



COULD US/ISRAELI-IRAN WAR SET OFF A BAB EL-MANDEB FLASHPOINT?

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INTRODUCTION

The military attacks launched against Iran by the U.S. and Israel on Feb. 28, 2026, can at first glance be seen as a new phase in the power struggle centered on Tehran. However, this development should be

read not only as an operation targeting Iran's military capabilities, but also as a multilayered geopolitical rupture that could simultaneously affect the deterrence architecture of the proxy network defined as the "axis of resistance," the Red Sea security architecture, and the subregional balance of power in the Horn of Africa.

Therefore, the issue is not a crisis limited to the Iran-Israel-U.S. triangle; it is a process that could redefine security, trade and sovereignty dynamics across a broad geography stretching from Bab el-Mandeb to Assab, and from the Gulf of Aden to Mogadishu.

The main research question of this study focuses on whether U.S.-Israel attacks against Iran will trigger a new cycle of militarization in the southern Red Sea or lead to a prolonged period of uncertainty through controlled deterrence. Three main lines of argument emerge in addressing this question. The first is Iran's capacity to close its deterrence gap through proxy actors and its implications for Bab el-Mandeb. The second is the new security architecture that could emerge on the African coast following Israel's recognition of Somaliland, and how this will be perceived by the Houthis and Iran. The third is how the military buildup in the Red Sea could affect land geopolitics in the Horn of Africa, particularly Ethiopia's quest for access to the sea and the balance along the Eritrean line.

In this context, the article puts forward three hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that although the Houthis' current rhetoric points to a strategy of "controlled deterrence" rather than direct military escalation, their approach of maintaining Bab el-Mandeb's potential for escalation as a means of pressure keeps alive the risk of permanent militarization. The second hypothesis is that possible security cooperation between Israel and Somaliland could move Somaliland beyond being merely a diplomatic actor and draw it into a proxy war dynamic, with the potential to generate new instability in the Horn of Africa. The third hypothesis is that as the crisis

in the Red Sea drags on, Ethiopia is increasingly likely to bring the issue of access to the sea to the fore as a "geostrategic necessity," using harsher tools and creating a risk that could escalate from controlled tension to actual conflict on the Ethiopia-Eritrea front.

In this context, the article discusses four main scenarios:

1. The Houthis limiting themselves to symbolic solidarity and postponing military engagement, causing the crisis to enter a phase of "prolonged uncertainty";
2. The permanent militarization of the Red Sea with the resumption of hybrid naval attacks in Bab el-Mandeb;
3. Israel-Somaliland security cooperation turning the African coast into an indirect conflict zone;
4. Ethiopia taking advantage of the distraction created by the Red Sea crisis to attempt to create a *fait accompli* along the Eritrean border, opening up a land front.

Based on this, the study analyzes whether a military crisis that appears to be centered in Iran will actually lead to a multilayered geopolitical realignment along the Red Sea-Horn of Africa axis. The aim is to assess the risk of regional escalation not only in military terms, but also in the context of economic fragility, sovereignty disputes and subregional power hierarchies. In this regard, the study seeks to show how a small trigger can lead to large-scale strategic consequences in a geography oscillating between open warfare and controlled tension.



Iran-backed Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Sarea speaks at a news conference in Sanaa, Yemen, March 11, 2022.

IS THERE A NEW CYCLE OF MILITARIZATION IN BAB EL-MANDEB?

The military attacks launched against Iran by the U.S. and Israel on Feb. 28, 2026, should be seen not only as an operation targeting Iran's military infrastructure, but also as a process testing the strategic future of the regional proxy network known as the "axis of resistance." In this context, the crisis has the potential to produce a chain reaction that could directly affect the security architecture of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, going beyond a Middle East-centered military tension.

Targeting Iran's direct military capacity creates a need for Tehran to reestablish its deterrence, and how this need will be met is a critical question. While a conventional,

large-scale response by Iran could rapidly escalate regional warfare, generating asymmetric pressure through proxy actors offers a lower-cost and more sustainable option. At this point, Yemen's Ansarullah (Houthis) emerges as the most critical variable in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and Gulf of Aden equation.

