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The Red Sea Crisis And Political Equity Of Non-State Armed Actors

Pranav Nair

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1. Abstract

In today's codependent world, conflict in one part of the world has serious repercussions in another part. The recent Red Sea crisis is just another example of this. But what is different about it is that the powers involved in this are not just foreign democratic states but also violent non-state actors like Houthis and Hamas. The following paper analyzes the rise of non-state actors and their role in society followed by a deep dive into the Red Sea crisis. The paper will first look into what are non-state actors and the geographical importance of the Red Sea. This will be followed by a glance at the recent rise of non-state actors and how they affect global society with the help of three case studies of Taliban, Hamas, and Hezbollah. After this, the paper will provide a brief history of what led to the rise of the Houthi movement. Then the paper delves into the Red Sea crisis in depth including its timeline, how the Israel-Palestine war caused it and the role the US and Iran have played in it. Furthermore, the paper inspects how this crisis is affecting some of the major powers of the world. Finally, the paper will conclude with some recommendations on how the crisis can be solved, and how the Red Sea area can be kept stable in the future.

Keywords: Red Sea crisis, non-state actors, Houthis, Hamas, Taliban, Hezbollah, Israel-Palestine war, U.S., Iran.

2. Introduction

Although the Red Sea¹ is known for its natural beauty with extensive coral reefs it is also an important shipping route for the oil tankers through the Suez Canal. A glance at the map of the Middle East shows the great strategic importance of the Red Sea. In a few words, it is the heart of the area and the link between two worlds. Even before the Suez Canal came into being, the Sea had been of importance serving as a bridge between the richest areas of Europe and the Far East.

The Red Sea region



Image Source-[Britannica](#)

¹ [The Red Sea is a semi-enclosed body of water located between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean.](#)

After the construction of the Suez Canal, this new seaway replaced the older route around the Cape of Good Hope. Consequently, the region has become an important route for the transportation of oil from Bab el-Mandeb in the south to the Canal in the North. Its ports are used to transport Gulf oil. This newfound importance will continue as long as oil remains a primary source of energy which seems to be true for the near future. Additionally, the Red Sea is also a vital route for military forces to their bases in different parts of the world. Due to this and other exogenous factors it is surrounded by regional powers having their mutual disagreements. Regional conflicts in the Red Sea affect international interests and in this way could escalate into a full-fledged war involving the multiple powers who share a vested interest in it. This is slowly becoming a reality in the past decades. Several powers, particularly the United States are interested in the Red Sea and the developments along this waterway. Therefore, the Red Sea is an important theater for both regional and international conflict.

3. Analysis of the Rise of Non-State Actors and Their Bloody Wars for Political Equity

The rise of non-state actors in global politics has far-reaching consequences for foreign policy. From the Taliban in 2021 gaining control of Afghanistan to the rise of the Houthis in Yemen, non-state militant actors have over the past five years gained more political and geopolitical equity in the global order. In the geopolitical tussle between the West, China, and Russia, combined with a trend towards a multipolar world order, non-state militant actors have plenty to choose from, in aligning interests with these powers. These shifts in the behavior and capacities of non-state militant actors, many of whom are sponsors of terrorism, are forcing arbitrary, ad-hoc, and short-term implementation of security policy.

A. Who are Non-State Actors:

Non-state actors are more difficult to define than states. A non-state actor at its most basic level is simply just a group with economic, political, or social power. These can be non-governmental organizations like the Red Cross, but the definition the paper considers is the one that includes politically violent actors such as the Taliban or Hamas. They can have a variety of interactions

with the state some constructive but most violent. For example, some states purposefully outsource some of their tasks to non-state actors. One such example is Hezbollah's extensive educational services and health care provision. In this case, non-state actors become the representatives of community interests like Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen who claim to represent Shia interests. Arab states have also used non-state actors to further their interests in opaque ways. Like, Hezbollah operates as Lebanon's legitimate resistance against Israeli occupation. In more antagonistic forms, the non-state actor challenges the regime in place by legitimizing its existence and disproving the state's capacity to deliver. Examples are those that seek mainly to destabilize the state (Al-Qaida) or even to replace an existing one (ISIS), whereas others (Houthis) seek to control the state in which they operate.

