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The Red Sea Flashpoint: Chokepoints, Militias, and Maritime Risk

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Source: ECFR[2]

Introduction

On 28 February 2026, coordinated American and Israeli airstrikes under Operation Epic Fury struck Iran's military facilities, nuclear infrastructure, and leadership, killing Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and triggering the most consequential maritime crisis since the 1973 oil embargo. Iran's immediate response was to close the Strait of Hormuz through which, in peacetime, approximately twenty percent of the world's traded oil and twenty percent of its liquefied natural gas transits daily.[3] Tanker traffic through the strait collapsed from its normal volume to near zero within days. Oil prices surged to approximately $115 per barrel before the fragile two-week ceasefire mediated

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[2] https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/RedSeaMapping_Cover_169.jpg
[3] Wikipedia, "2026 Strait of Hormuz crisis," last modified April 17, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Strait_of_Hormuz_crisis.

by Pakistan on 8 April 2026 produced a temporary, contested reopening.[4] Even as that ceasefire frayed almost immediately, Iran re-closing the strait within hours after Israeli strikes on Lebanon continued and even as Iran's Foreign Minister declared the strait "completely open for the remaining period of ceasefire" on 17 April, the episode had already accomplished something structurally significant: it forced strategists, energy markets, and governments to confront, with urgent clarity, the second maritime chokepoint in the same regional system.[5]

That second chokepoint is the Bab al-Mandeb Strait — the "Gate of Tears" in Arabic — a passage of barely thirty kilometers at its narrowest, separating Yemen from Eritrea and Djibouti at the southern entrance of the Red Sea. The argument of this commentary is straightforward but under-appreciated in mainstream strategic discourse: the Hormuz crisis has not resolved the Red Sea's structural fragility. It has, in fact, compounded it. The simultaneous or sequential closure of both straits would constitute a dual chokepoint crisis of historically unprecedented severity. The Red Sea's specific danger profile which is defined by a militia with demonstrated anti-ship capabilities, a patron state facing existential pressure, and a global shipping corridor already weakened by two years of conflict, demanding analytical attention that the current fixation on Hormuz has not yet adequately provided.

The Architecture of Chokepoint Vulnerability

The concept of a maritime chokepoint designates something analytically precise: a narrow navigational passage whose geography has no meaningful substitute and whose disruption produces costs distributed far beyond the immediate belligerents. The Strait of Hormuz and the Bab al-Mandeb together constitute an interlocking chokepoint system for the Gulf to Mediterranean energy corridor. Noam Raydan of The Washington Institute has described both passages as critical for the global economy, carrying ships, container vessels, oil tankers, and carriers connecting different regions and continents.[6] What the current crisis has revealed is how the interdependence of these two passages can be weaponized: the Saudi Arabia-built East–West

[4]Fortune, "Iran closes strait, challenges U.S. to rein in Israel," April 9, 2026, https://fortune.com/2026/04/09/iran-closes-strait-hormuz-ceasefire-fragile-israel-bombing-lebanon/.
[5]CBS News, "Iran accuses U.S. of violating ceasefire as Israeli attacks on Lebanon continue," April 2026, https://www.cbsnews.com/live-updates/iran-trump-ceasefire-strait-hormuz-israel-war-hezbollah-continues/.
[6]Noam Raydan, quoted in Time Magazine, "What to Know About the Bab El-Mandeb Strait," April 8, 2026.

Petro-line pipeline, designed as a Hormuz bypass, terminates at the Red Sea port of Yanbu—meaning oil diverted to avoid Hormuz must still pass through Bab al-Mandeb to reach Asian markets.[7]

Source: Chatham House[8]

The International Energy Agency estimated that in 2025, approximately 4.2 million barrels of crude oil and petroleum liquids crossed Bab al-Mandeb per day, representing roughly five percent of global production.[9] This figure already represented a dramatic decline from the 9.3 million barrels per day recorded in 2023, before the Houthi campaign began in earnest.[10] In other words, the Red Sea corridor entered the 2026 Hormuz crisis already operating at roughly half its pre-conflict capacity. The redundancy that might have insulated the global system against compound shocks had already been consumed.

[7]The Conversation, "Why a second global shipping chokepoint could soon live up to its name as the 'Gate of Tears,'" April 15, 2026, https://theconversation.com/why-a-second-global-shipping-chokepoint-could-soon-live-up-to-its-name-as-the-gate-of-tears-279548.

