

Maritime Security Threats and the Passage Regime in the Bab el-Mandeb

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Matter commented on: Maritime security threats and the passage regime in the Bab el-Mandeb

1 Introduction

The strait of Bab el-Mandeb separates Africa from the Arabian Peninsula and is an important element in the connection of the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea with the Indian Ocean. The Suez Canal interlinks the Mediterranean with the Red Sea, while the Bab el-Mandeb connects the Red Sea with the Indian Ocean. In Arabic, *Bāb al-Mandab* stands for “the gate of tears” ([Encyclopaedia Britannica](#)), which in the present-day context is a fitting name for a sea passage in a region that has borne tragic sufferings: a protracted humanitarian crisis and armed conflicts in Yemen, Somalia, and the Ethiopian province of Tigray, a brutal dictatorship in Eritrea, and genocide in Sudan.

At the same time, the Bab el-Mandeb is the world’s third-largest maritime oil chokepoint after the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca. The oil flow through the Bab el-Mandeb increased from 5.1 million barrels per day (b/d) in 2014 to 6.2 million b/d in 2018 which accounts for roughly a tenth of total seaborne-traded oil ([EIA](#), 2019). The Bab el-Mandeb bears particular strategic importance for Europe as most of the European Union’s (EU) maritime commerce with Asia crosses this narrow sea passage.

This blog post first discusses the passage regime in the Bab el-Mandeb. Second, it examines the threats posed by terrorism, piracy, civil war, and a hybrid naval war to international navigation through that strait. In this context, hybrid warfare is understood as a phenomenon “where a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures are employed in a highly integrated design” ([NATO](#), 2014, para 13; see also [NATO](#), 2021, para 3). This blog post shows that these threats to international shipping in the Bab el-Mandeb have emerged as waves. As soon as one threat starts to fade away, another emerges. Third, the blog post seeks to find out the main causes of the instability of international navigation through the geopolitically turbulent waters of the Bab el-Mandeb.

2 Geographical Characteristics of the Bab el-Mandeb

The geographic features of the Bab el-Mandeb are favourable to international navigation: it is a wide, deep and straight strait which does not have many islets or rocks that would significantly decrease the safety of navigation. At one of its narrowest points, between the Yemeni Perim Island (13 km²) and Djibouti’s Kadda Dabali Island (one of the Seven Brothers Islands), the strait is about 9.5 NM wide. Measured from Yemeni Perim Island to the mainland coast of Djibouti, the Bab el-Mandeb is 11.5 NM wide. Even in this narrow section of the Bab el-Mandeb, the depth of the strait mostly stays close to 200 metres or above ([Navionics ChartViewer](#)). The narrowest channel

between Perim Island and the Yemeni mainland coast is only about 1.5 NM wide. Its depths range from 10 to 31 metres and it is mainly used for local navigation, while the international sea lanes traverse the strait of Bab el-Mandeb proper.

At its narrowest point, between the coasts of Djibouti and Yemen's Perim Island, the Bab el-Mandeb includes Djibouti's Seven Brothers Islands (also referred to as Sawabi or Seba Islands). Djibouti has connected these small islands with its system of straight baselines ([Djibouti's 1985 Decree](#)). The longest straight baseline segments, respectively about 6.5 NM and 10 NM long, connect the islands of Ounda Komaytou and Kadda Dabali with Djibouti's mainland coast ([Marineregions.org](#)). The internal waters regime applies within the limits of the straight baselines around the Seven Brothers Islands (Art 8 of LOSC), but this does not have much significance for the passage regime in the Bab el-Mandeb. The international vessel traffic that follows the traffic separation scheme (TSS) in the Bab el-Mandeb runs northwards of the Seven Brothers Islands through the territorial sea of Djibouti and Yemen.

Map of the Waterways around the Arabian Peninsula



Source: [EIA](#), 2019.