B. Taliban:

The Taliban began as an armed group by the Afghan Sunni Muslim Clerics, who were former anti-soviet fighters, in the 1990s out of Afghanistan's civil war. These former fighters chose the name Taliban(a student of Islam). The Taliban quickly lost international and domestic support due to its imposed strict adherence to Islam and the harsh punishments it employed, including public executions. However, it was the Taliban's sheltering of Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden that led to its downfall. When President George W. Bush demanded that the Taliban hand over Al Qaeda leaders who were responsible for the 9/11 attacks, the Taliban leaders refused. The U.S. began its military action in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, and by November 13, the Taliban had evacuated Kabul, which U.S.-backed Afghan forces retook. However, by 2005, the scattered Taliban forces had begun to regroup in southern and eastern Afghanistan. In 2018, President Trump ordered direct U.S.-Taliban talks without the Afghan government. Those talks culminated in February 2020 with an agreement that stated the withdrawal of all U.S. and international forces by May 2021, and the Taliban's duty to prevent other groups, like Al Qaeda from using Afghan soil to attack the U.S. and its allies. In May 2021, the Taliban began solidifying its hold on the country by capturing the country's rural areas. On August 15, 2021, it entered Kabul, completing its takeover of the country. In taking over Afghanistan, the Taliban came into possession of a large amount of equipment supplied by the United States to the former Afghan government. These weapons have reportedly been handed down to Pakistani militant outfits by the Taliban to cause havoc in India. However, reports now indicate dissension in the Taliban ranks, largely between

the group's political wing, who advocate for greater inclusion of Afghan society and international recognition, and its military wing who oppose such compromises. Even if the Taliban succeeds in preventing factional infighting, its exclusive approach to governing may carry risks of inspiring insurgency against its rule.

C. Hamas:

Hamas is a Palestinian Sunni Islamist military and sociopolitical movement. Hamas's center of action is in the Gaza Strip, which it has controlled since 2007. The organization emerged in 1987 in Gaza during the first Palestinian intifada. After the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) entered into a peace process with Israel, Hamas established itself as an alternative to the PLO. Hamas's ideology combines Palestinian nationalism with Islamic fundamentalism. Observers differ on the extent of Hamas's pragmatism. Hamas's 1988 charter talks about the destruction of Israel and the establishment of an Islamic state in Palestine. However, the group also publicly released a document in 2017 stating that Hamas's conflict is with the "Zionist project" rather than with the Jews. Hamas reportedly receives assistance and training from Iran and its allies. Its social welfare network appears to have aided its popularity among Palestinians while helping fund its military operations. On October 7, 2023, Hamas led a surprise assault against Israel that killed some 1,200 Israelis and foreign nationals and took around 240 people hostage. The ensuing conflict, which has reportedly killed more than 25,000 Palestinians in Gaza², has reshaped Middle Eastern dynamics, with implications for the entire world.

D. Hezbollah:

Hezbollah is a powerful political and militant organization in Lebanon made up mainly of Shia Muslims. Hezbollah has risen from obscure roots to become Lebanon's most powerful political and military force. It was conceived in 1982 by a group of Muslim clerics after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Hostility to Israel has remained the party's defining platform ever since, with the party calling for the destruction of the state of Israel. However, in the past decade, Hezbollah has fought in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen on a scale that completely dwarfs its forty-year struggle against Israel. The party has long been supported by Iran, which provided it with arms and money. Hezbollah's current popularity amongst the Lebanese public can be summarized by a video that was leaked on

² [Palestinian death toll in Gaza surpasses 25,000 while the prolonged war divides Israelis](#)

6th August 2023. The video showed furious residents of a village in southeast Lebanon blocking two Hezbollah vehicles from passing through and beating the plainclothes Hezbollah men. This incident showed the world that the national consensus over Hezbollah's "resistance" against Israel has long ago ended, with the Lebanese population resenting an organization that is ideologically beholden to another country—Iran—and one that unilaterally determines matters of war and peace. Financial issues also have been a burden for Hezbollah, especially since 2006, when the organization grew massively in manpower. Corruption has also taken root in Hezbollah, a concept that was considered next to impossible twenty-five years ago.