[8] https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/styles/12_6_media_huge/public/reader-content/archive/epubs/563/cover-image/2017-06-27-chokepoints.jpg?h=8e49891a&itok=76xuTw2I

[9]International Energy Agency (IEA), cited in The Conversation, "Why a second global shipping chokepoint could soon live up to its name as the 'Gate of Tears,'" April 15, 2026.

[10]U.S. Energy Information Administration, cited in Time Magazine, "What to Know About the Bab El-Mandeb Strait as Iran Threatens to Restrict Another Key Trade Passage," April 8, 2026, https://time.com/article/2026/04/08/bab-el-mandeb-strait-iran-houthis-threat-trade-hormuz-war-ceasefire/.

Ambassador Mohamed A. Qubaty has framed this convergence in geoeconomic terms: *in a globally interconnected economy, disruption of trade routes and energy flows generates economic shockwaves far beyond the immediate theater of conflict, with insurance premiums rising, shipping routes shifting, freight costs escalating, and energy markets reacting instantly to signals of instability.*[11] The IEA Director Fatih Birol made this concrete on 16 April 2026, warning that Europe had approximately six weeks of jet fuel remaining if the Strait of Hormuz did not reopen, with some transatlantic flights potentially cancelled as a result.

The Houthis as a Strategic Actor: Asymmetry, Autonomy, and the Iran-Proxy Nexus

Understanding the Red Sea's specific risk profile requires disaggregating a common misconception that the Houthi movement is simply Iran's instrument, to be switched on or off according to Tehran's calculus. The relationship is more structurally complex, and its complexity matters for risk assessment. Jon Alterman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies has described the Houthis as a paradox: a rag-tag military operating on a minimal budget that, without representing a state, has nonetheless imposed costs on global trade that major naval coalitions have struggled to reverse.[12] Iran did not create the Houthi movement, but it has long seen it as useful.

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[11] Ambassador Mohamed A. Qubaty, "Hormuz and Bab al-Mandeb: The Geopolitics of the Twin Maritime Chokepoints," Eurasia Review, April 14, 2026, https://www.eurasiareview.com/14042026-hormuz-and-bab-al-mandeb-the-geopolitics-of-the-twin-maritime-chokepoints-analysis/.

[12] Jon Alterman, "A Strategic Approach to Red Sea Security," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, 2024, https://www.csis.org/analysis/strategic-approach-red-sea-security.

Source: NBC news[13]

Since November 2023, the Houthis attacked more than 178 vessels, sank four ships, and killed nine sailors in a sustained campaign that Alterman's colleague Mona Yacoubian of CSIS described as pioneering the use of asymmetric capabilities to disrupt maritime traffic.[14] The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency reported in June 2024 that the campaign caused a ninety percent decrease in container shipping through the Red Sea between December 2023 and February 2024, affecting twenty-nine energy and shipping companies across sixty-five countries and forcing rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope, adding approximately eleven thousand nautical miles, ten days of travel, and one million dollars in fuel costs to each voyage.[15]

By 2025, the group had recalibrated. ACLED's year-end review recorded only seven Houthi attacks on commercial vessels in 2025, compared to one hundred and fifty in 2024—a decline it attributed to strategic recalibration rather than diminished capacity.[16] The Houthis had, in the interim, launched one hundred and twenty-five strikes on Israeli soil in the first eleven months of 2025—a one hundred and twenty percent increase over 2024—while simultaneously surviving

[13] https://media-cldnry.s-nbcnews.com/image/upload/t_fit-560w,f_auto,q_auto:best/rockcms/2026-03/260318-houthi-mb-1016-e82d75.jpg

[14] Mona Yacoubian (Director, Middle East Program, CSIS), quoted in Military Times, "Amid focus on Strait of Hormuz, experts sound warning on Yemen's Houthis and Red Sea," April 14, 2026.

[15] U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency report, cited in Wikipedia, "Red Sea Crisis," June 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Sea_crisis.

[16] Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), "Regional Power Struggles Fuel Simmering Tensions Across the Red Sea," December 2025, https://acleddata.com/report/regional-power-struggles-fuel-simmering-tensions-across-red-sea.