However, Abdulmalik al-Houthi's speeches on Feb. 28 and March 2, 2026, indicate a deliberate departure from the expected "immediate military escalation" scenario at first glance. While the Houthi leader conveyed a message of "full solidarity" and "readiness for any developments" with Iran, he did not announce the resumption of naval operations. Although he characterized Iran's attacks on U.S. bases as a "legitimate right," he did not directly declare war; instead, he emphasized mass mobilization, a media campaign, and

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symbolic solidarity.

This situation points to three possible strategic interpretations:

1. By not yet resuming naval attacks, the Houthis are adopting a position of "controlled deterrence," a strategy that maintains the threat of potential engagement rather than actual military action.
2. The Houthis' decision to increase rhetorical solidarity while suspending actual naval operations following the attack on Iran's leadership suggests the possibility of a coordinated escalation contingent on guidance from Tehran.
3. It is possible to exert psychological influence on maritime insurance markets and logistics chains even without initiating military activity in the Red Sea. Indeed, as seen after Oct. 7, 2023, the Houthis' threat capacity alone led to significant increases in energy prices, freight rates and insurance premiums.

From this perspective, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait is not merely a zone of military pressure for the Houthis; it is a strategic lever capable of gener-

ating significant economic and geopolitical impact at low cost. The possibility of hybrid methods such as unmanned aerial vehicles, ballistic missiles, and port sabotage returning to the table remains on the military agenda; however, at this stage, it appears that a deliberate distance is being maintained between rhetorical escalation and actual engagement.

However, Bab el-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden are not merely a Yemen-centered security issue. The U.S. Camp Lemonnier base in Djibouti, China's military logistics facility, the European Union's naval task force, and the growing naval presence of Gulf countries have already transformed this route into a multi-actor power projection arena. The emergence of new deployments under the guise of protecting commercial routes following the U.S.-Israel attacks could turn the Red Sea from a low-intensity proxy conflict zone into a more visible arena of military competition.

If Iran-linked actors target commercial interests in the Gulf of Aden, the southern entrance to the Red Sea could become permanently militarized. However, current Houthi rhetoric indicates that, at least in the short term, a "standby" strategy is preferred over direct escalation. This suggests



U.S. President Donald Trump said he had ordered a "major attack" against the Houthis in Yemen, March 16, 2025.

that the crisis may enter a phase of "prolonged uncertainty" rather than a sudden military outbreak.

This prolonged state of uncertainty is already having economic consequences. As seen after Oct. 7, 2023, energy prices, freight costs, and war-risk insurance premiums may rise sharply. For global trade passing through the Suez Canal, this situation creates significant financial pressure, particularly for Egypt. The diversion of maritime traffic around the Cape of Good Hope could lead to steep declines in Suez Canal revenues, strain Egypt's foreign exchange reserves, and contribute to upward pressure on global inflation.

In summary, at this stage, the Houthis' rhetoric reflects an approach of retaining the potential for escalation as a strategic bargaining chip rather than an intent to initiate a naval war. However, given the current military density and multi-actor presence in the Red Sea, even a minor triggering event

could transform the Bab el-Mandeb Strait into an actual crisis zone. The region is, therefore, walking a fine line between open war and controlled tension.

HORN OF AFRICA: THE SOMALILAND AND ETHIOPIA-ERITREA SCENARIO

While Israel's recognition of Somaliland may appear at first glance to be a diplomatic development, it could have consequences that place Somaliland directly on the front lines of regional power competition if backed by actual security cooperation. Somaliland's strategic location and port infrastructure in the Gulf of Aden offer significant advantages for maritime surveillance, early warning, and electronic intelligence. However, these same advantages also make it a potential target.

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lished between Israel and Somaliland, the situation would likely be interpreted by the Houthis, and indirectly by Iran, as a new type of threat. In such a scenario, Somaliland would not merely be a diplomatically recognized actor but could be seen as part of Israel's "forward observation and defense line" at the southern entrance to the Red Sea. This perception could increase the risk of attacks extending from the Yemeni coast toward African shores.