4. A Historical Perspective into the Rise of the Houthis

A. Yemeni Civil War (1994):

The modern Yemeni state was formed in 1990 with the unification of the U.S. and Saudi-backed Yemeni Arab Republic, in the north, and the USSR-backed People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, to the south. Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had ruled North Yemen since 1978, assumed leadership. Saleh secured his power by playing various factions off one another. This ultimately led to a battle for the secession of the socialist south from the unionist north led by Saleh. The war was short resulting in the defeat of the South, but the most prominent outcome of this was that the North was supported by the Sunni Wahabbis for which it was rewarded in the form of important seats in the Yemeni government. This created fear in the minds of the Shia Zaidis, who were a minority, that their voices were being suppressed.

B. Emergence of the Houthis(2004-2015):

The Houthi movement is an Islamic fundamentalist movement in northern Yemen. They call themselves Ansar Allāh ("Defenders of God"). The more popular term, Houthi, refers to its founding figure, a Zaydī activist named Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi. He was a Zaidi member of the parliament who founded a society called the Believing Youth. Though the government initially supported it, its growing criticism of Saleh drew the ire of the government. As the movement grew Saleh's government began cracking down on the Zaidi members. This eventually led to the death of Hussein al-Houthi by Yemeni forces. As a reaction to this, the movement became stronger than ever, acquiring weapons from the black market and becoming violent. This insurgency in the north

combined with the ever-present unrest in the south led to the toppling of the Saleh government in 2012.

C. Yemeni Crisis(2011-Present):

Following Saleh's resignation in 2012, his vice president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi became the President. But he too was against the Houthi movement. This resulted in Saleh changing his tune and supporting the Houthis. In 2014 Hadi cut down on fuel subsidies resulting in protests by the Yemeni people. However, in September when Yemeni forces opened fire in the capital, Sanaa, Houthis fought back capturing parts of the city within a month. With the help of Saleh and his military loyalists Houthis successfully overthrew the Hadi government. Hadi fled to the city of Aden in 2015 and asked the Saudi government for their help. Thus began the Yemeni war. The war which was supposed to last for a few months, has dragged on till now. The Houthi rebellion has been sustained in part by its control of the port city of Hodeidah, through which it received most of its imports and revenue. On top of this Houthis have become more sophisticated, due to the weapons and training given by Iran. By early 2020, the Houthis had gained an upper hand over Saudi due to the adverse impact of COVID on the Saudi economy. Following a ceasefire in 2022 and Hadi's resignation, Saudi began to hold direct talks with the Houthis in 2023. The talks were reported to be going well and an agreement was almost reached between the two parties. However, this progress was disrupted on 7th October 2023, when Hamas attacked Israel, thus shaking up the entire Middle East region and moving the Houthis to its next phase.

5. Red Sea Crisis(2023)

The Red Sea Crisis officially began on 19th October 2023 when the U.S. Navy destroyer USS Carney shot down missiles that were launched toward the Southern Israeli border by the Houthis. The Houthis justification for this was that they were showing solidarity with their brothers in Palestine. In the coming days, it would continue to fire missiles, though these attempts would prove to be unsuccessful due to the efforts of the U.S., Israel, and Saudi Arabia. However major concerns were raised over the potential of the war expanding into a greater regional conflict when the Houthi fighters began attacking ships passing through the Red Sea thereby disrupting global

shipping. The Houthis rhetoric was that any ship owned by Israeli companies would be targeted so that water and medical supplies could reach Palestine and the bombing of Gaza could be stopped.