The route via the Bab el-Mandeb and the Suez Canal is about 8 to 9 days shorter than the alternative route around the Cape of Good Hope as calculated on the basis of a ship's average speed of 16.43 knots ([BBC News](#), 29 March 2021). The significance of the Bab el-Mandeb for the global economy was illustrated by a shipping accident in the Suez Canal in March 2021. This incident involved one of the world's largest container ships, a Suezmax-class *Ever Given* that beached the bank of the Suez Canal and caused a six-days-long blockage of the Suez Canal. The cost of this blockage for the global commerce was estimated at roughly six to ten billion US dollars ([BBC News](#), 29 March 2021).

The free flow of maritime commerce via canals remains vulnerable to such incidents also in the future, particularly as the industry constructs ever bigger ships. It does not necessarily take a Suezmax-class of ship to block passage through the Suez Canal. Passage of ships through a canal can be blocked not only by means of grounding a vessel, but also due to scuttling a ship in the narrow fairway of a canal (the minimal width of the Suez Canal is about 200 metres). For example, in occupying Crimea in 2014, the Russian Federation blocked the passage of Ukraine's Navy ships from their naval base in Crimea to the Black Sea by means of scuttling a decommissioned cruiser *Ochakov* in the narrow channel that formed the port's fairway ([Los Angeles Times](#), 5 March 2014).

The *Ever Given* incident shows that it takes just one ship to significantly disrupt global commerce, particularly between Europe and Asia, reroute global commercial and military shipping to alternative trajectories (e.g. the Cape of Good Hope and, in the future, increasingly the Northern Sea Route) and cause a rise in the global oil price. In the context of hybrid conflicts, this constitutes a potential threat. For example, should a state deem that such outcomes advance its strategic aims, it could carry out a clandestine operation, e.g. by blocking the canal using a commercial ship, to reach its aims without necessarily having to bear state responsibility for such actions. Notably, in the case of the *Ever Given*, the Suez Canal Authority has made a claim of 916.5 million dollars against the owner of the ship ([Reuters](#), 22 May 2021). If successful, then such consequences will likely deter threats that emanate from potential clandestine operations aiming at blocking a canal.

3 Passage Regime in the Bab el-Mandeb

The Bab el-Mandeb connects the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of Djibouti, Yemen and Somalia in the Gulf of Aden on the one hand, and the EEZs of Eritrea, Yemen, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt in the Red Sea on the other hand. These States, except Eritrea, are States Parties to the UN Convention on the [Law of the Sea](#) (LOSC) ([UNDOALAS](#), 2021). Hence, similar to the legal regime of the Strait of Hormuz, the regime of transit passage applies in the Bab el-Mandeb under Article 37 of the LOSC.

However, since it is unclear whether the right of transit passage forms part of customary international law ([Kraska](#) 2013, p 360; [Mahmoudi](#) 1991, p 348), it is possible that Eritrea as a non-State-Party to the Convention might reject this liberal passage regime and instead respects the right of non-suspendable innocent passage in its waters leading to and from the Bab el-Mandeb ([Corfu Channel case](#), judgment, 28). This might cause problems near the Yemeni Hanish Islands and Eritrean islands where Eritrea's territorial sea is crossed by the international TSS. The TSS in the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb was adopted by a [1973 Resolution A.284\(VIII\)](#), "[Routeing Systems](#)" of the Inter-Governmental Maritime Consultative Organization (IMCO, nowadays IMO).

The sea passage between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden is less than 24 NM wide both in the area near Perim Island, where the territorial sea of Djibouti and Yemen overlap (the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb proper), and between the Yemeni Hanish Islands and the Eritrean mainland coast in the southern part of the Red Sea. In the latter part of the sea passage, the territorial sea of strait states, Yemen and Eritrea, overlap, thus satisfying the criteria of an international strait where the regime of transit passage applies. It can be considered as the northern limit of the strait of Bab el-Mandeb. It is located some 72 NM north of the southern limit of the Bab el-Mandeb near Perim Island ([Navionics ChartViewer](#)).

