

Cairo: Stuck between Securing the Red Sea and Avoiding a Perception of Support for Israel

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Despite economic losses, Egypt is still hesitant to participate in any direct military operations to deter the Houthis. Cairo believes that it is more appropriate to work towards ending the military operations in the Gaza Strip and launching a political process, rather than opening a new front to expand the conflict in the Middle East.

From the outset, it is difficult to imagine that Egypt, which completely closed the Red Sea during the October 1973 war with Israel by imposing a naval blockade at the southern entrance of the Red Sea near Bab el-Mandeb, would now be content to merely observe as Houthi missile and drones rain down on international maritime shipping.

While the American Fifth Fleet is currently tasked with countering the Houthis to secure the international shipping lane, in cooperation with allied fleets from 40 countries, Cairo has expressed clear skepticism about joining the international coalition "Prosperity Guardian," despite the fact that threats to international navigation in the Red Sea are a direct and explicit threat to Egyptian national security.

However, the truth is that Cairo's non-participation in "Prosperity Guardian" or international naval operations to secure the southern entrance of the Red Sea, through which nearly 12% of global trade passes, is due to highly complex political calculations.

This is not the first time the Houthis have sown chaos around the Bab el-Mandeb Strait; it is a recurrent issue dating

back to their desperate attempts to control the port of Aden during their conflict with the Yemeni government and its allied forces several years ago. This time however, the Houthis claim that their repeated attacks on international navigation in the Red Sea is in response to the ongoing war in Gaza. Cairo believes that conflating these issues could prolong the conflict in the Middle East and make matters more complicated in a region that seems to be on the brink of an abyss.

Egyptian Losses with Red Sea Instability

Despite the global negative impact of the Houthi attacks on international navigation in general, Cairo is the most directly affected. The country, which has the longest coastline on the Red Sea (1941 km) and is experiencing a severe economic crisis exacerbated by the war in Gaza, has been further burdened by the Houthi attacks. On one hand, these attacks pose a direct threat to the southern entrance of the navigation route leading to the Suez Canal—one of the most important sources of national income from foreign currencies, especially at a time when Egypt is already facing a significant shortage in its dollar revenues, with the dollar breaking the 60 Egyptian pounds barrier in the parallel market. The latest Houthi attacks have caused a 30% decrease in traffic through the Suez Canal compared to the same period last year.

Moreover, the slowdown in navigation in the Red Sea also means a slowdown in the country's imports, particularly of fuel, food, and intermediate goods necessary for industry. In addition to these losses, the tourism sector in the country, already under pressure due to the ongoing war in Europe between Russia and Ukraine, faces additional challenges. The Egyptian resorts overlooking the Red Sea and South Sinai have been severely affected by the war in Gaza. However, the fall of debris from Houthi missiles and drones over Sinai represents another nightmare for the faltering tourism industry in South Sinai. Recently, six civilian doctors suffered various injuries when debris from a Houthi drone fell on an ambulance point in the tourist city of Taba, South Sinai.

Bitter Memories

Despite all these losses, Cairo is still hesitant to participate in any direct military operations to deter the Houthis. This is not due to Egypt's absence in Red Sea security initiatives. In recent years, Egypt has upgraded and developed its navy and established the Southern Fleet to protect Egyptian security interests in the Red Sea. According to [Global Firepower \(https://www.globalfirepower.com/navy-ships.php\)](https://www.globalfirepower.com/navy-ships.php), Egypt has the strongest naval force among the Red Sea countries. Cairo has contributed to international efforts to secure navigation in the Red Sea by participating in the Combined Task Force 153, established in 2022 and even led it previously.

While the Combined Task Force was focused on combating smuggling, piracy, and countering illegal activities in the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Gulf of Aden, the "Prosperity Guardian" coalition was established in response to Houthi threats and Houthis' statements that they are targeting Israeli and American ships, although other ships have been targeted as well. Because this response by the Iran-backed group to the ongoing war in Gaza is part of their declaration of war on Israel, Egyptian participation in such a coalition would be considered a direct Egyptian intervention against the Houthis, which Egypt refuses.

Any public Egyptian participation in international naval efforts to secure the international shipping lane would be seen both domestically and regionally as indirect support for Israel in its military operations in Gaza. Cairo believes that it is more appropriate to work towards ending the military operations in the Gaza Strip and launching a political process, rather than opening a new front to expand the conflict in the Middle East.

