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Connectivity in the Red Sea: Triggering the Saudi-Emirati Competition

On December 12, 2018, Saudi Arabia gathered in Riyadh six Arab and African states to discuss the formation of a political council for the Red Sea [Naser Al Wasmi, “Arab and African states discuss forming a Red Sea security council”, The National, December 12, 2018]. The meeting was joint by the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, Egypt and of the internationally recognized government of Yemen. The new political council will improve security cooperation in the Red Sea, boosting also economic collaboration, investments and trade.

Such a political choice emphasizes the renewed Red Sea’s central role in Gulf geopolitics, and not only. Security and economic interdependence between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa has dramatically risen in few years, as a result of Gulf monarchies’ economic diversification and regional ambitions. The Bab el-Mandeb strait, linking the Gulf of Aden with the Red Sea, has gained new prominence in worldwide waterways, as well as maritime politics has become a pillar in the Saudi and the Emirati geo-strategies.

The crisis and civil war in Yemen, coupled with the rivalry with Iran, have contributed to shift Gulf monarchies’ attention to the Red Sea and its waters and coastal neighbourhood. First, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi need to protect maritime security and freedom of navigation due to the Yemeni Huthi rebels’ presence in the Western coast of Yemen, which resulted into the launch of missiles, maritime attacks against military but also civilian vessels and naval mining. Second, the Bab el-Mandeb strait and the Red Sea represent an alternative route with respect to the Hormuz strait and, in general, of the Persian Gulf: although part of a well-known rhetoric and propaganda by the Islamic Republic, Iranian authorities’ continuous threats regarding the interdiction/denial of Hormuz put oil transit and trade potentially at risk.

Connectivity in the Red Sea develops through port agreements and military bases. Saudi Arabia and the UAE play together to contain Iran's expansion, as well as the Turkish and the Qatari leverage in the sub-region: for instance, the Saudis and the Emiratis brokered the recent rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia. But Abu Dhabi's activism along the Red Sea rimland (Yemen's Western coast, Assab in Eritrea, Berbera in Somaliland, Bosaso in Puntland) has been triggering competition with Riyadh, which looks at this area for economic and infrastructural projects.

The Emiratis have gained strategic depth in the lower Red Sea and the battle for Hodeida in Yemen pushed this trend, since the military forces fighting the Huthis on the ground (remnants of the former Republican Guard led by Tareq Saleh, Tihami Resistance, Giants Brigade) are mainly supported and trained by the UAE, thus opening the way to a remarkable Emirati influence in post-conflict Hodeida, and on its critical port.

Not by chance, the UAE is not part of the new, Saudi-led political council for the Red Sea. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are close allies and work together for political hegemony in the wider Middle East. But Abu Dhabi's growing geopolitical and military ambitions trigger a subtle competition in this strategic waterway, which could destabilize and generate new layers of conflict in poor Eastern African countries.

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