Both Eritrea and Yemen claimed title over Hanish Islands in the arbitration proceedings between the two states. Eritrea maintained that after gaining its independence from Ethiopia in 1991, it

acquired sovereign title to Hanish Islands and exercised authority over them ([1999 award](#) on the first stage of the proceedings, para. 29). After examining all relevant historical, factual and legal considerations, the Arbitral Tribunal decided in 1998 that Hanish Islands belong to Yemen (ibid, para 527). In support of this, the Tribunal found that “these islands fell under the jurisdiction of the Arabian coast during the Ottoman Empire; and that there was later a persistent expectation reflected in the British Foreign Office papers submitted in evidence by the Parties that these islands would ultimately return to Arab rule” (ibid, para. 508).

There is a fringe of Eritrean small islands/rocks located between the Yemeni Hanish Islands and Eritrean mainland coast. These islands/rocks include Harbi Island, Sayal Island, Flat Island, High Island, North East Haycock, South West Haycock, and South West Rocks ([1999 award](#) on maritime delimitation, map on p. 334). In the arbitration proceedings between Eritrea and Yemen, the Arbitral Tribunal decided that Eritrea has sovereign title over that fringe of islands ([1999 award](#) on the first stage of the proceedings, para. 527). South West Rocks and Haycock Islands are situated in the middle of the 7.5-km-wide buffer zone between the two traffic lanes of the TSS that has been established in this international waterway situated between the Eritrean fringe of islands/rocks and Yemeni Hanish Islands ([Navionics ChartViewer](#)).

Thus, for the sake of clarity and simplicity, it may be concluded that the regime of transit passage applies in the strait of Bab el-Mandeb in an area which is about 72 NM long. It is less than 10-NM-wide in two sections. First, between Yemeni Perim Island and Djibouti, the strait is 9.5 NM wide. Second, between Eritrea’s South West Rocks and the Yemeni Hanish Islands, the strait is only approximately 4 NM wide. In the latter part of the strait, there exists a roundabout route via the Abu’ Ali Channel between Hanish Islands and the Yemeni mainland coast that is at least 15.5-NM-wide.

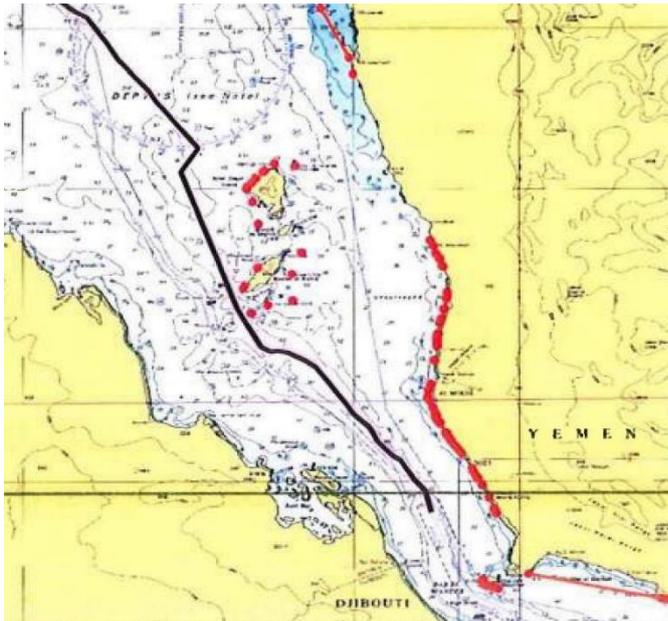
Therefore, in the maritime area around Hanish Islands, the TSS in the Bab el-Mandeb is divided into two alternative sections before reaching the EEZs in the Red Sea. This is significant because in case Eritrea would start impeding international navigation along the international shipping route in its territorial sea near the Haycock Islands and South West Rocks, then foreign ships and aircraft can use the alternative route to and from the Bab el-Mandeb via the Abu’ Ali Channel. This maritime area comprises Yemen’s territorial sea. Yemen appears not to have connected Hanish Islands by straight baseline segments with its mainland coast, as discussed below. In the Abu’ Ali Channel, the Yemeni territorial sea is crossed by international sea lanes, including a TSS ([Navionics ChartViewer](#)).

Map of the Bab el-Mandeb



Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#). The map serves an illustrative purpose only and is not necessarily completely accurate in relation to the delimitation of maritime boundaries in the area.

