICOM has provided coherence to U.S. military efforts in support of the U.S. Strategy for Africa, enabling our nation to better focus efforts and resources on programs that make the most difference. ... AFRICOM is committed to a whole-of-government approach, which is why the command has worked to help African nations enhance their own security through development across many sectors, including defense, governance and economic development.²⁷

Compare this to CENTCOM’s overtly militaristic mission statement: “[CENTCOM] directs and enables military operations and activities with allies and partners to increase regional security and stability in support of enduring U.S. interests.”²⁸ The difference between AFRICOM and other CCMDs can also be seen in the command’s structure. AFRICOM is atypical in that instead of being assigned a Foreign Policy Advisor, it is explicitly assigned two deputies for the CCMD: one three-star military officer “Deputy” and one ambassador-level state department “Deputy to the Commander for Civil-Military Engagement.”²⁹ AFRICOM, unlike the other geographic CCMDs, was not established to be the supported commander in the DOD for combat operations in its AOR. AFRICOM was created to focus on using whole-of-government coordination to ensure the stability and development of the states in its region, a critical capability for managing the Red Sea arena.

Unlike AFRICOM, CENTCOM is not well organized to face the Red Sea challenge. Written in the same militaristic vein as its mission statement, CENTCOM’s command priorities manifestly show that the command is not addressing the Red Sea region. Its priorities are deter

²⁶ United States Africa Command, “About the Command.”

²⁷ “History of U.S. Africa Command.”

²⁸ “CENTCOM Mission and Command Priorities.”

²⁹ “Leadership.”

Iran, obtain a negotiated resolution to the conflict in Afghanistan, maintain defeat-ISIS campaign in Iraq and Syria, counter the UAS threat, and confront the weaponization of internally displaced persons and refugees.³⁰ The 2020 CENTCOM posture statement also makes the command's lack of attention crystal clear; the only mention of the Red Sea in the statement is in reference to ensuring lines of communication in the event of chokepoint closure (presumably during armed conflict).³¹ Even Yemen, a Red Sea nation with ongoing armed conflict, is mentioned only once. And this reference to Yemen is only made to highlight Iran's ability to destabilize and incite attacks on U.S. partners. In addition to the lack of attention at the CCMD level, CENTCOM has no subordinate operational level command in the Red Sea region.³² In summation, CENTCOM has neither the desire, the mission, nor the existing command organization to address the Red Sea region.

CJTF-HOA, an AFRICOM subordinate, is the only extant command situated to assume control over the Red Sea arena, but its current structure does not support it assuming this responsibility. CJTF-HOA was established in 2002 as a consequence of the September 11 attacks to conduct counter-violent extremist organization operations in East Africa.³³ CJTF-HOA is responsible for a combined JOA that covers 12 East African countries—and an area of interest (AOI) of nine additional nations—that includes all the countries in the Red Sea region that are in AFRICOM's AOR.³⁴ Historically, CJTF-HOA has been structured and manned as a Joint Task Force (JTF) with a temporary purpose, which is the standard for a JTF.³⁵ For example, when the center for Army Lessons Learned conducted an assessment in 2016 it noted that,

³⁰ "CENTCOM Mission and Command Priorities."

³¹ McKenzie, "Posture Statement of General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr."

³² "Unified Commands, CENTCOM & Components."

³³ Kimball et al., *Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa*, 1.

³⁴ Lange, "What is the Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa?"

³⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Task Force Headquarters*, A-B-1.

... the high turnover of HOA personnel necessitates a constant retraining effort to ensure knowledge of the HSP [CJTF-HOA's former campaign plan] is not lost. ... With 150 percent annual turnover rate for personnel at HOA, all participants on the HSP were gone from the staff within six months. This high turnover rate will continue until HOA transitions from Overseas Contingency Operations funding to baseline funding.³⁶

And while significant changes to Overseas Contingency Operations funding in East Africa have been made,³⁷ the September 2020 deployment of 200 soldiers from the 196th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade HQ element for nine months to serve as CJTF-HOA HQ staff³⁸ shows that the command still has not solved the issue of long-term manning. CJTF-HOA's manning restraints inhibit its ability to conduct campaign planning and sustain the required corporate knowledge to prosecute said campaigns.

Recommendations

It is clear the realities of the current Red Sea dictate a new approach, and AFRICOM must take the lead. The only other CCMD in the region, CENTCOM, has a markedly different mission that is unfit to the task. CENTCOM's mission is military centric and focuses on combat operations while AFRICOM's mission and vision underscore the command's non-combat origins. They also reflect AFRICOM's fixity of purpose to work in the interagency environment to promote stability and development in the countries in its AOR. Considering this, and the DOD's lack of combat objectives in the region, AFRICOM is the best choice to assume responsibility for the DOD in ensuring unity of effort in the Red Sea region.

The first thing AFRICOM must do is assign CJTF-HOA to conduct a mission analysis to determine the command requirements to manage the region. Joint Publication (JP) 3-33 *Joint Task Force Headquarters* lists a variety of options for commanders when an enduring mission

³⁶ Kimball et al., *Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa*, 12.

³⁷ O'Donnell, *COP-OCO*, iv.