Although it seems unlikely that Iran would directly target Somaliland, based on Abdulmalik al-Houthi's statements, it is more probable that Iran would exert indirect pressure through the Houthis in Yemen. Given the Houthis' past capacity to target commercial vessels and port infrastructure, Somaliland's ports, energy facilities, or radar installations could become potential targets for such pressure. This proxy approach would allow a strategic message to be sent without constituting a direct attack on Israel.

However, the situation is more complex for Somaliland. For a political entity seeking international recognition that has not yet gained widespread diplomatic acceptance, becoming an indirect front in the Israel-Iran conflict poses serious risks. Given that the over-

whelming majority of Somaliland's population is Muslim and that the regional public is sensitive to the Palestinian issue, open security engagement with Israel is likely to spark domestic controversy, potentially straining internal stability and social legitimacy.

More importantly, Somaliland's actual involvement in the conflict equation could also hinder its quest for independence. The Somali central government may frame such security cooperation as a "violation of sovereignty" and intensify its diplomatic campaign. Similarly, the African Union and regional actors may view Somaliland's participation in a military power struggle as a destabilizing development, further complicating its pursuit of international legitimacy. For this reason, it would be rational for Somaliland to approach any engagement, particularly one involving military or intelligence dimensions, with caution.

On the other hand, the escalation of Israeli and U.S. attacks against Iran into a chain reaction of security crises along the Red Sea corridor could have consequences that reshape not only maritime trade security but also land-based geopolitics in the Horn of Africa. In particular, the increased military presence in



Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki meet in Saudi Arabia, hosted by the kingdom, following the recent peace process, Sept. 16, 2018.

the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden, while drawing international attention toward crisis management centered on Iran, could reinforce a “perception of strategic opportunity” for certain actors regarding potential vacuums in regional power balances. In this context, Ethiopia’s quest for access to the sea has moved beyond being merely an economic or commercial logistics issue; it is increasingly framed as a “geostrategic necessity” tied to national security, energy supply security, and great-power competition over the subregional hierarchy.

The fact that access to the sea has been increasingly framed in harsher security rhetoric in the Addis Ababa administration’s discourse in recent years suggests that Ethiopia may evaluate alternative port options not only through diplomatic negotiations but

also by exploiting conjunctural advantages that arise during crisis periods. An escalating conflict along the U.S.–Israel–Iran axis in the Red Sea could divert the international community’s attention to another front, creating a “window of chaotic opportunity” for initiatives aimed at establishing limited yet effective de facto positions in the Horn of Africa.

In this scenario, a direct, large-scale Ethiopian military operation against the port of Assab in Eritrea would carry high short-term risks and costs. Given Eritrea’s military mobilization capacity, the geographical challenges of the border, and the likelihood of an international backlash, a comprehensive operation could expose Addis Ababa to serious risks of diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions. However, intermediate scenarios short of direct occupation appear

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First, given the recent escalation of the Tigray issue, a strategy of controlled military pressure or “limited escalation” along the border could come to the fore. This approach might aim to create a de facto security zone through small-scale border violations, military buildup, or attempts to establish buffer zones under the pretext of security.

Second, the possibility of deploying proxy networks to exert indirect pressure through local actors within Eritrea or border communities should not be overlooked. Such a model could aim to weaken Eritrea’s security capabilities without constituting a direct declaration of war.

The third and more complex scenario involves the imposition of economic or security-based “de facto access” models in the vicinity of Assab. In the event of disruptions to maritime trade or increased security risks along the Djibouti route, Ethiopia could propose temporary access arrangements involving international actors, citing energy supply security or humanitarian logistics as justification. Such a de facto situation could eventually evolve into a permanent change in status.