Pursuant to the 1977 Act on its maritime zones, Yemen has applied the method of straight baselines for measuring the breadth of its territorial sea (Section 5(f) of the [Act No. 45](#)). The 1977 Act was repealed and replaced with a new Act on Yemen's maritime zones in 1991 following the unification of Yemen in 1990 (Yemen's [Republican Resolution on Law No. 37](#)). In 2014, Yemen established the coordinates of 743 points that serve as the basis for measuring the breadth of its up to 12-NM-wide territorial sea in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean (Yemen's [Law No. 26 \(2014\)](#)). However, the 2014 law does not specify in which points around its coastline the method of straight baselines is used. In 2015, Yemen deposited a list of illustrative maps that depict its baselines in four maritime areas: Masamirit to Bab el Mandeb, Gulf of Aden, Ra's al Kalb to Ra's Marbāṭ, and Socotra Island ([M.Z.N.112.2015.LOS](#) of 7 January 2015). According to these maps, Yemen has drawn straight baselines around its coast in each of the aforementioned four maritime areas. Notably, however, Yemen appears not to have connected the islands located in the Bab el-Mandeb (Perim Island and Hanish Islands) by straight baseline segments with its mainland coast.



Source: A fragment of the map “Masamirit to Bab el Mandeb”, ([M.Z.N.112.2015.LOS](#) of 7 January 2015).

In effect, the 1.5-NM-wide maritime area in the Bab el-Mandeb between Perim Island and Yemen’s mainland coast does not comprise Yemen’s internal waters, but instead falls under the regime of territorial sea. In this narrow channel, foreign ships and aircraft enjoy the right of transit passage similarly to the Strait of the Bab el-Mandeb proper on the other side of the Perim Island. The so-called Messina exception of non-suspendable innocent passage (Arts 38(1) and 45(1)(a) of LOSC) does not apply to passage through this channel. The Messina clause provides for an exception to the regime of transit passage only in such straits that are formed by an island of a strait State and its mainland coast, if there exists seaward of the island a route through the high seas or through an EEZ of similar convenience with respect to navigational and hydrographical characteristics. The Strait of Bab el-Mandeb proper does not include a high sea or EEZ corridor between Djibouti and Perim Island.

Therefore, the legal regime of the Bab el-Mandeb is relatively clear and contributes to the stability of international navigation through the strait. As examined next, the main threat to international commerce and navigation in the area stems from geopolitical factors.

4 Terrorism and Piracy near the Bab el-Mandeb

Prior to the intensification of the Yemeni armed conflict in 2016, navigation through the Bab el-Mandeb was mainly under threat from terrorism and a widescale campaign of pirate attacks against international shipping in the Gulf of Aden and around Somalia’s coast in the Horn of Africa. In October 2000, the naval destroyer *USS Cole* was attacked in the Yemeni port Aden, some 80 NM east of the Bab el-Mandeb, by militants who were associated with the terrorist organisation Al-Qaeda, leaving 17 members of the crew of *USS Cole* dead and 39 more wounded ([Encyclopaedia Britannica](#)). The suicide attack was carried out by two Yemeni nationals who were trained in terrorist training bases in Sudan and used a rubber boat carrying over 200 kg of explosives ([BBC News](#), 13 February 2020). Two years later, in October 2002, al-Qaeda launched a similar suicide attack involving an explosive-laden boat against the French oil tanker *Limburg*, leaving the tanker’s

one crew member dead, 12 injured and the marine environment of the Gulf of Aden polluted with more than 90,000 barrels of oil (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

Since 2005, pirate attacks against commercial shipping in the Gulf of Aden (the Bab el-Mandeb's eastern approach) surged and the attacks doubled each year from 2007 to 2009 and continued to increase until 2011. This led Clive Schofield to conclude that: “/.../ in the 2009–2011 period Somali pirates were responsible for over half of global piracy attacks, making these waters the most dangerous in the world in terms of the threat of attacks against shipping” (in Caron and Oral (eds), [Navigating Straits](#), p 280). In 2008, the EU established its anti-piracy operation Atalanta (ongoing) in the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia based on a series of UN Security Council resolutions, including [Resolution 1816](#) and [Resolution 2316](#). This was followed by the establishment of the multinational Combined Task Force 151 (ongoing). In addition, NATO ran three anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden: The Allied Provider (in 2008), the Allied Protector (in 2009), and the Ocean Shield (2009–2016).

