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Two Straits, Three Fronts: Arabia's Double Encirclement

Saudi Arabia lives a double encirclement. First, the waters surrounding the Arabian Peninsula are under repeated attack by asymmetric warfare activities, at east of the Hormuz strait (Gulf of Oman), as well as in the Southern Red Sea, next to the Bab el Mandeb strait. Second, the kingdom finds itself encircled by three parallel fronts: apart from the maritime one, the air dimension of the Yemeni crisis (with missiles and drones launched against the Saudi soil by the Yemeni Huthi insurgents) has turned critical since May 2019; and the border front, which involves not only the Saudi-Yemeni Western frontier but, to a lesser extent, also the Saudi-Iraqi frontier, since the June 29 drone attacks against oil installations in the north of Riyadh would have been launched from the Iraqi territory, according to US officials [Isabel Coles-Dion Nissenbaum, "U.S.: Saudi Pipeline Attack Originated From Iraq", *Wall Street Journal*, June 28, 2019]. The nature of the attacks against the oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman (May 12 and June 13) is still to be assessed, although the Huthis, who are not Iran's proxies but receive military aid from Tehran, have already adopted similar tactics (as water mines) since 2016 along the Yemeni Western coast, against navies and oil tankers.

Despite this 'fog of escalation', three firm points can be identified.

First of all, freedom of navigation along the Arabian Peninsula's perimeter is no longer safe and this is a global issue; secondly, "beyond Hormuz" infrastructural strategies developed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are not sufficient to grant wholly-viable export routes; thirdly, civilians have become targets of the dispute, by the sea (oil tankers) and in Saudi Arabia (airports, oil installations, desalination plants).

The still unattributed maritime attacks, occurring in the Gulf of Oman and those claimed by the Huthis in the Southern Red Sea, show an emerging maritime risk, which cannot be classified as piracy (differently from the attacks along the Somali coast), but display more sophisticated tactics and weapons, rather

echoing maritime terrorism [Ferdinando Sanfelice di Monteforte, “Il ritorno del terrorismo marittimo: una minaccia per il commercio nel Mediterraneo”, *Mediterranean Insecurity*, February 2018].

This phenomenon has global impact, affecting commercial and oil interests: signals of a possible naval multilateral initiative to protect shipping lanes, headed by Gulf monarchies and the US, are emerging in declarations and meetings. It is possible that a US-led patrolling force could be joined by Australia, Bahrain and UK.

Cross-regional maritime security architectures are already looming in the Western side of the Peninsula. After the Emirati-backed Yemeni forces secured Al-Mokha and the Southern Tihama’s neighbourhood in Yemen (so controlling the Bab el-Mandeb area), Saudi Arabia launched in late 2018 the project of the *Red Sea Alliance* with Egypt, Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen and Jordan to ensure maritime security in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Due to parallel episodes of instability (both in Bab el-Mandeb and at east of Hormuz), Saudi Arabia and the UAE do not have alternative safe routes for export/import, notwithstanding Riyadh and Abu Dhabi opened and/or strengthened logistical and infrastructural positions out of the Gulf (as the Saudi ports on the Red Sea and the “beyond Hormuz” Fujairah port for the Emiratis). This indicates how much the Iranian and the Yemeni files are now part of the same dossier.

Huthis’ attacks with missiles and drones against civilians in Saudi Arabia have been escalating: in two distinct episodes hitting the Abha International Airport (Asir), twenty-six (June 12) and twenty-one persons remained injured (June 23, plus one dead). In the first attack, a cruise missile was launched, thus signalling an improvement in Huthis’ strike capabilities.

In such a context, the risk of miscalculation and over-reaction is a distinct possibility. National perceptions quickly become facts as a result of the “blame game loop”, paving the way for misperceptions and biased perceptions of others’ behaviours and strategies. Surely, Saudi Arabia’s feeling of encirclement has already being reinforced.

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