From Eritrea’s perspective, however, such developments would be perceived as a matter of regime security. The likelihood of a harsh military response from the Asmara administration could trigger a rapidly escalating conflict along the Ethiopia–Eritrea border. This situation has the potential to generate a multi-front crisis, affecting not only the two countries but also the fragile post-Tigray balance, the Sudan border, and the security architecture along the Red Sea coast.

Consequently, as an Iran-centered crisis in the Red Sea drags on, competition for access to the sea in the Horn of Africa could intensify. It appears more likely that Addis Ababa will pursue strategies of gradual pressure and the creation of facts on the ground rather than direct occupation. However, given the current military buildup and regional vulnerabilities, even limited escalation could quickly spiral into a large-scale Ethiopia–Eritrea conflict, dragging the Horn of Africa into a multidimensional zone of instability where maritime security crises converge with land-based conflicts.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR TÜRKIYE

From Türkiye’s perspective, developments along the Bab



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan holds a joint news conference with Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in Ankara, Türkiye, Dec. 12, 2024.

el-Mandeb corridor are not merely a matter of maritime security; they constitute a risk area where the emerging geopolitical dynamics along the Red Sea-Horn of Africa axis directly affect Ankara's economic, military, and diplomatic engagements. When the spillover of the U.S.-Israel-Iran crisis into the Red Sea, the Houthis' oscillation between controlled deterrence and actual escalation, the potential for the Israel-Somaliland axis to take on a security dimension, and the likelihood of the Ethiopia-Eritrea issue intensifying are considered together, three fundamental levels of strategic implications emerge for Türkiye.

First, the context of maritime trade, energy supply security, and logistical vulnerability. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a critical transit point for Türkiye's Asia-Africa trade routes. Even if the Houthis merely

resume maritime operations or raise the threat level, this could lead to higher insurance premiums, increased freight costs, and the diversion of some routes around the Cape of Good Hope. In this scenario, even if Turkish commercial vessels are not directly targeted, they would face indirect cost pressures from regional uncertainty and military tensions. In terms of energy transportation, disruptions along the Red Sea route could trigger upward fluctuations in global oil and LNG prices. For an energy-importing country like Türkiye, this represents not only a commercial concern but also a macroeconomic vulnerability. Therefore, instability in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait should be assessed by Ankara not only in security terms but also as an issue of economic security.

Any escalation along the Bab el-Mandeb corridor represents not merely a maritime security issue for Türkiye; it also entails economic costs, the sensitivities of military engagements on the ground, and an expansion of its diplomatic mediation role.

Second, there is Türkiye's security engagement in Somalia and the Somaliland factor. Türkiye's military training, capacity-building, and defense cooperation efforts in Somalia aim to strengthen the institutional capacity of the Mogadishu administration. However, if Israel's recognition of Somaliland and the potential deployment of security infrastructure create new tensions in Somali domestic politics, Türkiye's role on the ground could face a more delicate balancing act. While positioning itself as an actor supporting Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, Türkiye must also avoid being perceived as a party to regional escalation. If Somaliland comes under indirect pressure from the Houthis or Iran-linked actors, security priorities in Somali domestic politics are likely to harden, and the military tone may intensify. This could push Türkiye's capacity-building activities onto a more security-focused and higher-risk trajectory.

Furthermore, should Somaliland be drawn into the regional conflict through security cooperation with Israel, the Somali central government is highly likely to adopt a tougher diplomatic and political stance. While this scenario would make Türkiye's strategic part-

nership with Mogadishu even more critical, it could also force Ankara to contend indirectly with the spillover effects of the Israel-Iran rivalry. Consequently, for Türkiye, a policy of balance has become essential not only along the Somalia-Ethiopia axis but also in managing tensions between Somalia and Somaliland. Third, there are the challenges the Ankara Process will face amid the escalating crisis. Launched by Türkiye to de-escalate tensions between Somalia and Ethiopia, the Ankara Process initially aimed to manage disputes over port access between the two countries. However, an escalating crisis in the Red Sea and potential tensions along the Ethiopia-Eritrea border are expanding this process into a broader framework of regional crisis management.