The intervention of navies of international coalition forces (among others the United States, the EU, China, Japan, the Russian Federation, and India) was successful. The rate of pirate attacks off the Somalian coast were reduced to 7 in 2013, while the number of total attacks was 24 in 2008, 163 in 2009, 174 in 2010, 176 in 2011, and 34 in 2012 ([EU Naval Force, Operation ATALANTA](#)). From 2014 to 2020, the number of total attacks ranged between 0 to 2 with the exception of 7 attacks in 2017 (ibid). Thus, the threat of pirate attacks in the Gulf of Aden was minimized in 2014, only to be replaced with a new menace to the stability of international shipping through the Bab el-Mandeb – the intensification of the Yemeni armed conflict in 2015.

5 Threats to International Shipping from the Armed Conflict in Yemen

The armed conflict between Yemen's Government and the Houthi forces has lasted nearly twenty years. Yemen's domestic political situation entered into turmoil when Houthi forces overtook Yemen's capital Sana'a in the end of 2014. Soon, the Houthi movement consolidated its control over much of the north-western part of Yemen bordering Saudi Arabia and the Red Sea. This region *grosso modo* overlaps with the area that formed the territory of the Arab Republic of Yemen, also known as North Yemen, between 1962–1990.

Yemen's internationally recognised President invited an international coalition to intervene in the Yemeni armed conflict. The coalition forces are led by Saudi Arabia and its other members including Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, and Sudan.

In 2017, with the backing of the United Arab Emirates, a new secessionist movement emerged in Yemen – the Southern Transitional Council. In 2018, with the military support of the United Arab Emirates, the Southern Transitional Council gained control over the strategic port town Aden ([Middle East Eye](#), 30 August 2019). This year, the Southern Transitional Council has actively campaigned for international support for holding an UN-mandated referendum on declaring the independence of South Yemen.

According to the United States' position, the Houthi forces are supported by Iran that provides Houthis with financial and material assistance, including small arms, missiles, explosives, and drones, complemented with military guidance and training ([The US Department of the Treasury's Press Release](#), 2 March 2021; [Drennan](#), 2018). In this context, the president of the Southern Transitional Council commented in 2021 that: “Without Iran's support the Houthis would have

been defeated very early on” ([The Guardian](#), 1 March 2021). However, as observed by [Qureshi](#) (at p. 248), Iran’s support falls short of direct control over the Houthi forces. Nonetheless, it illustrates the extent of the influence that Iran has over some of the world’s most important trade routes that pass through not only the Strait of Hormuz, but also the Bab el-Mandeb.

Soon after the intensification of hostilities in Yemen in the beginning of 2015, the UN Security Council adopted [Resolution 2216](#) under which it imposed an arms embargo by calling on states to adopt measures for the prevention of any supply, sale or transfer to Yemen, “from or through their territories or by their nationals, or using their flag vessels or aircraft, of arms and related materiel of all types” (para. 14). The Security Council also called upon states “to inspect, in accordance with their national authorities and legislation and consistent with international law, in particular the law of the sea and relevant international civil aviation agreements, all cargo to Yemen, in their territory, including seaports and airports” subject to reasonable doubt that such cargo breaches the arms embargo (ibid, para. 15).

The Security Council resolution was implemented, *inter alia*, by the establishment of the UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism (UNVIM) for Yemen, situated in Djibouti. Under this mechanism, commercial ships carrying cargo to the Houthi-controlled ports located on Yemen’s Red Sea coast, e.g. Hodeidah and Saleef, are required to apply for a clearance and are subject to inspection ([UNVIM](#)). Yet, reportedly most ships heading to the ports of Hodeidah or Saleef have been still held for weeks by the warships of the Saudi Arabia-led international coalition irrespective of whether they have received the UN clearance ([The Guardian](#), 22 March 2021). The arms embargo is particularly relevant in the light of claims that Iran supplies the Houthi movement with anti-ship cruise missiles ([Foreign Policy](#), 4 March 2021). Such alleged supplies enable to effectively destabilize navigation in and around the Bab el-Mandeb.