Israeli decapitation strikes targeting their leadership.[17] This is the adversary that now controls the western coast of Yemen overlooking Bab al-Mandeb: battle-hardened, institutionally resilient, and embedded within an Iran-centric network that gives Tehran leverage without requiring direct command and control.

Elisabeth Kendall, President of Girton College at Cambridge, has emphasized that asymmetric warfare suits the Houthis intrinsically: they need not be accurate or sophisticated, only sufficiently persistent to harass shipping and achieve the goal of disrupting trade. The Houthis are seasoned fighters who have been at war, on and off, for over twenty years, and whose battle logic treats war as a way of life rather than an emergency departure from normalcy.[18] The TRT World Research Centre has framed this in structural terms that the Houthis exemplify a model of networked warfare in which relatively low-cost actors generate high-impact systemic disruption by targeting critical nodes within global trade and energy networks.[19]

The question of whether the Houthis will re-enter the conflict in the current crisis is, therefore, not simply a function of Iranian orders. Burcu Ozcelik of the Royal United Services Institute has noted that the group's restraint since the February 2026 strikes reflects strategic patience, not absence from the conflict, with internal factionalism dividing hard-liners "spoiling for a fight" from those who argue that consolidating control over Yemeni territory should take priority.[20] The CFR's Global Conflict Tracker has recorded that the Houthis explicitly warned they would intervene militarily in the Iran war if regional countries allied against Iran, the Red Sea was used to conduct hostile operations against Iran, or escalation against the Axis of Resistance continued.[21]

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[17] ACLED, "Regional Power Struggles Fuel Simmering Tensions Across the Red Sea," December 2025.
[18] Elisabeth Kendall (President, Girton College, University of Cambridge), quoted in Military Times, "Amid focus on Strait of Hormuz, experts sound warning on Yemen's Houthis and Red Sea," April 14, 2026, https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2026/04/14/amid-focus-on-strait-of-hormuz-experts-sound-warning-on-yemens-houthis-and-red-sea/.
[19] Burak Elmali, "Weaponizing Connectivity: The Iran War and the Rise of Chokepoint Warfare," TRT World Research Centre, April 2026, https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/publications/analysis/weaponising-connectivity-the-iran-war-and-the-rise-of-chokepoint-warfare/.
[20] Burcu Ozcelik (Senior Research Fellow, Royal United Services Institute), quoted in NBC News, "Why the Red Sea could be the next choke point for the global economy," April 2026, https://www.nbcnews.com/world/iran/red-sea-choke-point-global-economy-rcna264045.
[21] Council on Foreign Relations, "Conflict in Yemen and the Red Sea," Global Conflict Tracker, updated April 2026, https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-yemen.

The Maritime Risk Calculus: Insurance, Routing, and Economic Cascades

The commercial shipping industry functions through risk pricing, and it is the insurance market that most acutely translates geopolitical threat signals into structural economic costs. During the 2023–2024 Houthi campaign, war-risk insurance premiums for Red Sea transits rose from roughly 0.125 percent of ship insurance value to as high as 2 percent. As of January 2024, most marine insurers had already required warranties of no Israeli involvement to cover vessels on the Red Sea route, with some demanding warranties of no U.S. or U.K. interest and no calls to Israeli ports in the preceding twelve months.

The practical consequence was the progressive commercial closure of a corridor that remains technically navigable. By March 2024, over two thousand ships had diverted routes away from the Red Sea, making costlier voyages, since the first Houthi attack the previous November. Traffic through the Suez Canal fell from 2,068 transits in November 2023 to approximately 877 in October 2024. Suez Canal revenue to Egypt dropped by an estimated forty percent—a destabilizing macroeconomic shock for a country already under severe fiscal strain.[22]

The current Hormuz closure has superimposed an additional shock on this already-damaged system. Bab al-Mandeb transits had already hit a record low in June 2025, down sixty-five percent from June 2023, before any re-escalation connected to the Iran war.[23] South Korea's government—which on 17 April 2026 announced that one of its vessels had transported crude oil through the Red Sea for the first time since the Hormuz closure, using an alternative route from Saudi Arabia's Yanbu port—illustrated both the desperation for alternative routing options and their inherent vulnerability.[24]