A. Israel-Palestine War:

On 7th October 2023, Hamas attacked Israel from the land, sea, and air, on a scale that had not been seen before. This resulted in the death of more than 1200 people making October 7th the deadliest day in Israel's history. On top of this, Hamas took more than 200 people hostage. All of this led to Israel officially declaring war on Hamas. The birth of Israel and its hostile relationship with Palestine and Hamas specifically is one of the most documented works in the world. Hamas is supported in its cause by the "axis of resistance" which includes Iran, Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and crucially the Houthis of Yemen. Hamas' attack was met with a swift reaction from Israel. Within a few days of the attack, Israel gathered up a force of 350000 and started conducting air raids on Palestine. This was not all, it followed a scorched earth policy, cutting the 2 million Palestinians in Gaza off of electricity, food, and even water. This resulted in the deaths of over 25 thousand Palestinians by February. All of this led to skirmishes with Hezbollah near the Lebanese border and the attack on the southern Israeli border by the Houthis with the help of Iranian drones and missiles as well as the crisis in the Red Sea.

B. United States-Iran Proxy War:

The crisis can be seen as a branch of the broader United States-Iran proxy war. The two global superpowers have been in a power tussle ever since the Iranian revolution 1979. Relations between the two countries have soured in recent years with the U.S. pulling out of the Iran nuclear deal and the assassination of Major General Qasem Soleimani by U.S. forces. In the past few months, things turned even more violent with the bombing of the U.S. military bases in Syria, Jordan, and Iraq by Iran-backed militias. In the analysis of the Red Sea crisis, clear connections emerge between the Houthis, Iran, and Hezbollah. Reports have emerged of Iran increasing its shipment of drones and anti-ship and medium-range missiles to the Houthis since the start of the Israel-Palestine war.³ The reason for this is simple. Iran craves to be the leader of the Middle East and yearns for a U.S.-free Middle East. The United States for its part has been busy with blocking the Houthi attacks from Israel all while protecting its strategic interest. The United States launched dozens of strikes against

³ [Iranian and Hezbollah commanders help direct Houthi attacks in Yemen](#)

the Houthi rebels in January 2024 in coalition with the United Kingdom. This coalition which it calls Operation Prosperity Guardian(OPG) is the U.S.'s primary way of fighting back against the Houthis and Israel. It consists of more than 20 member nations and tasted its first taste of victory on 12th January 2024 when it launched the first of many airstrikes on the Houthi bases in Yemen.

C. The Indian Stance:

The crisis has profoundly impacted India as most of its exports to Europe are through the Bab-el-Mandeb strait. So peace in the region is crucial for India's economy and energy supply. Despite this, India has continued with its strategy of non-confrontation, choosing not to be part of any military initiatives. Instead, the Government of India has chosen to resolve this dispute diplomatically as highlighted by the meeting between the Indian External Affairs Minister and the President of Iran. As a result of this meeting, the two countries released a joint statement, in which they said they emphasized the importance of preventing further escalation of violence and hostilities. The external affairs minister said that India has a long-standing and uncompromising position against terrorism in all forms and manifestations. But at the same time, India strongly believes that it is imperative to avoid loss of civilian life in any conflict situation.⁴ Additionally, MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal held a press conference on 18th January where he answered a question about the crisis. He stated that India's interests are being impacted; however, the Indian Navy is patrolling the area. He also said The Indian Navy was striving to secure the sea lanes and make every effort to ensure that India's economic interests were not affected..⁵ By this, he meant the destroyers INS Kolkata, INS Mormugao, and Vishakhapatnam on top of INS Kochi that India had already placed in the region for maritime security.

6. Global Stakeholder Perspective

A. Iran:

The Iran-Houthi relationship has existed for as long as the Houthi movement has existed. However, since 2015, the Houthi-Iran relationship has improved significantly, enabling the Houthis to

⁴[Joint Press Statement by EAM, Dr. S. Jaishankar with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran](#)

⁵[Transcript of Weekly Media Briefing by the Official Spokesperson \(January 18, 2024\)](#)

effectively threaten the Yemeni government and the broader Middle East. The relationship between these two goes far beyond mere similarities in religious ideology. The two have built a relationship that is likely to endure for a long time, as Iran views the Houthis as an extension of its regional power and the Houthis look to Iran to enhance their military capabilities. In the Houthis, Iran sees an opportunity to destabilize the entire Middle East region thereby curbing the increasing influence the U.S. has been accruing in the region. With Iran's weapons and the Houthis ruthlessness, this could be a combination that shifts the power balance in the Middle East from Saudi to the hands of Iran.