If Ethiopia attempts to accelerate the issue of maritime access by exploiting the chaotic environment, and even a limited escalation occurs along the Eritrea border, the Ankara Process could evolve from a bilateral mediation effort into a multilateral security dialogue. At that point, Türkiye will need to maintain balanced diplomatic communication not only with Somalia but also with Addis Ababa and Asmara. This, in turn, would place Türkiye's

role in the Horn of Africa in a more visible yet simultaneously more fragile position.

In conclusion, any escalation along the Bab el-Mandeb corridor represents not merely a maritime security issue for Türkiye; it also entails economic costs, the sensitivities of military engagements on the ground, and an expansion of its diplomatic mediation role. Ankara will need to pursue a policy of balance, risk management, and multi-layered diplomacy throughout this process. As uncertainty in the Red Sea persists, Türkiye's role in the Horn of Africa will become more strategic, but it will require a cautious approach amid an intensifying geopolitical competition.

CONCLUSION

Although the U.S. and Israeli attacks on Iran on Feb. 28, 2026, may appear on the surface to be a bilateral military standoff, analysis indicates that the development has paved the way for a multi-layered security breakdown along the Red Sea-Horn of Africa axis. The key finding is that, while the crisis has not yet escalated into a full-scale regional war, the "potential for escalation" along the Bab el-Mandeb corridor has become a strategic pressure tool.

The first finding is that the Houthis have opted for a strategy of controlled deterrence by consciously maintaining a distance between their rhetoric and actions. Statements made on Feb. 28 and March 2 indicate that direct naval operations have not resumed. This suggests that an extended period of uncertainty is more likely than a sudden military mobilization in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. However, this uncertainty alone is sufficient to produce economic and psychological effects. The Houthis' potential capacity is

enough to exert upward pressure on energy prices, freight costs, and war-risk insurance premiums. Thus, militarization can occur not only through actual attacks but also through a sustained environment of threat.

The second finding is that Israel's recognition of Somaliland has added a new and fragile layer to the Red Sea's security architecture. A potential deployment of security infrastructure could strip Somaliland of its status as a purely diplomatic actor and make it a perceived target in proxy competition. In this scenario, it is more likely that Iran would exert pressure indirectly through the Houthis rather than directly. However, such a development would further complicate Somaliland's internal stability, its quest for international legitimacy, and its tensions with Somalia. Consequently, Somaliland is expected to proceed cautiously in any security-related engagements.

The third finding is that, as the crisis in the Red Sea persists, the likelihood of land-based geopolitical repercussions increases. Ethiopia's framing of maritime access as a geo-strategic necessity makes it impossible to rule out attempts at controlled escalation or the creation of a fait accompli along the Assab line in a chaotic environment. While direct occupation would be costly, intermediate scenarios, such as border pressure, the deployment of proxy networks, or the enforcement of temporary access arrangements, could trigger regional instability. Such developments could merge the maritime crisis in the Horn of Africa with a land front, potentially intertwining it with the ongoing Tigray conflict in Ethiopia and the war in Sudan.

The fourth finding is that, from Türkiye's perspective, these developments are not mere-

ly a matter of foreign policy but also concern economic security and strategic positioning. Any escalation in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait indirectly affects Türkiye's energy supply security and trade routes. Tensions involving Somaliland and Somalia could place Türkiye's security engagement in the region on more delicate ground. Meanwhile, a potential escalation along the Ethiopia-Eritrea border could shift the Ankara Process from a bilateral mediation effort to multilateral crisis management.

In conclusion, the key finding of this study is that the region sits on a fine line between

open war and controlled tension. The current landscape points less to the likelihood of a sudden regional war and more to a prolonged, fluctuating cycle of militarization. This cycle simultaneously pressures maritime security, energy markets, sovereignty disputes, and sub-regional power hierarchies. In this environment—where even a minor triggering event could set off a chain reaction—the southern Red Sea is not merely a maritime chokepoint; it is the intersection of global competition, proxy war dynamics, and regional geopolitical realignment.

About the Author

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