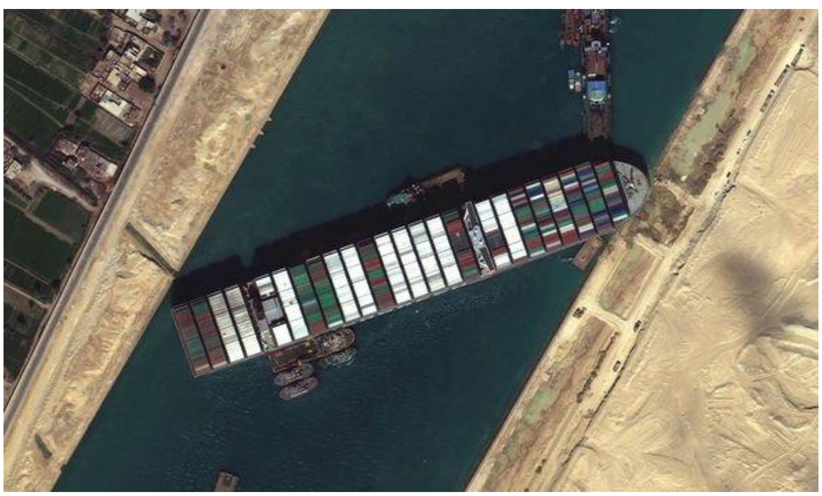
[22]Frontiers in Political Science, "Environmental Impacts of the Houthis' Attacks Against Commercial Shipping in the Red Sea," November 30, 2025, https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/political-science/articles/10.3389/fpos.2025.1711643/full.

[24]NBC News live updates, "Iran declares Strait of Hormuz 'completely open'," April 17, 2026, https://www.nbcnews.com/world/iran/live-blog/live-updates-israel-lebanon-ceasefire-trump-iran-talks-hormuz-summit-rcna332294.

The compounding logic is important: the effective closure of both Hormuz and Bab al-Mandeb simultaneously would constrain maritime access on both sides of the Arabian Peninsula. The TRT World Research Centre has articulated this scenario as a dual chokepoint crisis in which even alternative energy routes face heightened risk—Saudi Arabia's East–West pipeline, designed to bypass Hormuz, terminates at Yanbu on the Red Sea, and oil from that exit point still must pass through Bab al-Mandeb to reach Asian markets.

Weaponizing Connectivity: The New Grammar of Coercion

The strategic logic underpinning both the Hormuz closure and the persistent Houthi threat to Bab al-Mandeb reflects a structural transformation in the grammar of coercion. For much of the twentieth century, strategic pressure in the Middle East was expressed through conventional warfare, territorial control, and military alliances. What the current conjuncture demonstrates, with unusual clarity, is the emergence of a different register: the weaponization of connectivity.



Source: Daily Express[25]

TRT World Research Centre analyst Burak Elmali has described this transformation as a model in which deterrence is no longer anchored solely in military retaliation but in the threat of systemic disruption. Control over chokepoints allows actors to impose diffuse but far-reaching costs, effectively linking localized conflict dynamics to global economic stability. For Iran, this logic has

[25] https://cdn.images.express.co.uk/img/dynamic/78/590x/secondary/Suez-Canal-in-numbers-2975192.jpg?r=1616922195652

operated at two levels simultaneously: direct control over Hormuz as an instrument of existential deterrence against the United States and Israel, and indirect leverage over Bab al-Mandeb through the Houthis as a reserve card to be deployed when direct confrontation reaches its limits.

A senior Iranian source told Reuters on 7 April 2026 that "if the situation gets out of control, Iran's allies will also close the Bab al-Mandeb Strait." This statement is strategically legible: it signals that Bab al-Mandeb is held in reserve as a second-order pressure instrument, to be activated if the Hormuz gambit fails to extract sufficient concessions or if escalation on the Iranian front intensifies beyond manageable thresholds. What it implies for international order is more troubling: it normalizes the targeting of civilian economic infrastructure as a modality of interstate coercion, in direct violation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the principles underpinning UN Security Council Resolution 2722 of January 2024.