B. India:

India had emerged as one of the top exporters of petroleum and petroleum products to Europe in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine war. However, due to the constant onslaught that the cargo ships have been facing in the Red Sea the amount of petroleum exported by India has decreased by 70% from December to 111500 barrels per day in February⁶. Although the effects of inflation due to this crisis haven't been felt in India to a large extent this can be expected to change in the coming months if the crisis doesn't subside. This is because almost 90% of western hemisphere cargo that used to go through the Red Sea is now getting re-routed through the Cape of Good Hope⁷. This longer shipping time along with raised prices could cause significant inflation in the country. In addition to this, Somalia-based pirate groups have exploited the chaos generated by the Houthi militia and increased their attacks rapidly in the Gulf of Aden and the Western Arabian Sea after a lull of almost six years. To combat this the Indian Navy has embarked on its largest deployment in the Gulf of Aden and the Western Arabian Sea. India's unprecedentedly large naval fleet in the region consists of 12 warships, with two advanced vessels deployed in the Gulf of Aden and the remaining 10 in the Northern and Western Arabian Sea. This effort by the Indian Navy has already bore fruit, with the navy helping at least four merchant vessels that were attacked on the high seas by Houthi forces. The most recent of these rescue efforts happened on the 16th of March 2024, when the Indian navy took control of the Maltese-flagged MV Ruen, which was hijacked by Somali pirates, and evacuated the 17 crew members on the vessel with the help of drones, navy vessels, and marine commandos.

⁶ [Red Sea Crisis: India's petroleum exports to Europe nosedive to 18-month low in January](#)

⁷ [How has Red Sea trouble impacted India? | Explained](#)

C. U.S.A.:

The importance of the Red Sea to the U.S.A. is highlighted by the lightning-fast speed with which it launched its Operation Prosperity Guardian(OPG). The reason this operation was launched was to protect the U.S.A.'s strategic interest in the Red Sea region. Saudi Arabia-U.S. relations are at an all-time high with the U.S. importing an average of more than 550000 barrels of oil per day from Saudi⁸. Also, given the Houthis' very public disdain for Israel, and America's eternal friendship with the country due to strategic reasons, OPG ensures that Israel remains protected throughout the crisis. Considering this perspective, it becomes apparent that the OPG is just a machinery of the United States government to protect its interests rather than a vehicle to protect the global trade order. Despite this, the reactions to U.S. efforts by Americans themselves are as varied as the reactions of the global community. The United States Congress though initially accommodative of President Biden's actions has recently been becoming impatient. In the wake of France's declaration that their priority is to escort French-linked vessels after facing nationalistic pressure, the Congress has also called for the U.S. flagged vessels to be prioritized over others. Besides this, three senators from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee have expressed their concerns about the potential for escalation in the region and the risk of another war in the Middle East and underscored that any sustained military action against the Houthis must require a vote of Congress.

D. Europe:

In 2022 around 23% of the EU's imports came from Asia, most of them through the Red Sea. Between the start of the attacks and the first half of February, the average transit trade volumes through the Red Sea fell by 70%, while trade volumes through the Cape of Good Hope increased by 60%.⁹ So it is quite clear that the disruption in trade caused by the crisis has made a significant dent in the European economy. Not only has the EU repeatedly condemned the Houthi attacks on commercial ships but several EU Member States are already contributing to the US-led Operation.

⁸ [U.S. petroleum imports from Saudi Arabia from 2000 to 2022](#)

⁹ [NAVIGATING TROUBLED WATERS IMPACT TO GLOBAL TRADE OF DISRUPTION OF SHIPPING ROUTES IN THE RED SEA, BLACK SEA AND PANAMA CANAL](#)

E. China:

Although China has been quite fervent in showcasing its power throughout the world and the Middle East in particular, it is quite interesting to note that in the past few months, nothing has been officially heard from Beijing. There hasn't been any concrete plan of action proposed even though the blockage undoubtedly hampers China, the world's largest exporter and the second biggest importer. One potential explanation may be that China perceives this issue as a result of actions taken by the U.S., and is thus leveraging this situation to hold the U.S. accountable. Another reason could be that China has maintained relations with both the Yemeni government and the Houthi rebels due to Yemen having a lot to offer to China. Be it the ever-precious oil or lucrative infrastructure opportunities in the country, China won't lose them by siding with one of the parties.