From 2015 to 2020, the main threat to international navigation in the Red Sea, the Bab el-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden stemmed from the Houthi movement. There have been numerous naval attacks from Houthi forces against the Saudi Arabian-led coalition forces in the Bab el-Mandeb and its approaches during the Yemeni armed conflict ([Weiss](#), 17 August 2019). For example, in 2017, three small explosive-filled and remote-controlled boats attacked a Saudi Arabian frigate *Al Madinah* west of the strategic Hodeidah Port and caused an explosion which killed two and wounded three crew members of the frigate ([Reuters](#), 30 January 2017; [Defense News](#), 19 February 2017). In May and July 2018, two Saudi Arabian VLCCs, respectively, the *Abqaiq* and *Arsan*, were attacked near the Yemeni port Hodeidah and resulted in Saudi Arabia suspending its tankers from crossing the Bab el-Mandeb ([Knights and Nadimi](#), 27 July 2018).

Furthermore, both warships and commercial ships under the flag of a neutral state have been repeatedly attacked near Yemen’s coastline ([The Maritime Executive](#), 3 October 2016; [The Maritime Executive](#), 4 October 2016; [Stars and Stripes](#), 13 October 2016; [USNI News](#), 15 October 2016). ; [Reuters](#), 3 November 2016; [Al Arabiya News](#), 27 October 2016; [Reuters](#), 11 May 2018; [Reuters](#), 23 February 2020). In addition to missile attacks and attacks carried out by small boats, including remote-controlled and suicide boats, the international navigation through the Bab el-Mandeb is threatened by naval mines that are placed by Houthi forces in the Red Sea. From 2015 to 2018, the international coalition forces disarmed close to 90 naval mines in the Red Sea ([Arab News](#), 25 November 2018). Some cargo ships have struck these mines in the Red Sea and they have caused casualties among local fishermen (ibid). Moreover, some floating mines that have been released by Houthi forces north of the Bab el-Mandeb have drifted southwards through the strait

into the Gulf of Aden, causing explosions in commercial vessels ([Knights and Nadimi](#), 27 July 2018; [The US Department of the Treasury's Press Release](#), 2 March 2021).

Currently, the Houthi forces advance in their offensive in northern Yemen against the internationally recognised Hadi's government ([The Guardian](#), 1 March 2021; [The Guardian](#), 7 May 2021). In this context, Saudi Arabia and the United States made ceasefire proposals to the Houthi rebels that involve the lifting of the blockade on the Houthi-controlled capital Sana'a and the Red Sea ports that they control ([The Guardian](#), 22 March 2021). The Yemeni peace process is fragile and already a new conflict has escalated in the region threatening international shipping in and near the Bab el-Mandeb.

6 The Israeli–Iranian Hybrid Naval Conflict and the Bab el-Mandeb

In the shadow of the armed conflict in Yemen, a hybrid naval warfare emerged between Iran and Israel in 2019. Reportedly, since 2019, Israel has carried out at least a dozen clandestine attacks in the Red Sea and other maritime areas around the Arabian Peninsula against Iranian-flagged oil tankers heading to Syria ([The Wall Street Journal](#), 11 March 2021). Similarly, in the summer of 2019, a series of attacks and intrusions against commercial ships were conducted in or near the Strait of Hormuz, for which Iran was widely held responsible ([Reuters](#), 14 June 2019). The first attack against Iranian-flagged tankers occurred only a few months later, in October 2019, when the *Sabiti* tanker was subjected to an apparent missile or limpet mine attack in the Red Sea near the mainland coast of Saudi Arabia, leaving two holes above the ship's waterline ([BBC News](#), 14 October 2019).

Iran has allegedly also carried out attacks against Israeli commercial ships in the waters around the Arabian Peninsula. For example, in late February 2021, an Israeli cargo ship *Helios Ray* sustained damage from explosions that hit her from both sides in the Gulf of Oman; Israel's Prime Minister attributed this attack to Iran ([The Guardian](#), 1 March 2021). Only a month later, an Iranian missile hit Israeli-flagged container ship in the Arabian Sea ([The New York Times](#), 7 April 2021).