In fact, this discomfort with active military engagement in Yemen is longstanding—Egypt has consistently avoided military intervention in the Yemeni civil war and prefers a diplomatic solution. While Egypt participated in Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm, it focused on support through its naval forces to secure the shipping lane rather than a significant troop deployment. This may be attributed to the tragic results and bitter memories of Egypt's

intervention in Yemen in the 1960s, which contributed to the weakening of Egypt's military power and its later defeat in the 1967 war. Today, amidst all these regional disturbances, Cairo sees it prudent to be cautious, and rightly so.

In an interview, Egyptian officials told us that Egyptian participation in the Red Sea coalition at this time would be interpreted as bias and indirect military support for Israel in the war in Gaza, especially amidst widespread public anger in Egypt and Arab countries due to the rising number of Palestinian casualties, with 25,000 killed and over 60,000 wounded, including many civilians—higher than any previous Israeli operation against the Palestinians.

Several Egyptian officials asserted that Cairo's stance in this regard is to reject Israeli military tactics in Gaza, which have resulted in a tremendous number of civilian casualties and the displacement of hundreds of thousands, besides Israeli obstinacy in allowing aid into Gaza, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. The officials emphasized that Egypt is instead working to calm the conflict and engage in mediation efforts for the release of Israeli captives and ensuring the entry of as much aid as possible.

Based on this stance, Cairo believes that expanding military operations by confronting the Houthis in Yemen will only complicate matters further. It also represents a threat to Egypt's credibility as a trustworthy mediator working towards de-escalation and the liberation of captives.

Egyptian officials added that it would be more feasible and less costly for the United States, Israel, and countries in the region and the world if Washington were to seek an end to the war and lift the siege on the people of Gaza, and reach a diplomatic and political solution that ultimately leads to a Palestinian state, thereby closing the circle of violence, rather than a military mobilization south of the Red Sea and prolonging military operations in the region.

Naturally, Cairo sees the need to end the war and reach a quick de-escalation to limit the worsening humanitarian crisis on the Egyptian border with Gaza, which has the potential to explode at any moment, especially under suggestions from certain segments of the Israeli government that Gaza's population be relocated to the Sinai, which Cairo has repeatedly and vehemently rejected. Egypt's calculus attempts to stymie the economic losses Egypt is suffering due to the war, in addition to the already volatile situation on all of Egypt's borders, whether in Sudan or Libya. Thus, expanding the scope of combat necessarily means prolonging the conflict, especially since the heavy U.S. and British military presence in the south of the Red Sea since the beginning of the war in Gaza has not been a deterrent factor for the Houthis, who have already launched drones and ballistic missiles at Israel.

Harmony with the Regional Stance

It may prove impossible for the U.S.-led coalition to secure the southern entrance of the Red Sea without the active participation of the Red Sea countries themselves, which are trying to distance themselves from entering an additional conflict that could further complicate matters.

No Arab country except Bahrain, which hosts the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, has officially joined the naval coalition. In particular, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, despite their previous wars against the Houthis, have not joined the coalition. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which owns 1811 km of the Red Sea coast, is clinging to the prospect of a peace deal; in Yemen, with increasing probabilities of major agreements between the Kingdom and the Houthis, as part of a broader Saudi-Iranian détente.

Yet it is worth mentioning that Vice Admiral Brad Cooper, commander of the U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, the Fifth Fleet, and the Combined Maritime Forces, had previously mentioned

(<https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3631484/navcent-commander-vice-admiral-brad-cooper-holds-an-off-camera-on-the-record-pr/>) during a virtual press briefing that some countries had joined the "Prosperity Guardian" coalition, but in an undisclosed manner.

Currently, even after the formation of the coalition, the Houthis continue their attacks despite the retaliatory U.S. airstrikes, signaling an escalation of the conflict and consequently more instability for navigation in the Red Sea, in addition to the possible opening of other fronts across the region. The erosion of American deterrence in the Middle East in general, the weak performance of the U.S. administration in managing conflicts in the region, and its attempts to appease Iran—which have already proven to be unsuccessful—have led to the strengthening of Iran and its regional proxies to the point where military action of this nature has a limited impact. These factors indicate the possibility that the conflict in the Red Sea could turn into yet another protracted conflict in the Middle East. These conflicts could end unfavorably for the forces of freedom and democracy, creating more sympathy for terrorist groups in the region and fueling the spread of anti-Western and anti-Semitic sentiments. ❖

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