7. Recommendations

After considering the perspective of the Houthis, it becomes evident that there is a need to engage in constructive collaboration with them. Besides the Houthis, the Red Sea will remain a contentious area in the future so our focus should not just be on the Houthis but on the area as a whole. The following recommendations will help in implementing the above measures and curb the problem of non-state actors disrupting the world in general.

- A. **The Iran issue-** It cannot be forgotten that the might of Houthis is nothing without the arms and training of Iran. Time and time again it has been seen that sanctions seem not to affect Iranian activities. The way forward is undoubtedly a round of talks between the U.S. and Iran to the same magnitude that led to the signing of the Iran nuclear deal. The U.S. and Iran have too many differences to be solved in one sitting but both parties should come together to at least stop the atrocities being committed in the Red Sea for their mutual benefit.
- B. **A Red Sea Forum-** The idea of a Red Sea forum is not new. It was initially floated around in 2018. The purpose of the forum is to establish a convocation, where concerned parties come together to discuss shared interests and come up with common solutions. However, the recent crisis has highlighted the importance of inviting non-state actors to this forum. Any forum that includes just the democratic governments would firstly not come up with any peaceful solution to the problem and secondly, in the case of the Middle East, it is seen that these actors

are the voices of a majority who have grievances with the government. The benefits of the forum are obvious and numerous. Both the Middle East and the world would benefit from the stable trade of goods and services in the region. Besides this, the forum could also help build ports and handle the immigration crisis caused by the civil wars in the regions.

- C. **Operation Prosperity Guardian-** Although the military initiative by the United States did have some initial success, its major flaws lie in the names who have opted to stay out of it. The biggest among them being Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Saudi for its part wants to broker a deal with the Houthis to end its long-standing war. Egypt on the other hand is maintaining a delicate balance in the Israel-Palestine war and cannot afford to mishandle the situation. Whatever the case may be the absence of those two has hamstrung the operation. Moving forward the alliance should try to bring these powers into the fold so that they have a say in their matters and more importantly this new OPG should have a round of peaceful talks with the Houthi rebels to ensure that no such crisis ever arises in the future. The U.S. should also make sure that its fight against Houthis should not start a war in Yemen or else it might risk it becoming the new Afghanistan.
- D. **Interaction with non-state actors-** Political thinkers differ in their views on how to deal with non-state actors. Realists think that states are the dominant actors in the international system, with non-state actors just acting as subsidiaries. They believe that states have the ultimate authority and that non-state actors cause a fragmented and less accountable international order. On the other hand, liberals argue that non-state actors have counterbalanced state-centric power relations and have helped in the advancement of human rights, global health, and environmental protection. Whatever the case one thing is certain, the role of non-state actors is ever-evolving and they will continue to play a dominant role in global politics.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, through the above paper, it can be seen that the tussle between non-state actors and the government for political equity is going to be a constant. In some cases, it is seen that

governments use non-state actors for their benefit whereas in others it may be seen that the non-state actors become a pseudo-government entity. Keeping this in mind it is extremely important that the world as a whole interacts with them in the first place and does so cautiously. The Red Sea crisis may have been caused by the oppression of minorities in some countries but make no mistake this certainly won't be an isolated incident. It is vital that there is a Red Sea forum to make sure that such an incident doesn't arise in the area again and it is even more vital that it is not dominated by Western powers and the regional powers both state and non-state get more say in their affairs. Looking at our own country, India, while this issue was quite far from our border, there's storm-brewing in both the western and eastern parts of our country due to the volatility of those regions and the numerous terrorist organizations they possess. Hence it is important that India not only plays a vital role in the development of the world but also keeps a watchful eye on its borders to make sure that the Indian Ocean Region doesn't turn into the next Red Sea.

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