April 2021 marked the escalation of the hybrid naval warfare between Israel and Iran as an alleged Israeli clandestine operation targeted for the first time an Iranian military ship (ibid). A United States' official confirmed to the media that Israel had notified the United States about the attack (ibid). The mine attack left two holes below the water line of an Iranian-flagged cargo ship *Saviz* that, according to media reports, was used in the Red Sea at least since 2016 for military purposes ([The Guardian](#), 7 April 2021). According to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, she was deployed in the Red Sea to combat pirates in and near the Bab el-Mandeb. At the time of the attack, the *Saviz* was situated near the Eritrean Dahlak archipelago in the Red Sea. A recent incident involved the Iranian largest warship *Kharg* that caught fire and sunk off the port Jask near the Strait of Hormuz in June 2021. However, it is not clear whether it was an accident or a coercion by a foreign State ([The Guardian](#), 2 June 2021).

In defiance of the United States and European Union-sanctioned oil embargo ([Reuters](#), 17 September 2020; [Council of the EU](#), 17 May 2019), Iran has continued to ship oil to Syria. This leaves Iran dependent on the safe passage of its ships through the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb and the Suez Canal. Iran could use the alternative route around the Cape of Good Hope for transporting oil to Syria, but this is not necessarily a safer trajectory for reaching the eastern Mediterranean. In July 2019, the tanker *Grace 1* that carried approximately 2 million barrels of Iranian oil to Syria in breach of the sanctions was seized by the United Kingdom's marines in the Strait of Gibraltar

([Time](#), 4 July 2019). *Grace 1* was released over a month later, in August 2019, on the condition that it will not travel to Syria which both the captain of the ship and the flag State (Iran) confirmed ([BBC News](#), 15 August 2019). The April 2021 attack against the Iranian oil tanker near the Syrian province Tartus shows that Iranian oil tankers encounter also in the Mediterranean significant impediments to their passage to Syrian ports even if they have successfully transited the straits of Bab el-Mandeb or Gibraltar ([Al Arabiya](#), 24 April 2021).

It remains to be seen how the 3-years-long maritime hybrid warfare between Israel and Iran in the maritime areas around the Arabian Peninsula will impact international shipping in the straits of Bab el-Mandeb and Hormuz in the future. The previously examined maritime incidents demonstrate that, geopolitically, the maritime security in the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea is interlinked. For example, attacks against foreign ships in the Strait of Hormuz can have repercussions in the maritime security of the other parts of the region, e.g. the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb. By now, the field of operations of the armed forces of Israel and Iran has spread throughout the long waterway from the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean.

7 Conclusion

The Bab el-Mandeb is geopolitically the most sensitive chokepoint of international navigation in the long waterway that comprises the Strait of Gibraltar, the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden. The Bab el-Mandeb strait is long (over 70 NM) and deep (mostly over 200 metres), but narrow. In two sections, between Yemeni Perim Island and Djibouti as well as between Eritrea's fringe of islands and the Yemeni Hanish Islands, the strait is less than 10 NM wide as measured from the relevant baselines. This implies that ships that exercise their right of transit passage in the Bab el-Mandeb can relatively easily be targeted by missiles, mines, remotely controlled explosive-laden boats and other means of arms that have been frequently employed by terrorists, pirates, rebels and other armed forces for disrupting international trade and shipping in the region.

In the beginning of the 21st century, the vulnerability of shipping in the Bab el-Mandeb was marked by a series of terrorist and pirate attacks against commercial ships and warships. Currently, the Bab el-Mandeb is mostly impacted by an armed conflict that has been characterized as a proxy war in one of its key strait states, Yemen. In addition, the passage of ships through the strait has been impeded by the on-going Israeli-Iranian hybrid naval warfare that has been marked by a series of missile and mine attacks mostly against commercial ships in the waters leading to the Bab el-Mandeb. Currently, the prospects of the geopolitically turbulent waters of the Bab el-Mandeb for returning to times of tranquillity look distant.