The Frontiers in Political Science journal has characterized the Houthi campaign as a good example of the changing nature of traditional maritime security threats: an armed non-state actor with no navy that has partially seized control of one of the world's most important chokepoints, demonstrating that states are no longer the sole dominant actors in maritime security. The Washington Institute's tracking data confirmed that the Houthis, during the 2023–2025 phase, effectively turned the Bab al-Mandeb into an anti-access/area-denial zone—a concept previously associated exclusively with major state militaries.[26]

The Multipolar Dimension: Russia, China, and the Limits of Western Deterrence

The Red Sea crisis cannot be adequately understood without situating it within the broader multipolar contest over regional order. ACLED's regional analysis of 2025 identified the Red Sea as a space where African, Gulf, Middle Eastern, Asian, and global powers converge, making escalation in this arena hugely destabilizing for shipping.[27] This convergence has taken concrete institutional forms. The Wall Street Journal reported in July 2024 that U.S. officials had identified increasing indications that Russia was considering arming the Houthis with advanced anti-ship

[26] Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "Houthi Shipping Attacks: Patterns and Expectations for 2025," December 16, 2024, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-shipping-attacks-patterns-and-expectations-2025.

[27] Ahmed Soliman (Senior Research Fellow, Chatham House), quoted in NBC News, "Why the Red Sea could be the next choke point," April 2026.

missiles via Iranian smuggling routes, and that Russia's GRU had stationed personnel in Houthi-controlled Yemen to assist with targeting commercial ships.

China's position is structurally ambivalent but consequential. China Ocean Shipping Company and its container subsidiary OOCL had halted services to Israel following Houthi pressure, and Beijing's participation in Pakistan-mediated ceasefire efforts reflects its stake in restoring maritime stability for its own trade routes through Bab al-Mandeb and the Suez Canal. Yet China has also refrained from endorsing U.S.-led military operations aimed at restoring freedom of navigation, maintaining a studied equidistance that effectively constrains the breadth and legitimacy of Western counter-operations.

The limits of Western deterrence are starkly evidenced by the operational record. Since January 2024, the U.S.-led Operation Prosperity Guardian and the EU's Operation Aspides have conducted strikes against Houthi infrastructure and intercepted weapons. U.S. Central Command intensified operations under Operation Rough Rider in 2025, with carrier-borne F-35C stealth aircraft deployed for the first time against Houthi targets. Yet the Washington Institute's assessment confirmed that the impact on Houthi military capabilities remained limited—and Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's April 2026 statement that the Houthis have thus far "stayed out of" the Hormuz crisis likely reflected deterrence by example rather than structural incapacitation.[28]

Conclusion

The Hormuz closure of 2026 has performed a clarifying function. It has demonstrated, at scale and in real time, that the weaponization of maritime chokepoints is not a theoretical risk category but an operational practice now embedded in the strategic doctrine of at least one major regional power and its network of non-state partners. It has shown that the costs of such closures—measured in oil price spikes, jet fuel shortages, insurance paralysis, and rerouting-induced inflation—are borne globally and disproportionately by states that have no agency in the underlying conflict.

But the Hormuz crisis has also illuminated the Red Sea's persistent fragility with an urgency that the 2023–2025 Houthi campaign, for all its disruption, had not fully registered in strategic capitals.

[28] PBS NewsHour, "Why a U.S. blockade on Iran seems to be working," April 16, 2026, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/why-a-u-s-blockade-on-iran-seems-to-be-working.

The Bab al-Mandeb's vulnerability is not hypothetical: it was operationally demonstrated for two years, reducing one of the world's principal shipping corridors to a fraction of its pre-conflict capacity. The Houthi movement that produced that outcome remains intact, capable, and conditionally restrained—not disarmed or defeated.

Ahmed Soliman of Chatham House has observed that the Red Sea corridor is a space where African, Gulf, Middle Eastern, Asian, and global powers converge, and that escalation in this arena would be hugely destabilizing for shipping.

Three structural conclusions follow. First, maritime chokepoint security must be elevated from an operational concern of naval commands to a first-order consideration of national security planning in every state dependent on seaborne energy and trade. Second, the deterrence architecture designed for conventional state-versus-state naval confrontation is structurally inadequate for the hybrid, proxy-mediated, asymmetric threat profile that Bab al-Mandeb now represents. Third, and most uncomfortably, the two-week ceasefire that produced a partial, contested opening of Hormuz has resolved nothing in the Red Sea. It has, at best, deferred the flashpoint.

The current Red Sea crisis reveals a shift in global dynamics: maritime chokepoints and militias are now primary tools of statecraft, proving that shipping security is no longer a niche concern but a central pillar of the global political economy.