³⁸ Targeted News Service, "New Staff Arrives."

arises and a JTF is already conducting operations in the affected region. These include tasking the existing JTF or transitioning to a subordinate unified command.³⁹ However, JP 3-33 notes that, “determination of an appropriate option requires mission analysis based on future requirements and updates of the CJTF’s and staff’s understanding of the OE [operating environment].”⁴⁰ Given this, AFRICOM should task CJTF-HOA, as the command currently operating in the Red Sea region, to perform a mission analysis to determine the requirements for a command to assume responsibilities for the entire region. This mission analysis should be in support of instituting a command with the ability to operationalize AFRICOM fourth campaign objective, “Coordinate Action with Allies and Partners to Achieve Shared Security Objectives,”⁴¹ in the entirety of the region.

Even without the results of the formal mission analysis, there are a number of requirements that can be readily identified. First, the new command (hereafter referred to East Africa and Red Sea Command or EARSCOM) needs a geographic assignment commensurate with the mission. EARSCOM should be assigned a JOA that includes, at least, the following nations: Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, and Sudan, from the AFRICOM AOR and Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Yemen from the CENTCOM AOR. In addition to the JOA, EARSCOM should be assigned an AOI that includes other African and Middle Eastern nations with significant equities in the Red Sea region (e.g., South Sudan, Turkey, and Uganda). Second, EARSCOM needs to be established on a permanent basis and manned as such. Effective campaigning requiring a minimum level of staff continuity. Third, EARSCOM should either have direct liaison authority with CENTCOM or be

³⁹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Task Force Headquarters*, A-B-1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Townsend, “Statement of General Stephen J. Townsend.”

assigned to report to both AFRICOM and CENTCOM. Reporting to two combatant commanders is not without precedent. In fact, after AFRICOM began operations in 2008, CJTF-HOA initially operated under both AFRICOM and CENTCOM with responsibilities on both the African continent and in Yemen.⁴² Further, this setup is the same command organization that CENTCOM itself championed prior to the establishment of AFRICOM, a subordinate who simultaneously reported to the CCMD responsible for Africa and CENTCOM.⁴³ The correct geographic responsibility, adequate manning, and refined command relationships will be essential for EARSCOM success.

Alternative Recommendation and Rebuttal

Some would argue that AFRICOM should not concern itself with the Red Sea region and instead modify CJTF-HOA to have responsibility for the East Africa region. In point of fact, AFRICOM and CJTF-HOA requested to transition the latter to a permanent command called “JTF-Africa” in 2019.⁴⁴ This transition would entail changes to the command’s funding and manning. Additionally, JTF-Africa would have an expanded area of operations to enable the command to have a “main focus ... to maintain partnerships with African countries — competing with China and Russia for influence — and to protect U.S. interests, such as embassies.”⁴⁵ It can be argued that given the focus of national strategic documentation (e.g., the 2018 National Defense Strategy and the 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance) on Great Power Competition (GPC), particularly the robustness of the Chinese challenge, an explicit re-orientation and focus on GPC is the best path forward. Moreover, given the seemingly

⁴² Kimball et al., *Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa*, 2.

⁴³ Drea et al., *History of the Unified Command Plan*, 95.

⁴⁴ Garland, “New commander takes over Horn of Africa.”

⁴⁵ Garland, “New commander takes over Horn of Africa.”

transitory nature of events like the GCC crisis,⁴⁶ making long-term changes—such as instituting a command focused solely on the Red Sea—is inadvisable.

It goes without saying that transitioning CJTF-HOA to a permanent command will be beneficial for AFRICOM. As previously noted, CJTF-HOA’s planning and operations have long been restrained by its manning structure. Nevertheless, re-organizing a command in East Africa without taking into account the dynamics of the greater Red Sea region is a mistake. While the principal diplomatic incident in the GCC Crisis may have only lasted three and a half years, its effects will be felt for decades to come. For example, port concessions received by the UAE in Somalia were generally for 30 years.⁴⁷ Thus, the UAE’s negative impact on the stability of Somalia appears primed to become a long-standing issue. Additionally, complex issues like water rights to the Nile⁴⁸ and the flux of East African emigrants into the Arabian Peninsula will not be resolved any time soon. If the U.S. is going to take action in the Red Sea region it needs to act in a concerted manner that accounts for the dynamics of the region as a whole.

Conclusion

The countries around the Red Sea form an interdependent region that requires a region-wide unity of effort to adequately manage any part of it. It is true that AFRICOM, and the DOD for that matter, does not act unilaterally for the whole of the U.S. Government. Nevertheless, considering AFRICOM’s unique position and mission, enabling it to deal with the complexities of the Red Sea arena is a good first step in properly addressing the region as a whole. AFRICOM is singularly positioned, by virtue of both its mission and command organization, to be able to quickly adapt to address the emerging Red Sea region dynamics. Assigning CJTF-HOA to

⁴⁶ Yousef et al., “What Brookings experts are saying.”

⁴⁷ Vertin, *Red Sea Rivalries*, 3-4.

⁴⁸ See Mosley, “Ethiopia’s Transition,” 22-24 for an analysis of some of the issues related to Nile flow rights.

conduct a mission analysis and using those results to form an East Africa and Red Sea Command will immensely improve the U.S. government's ability to conduct coordinated, effective action throughout the Red Sea arena enabling the achievement of U.S. strategic objectives.

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