

## CIMIC contribution to operations in the Bab-el-Mandeb and the Red Sea

2024

### INTRODUCTION

The threat to global maritime merchant traffic lines, also known as Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), is a pivotal concern in the contemporary operating environment. Recognized as a critical artery for international trade and economic stability, the security of SLOC is paramount. Integration of this threat into a holistic and comprehensive security assessment is imperative, especially in the context of CIMIC as a joint function. CIMIC plays a vital role in addressing multifaceted challenges, including those posed by potential disruptions to SLOC.

### ECONOMICAL ASPECTS OF THE FREEDOM OF NAVIGATION IN THE BAB-EL-MANDEB AND THE RED SEA

The Bab-el-Mandeb strait serves as a crucial maritime chokepoint connecting the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, facilitating the passage of millions of barrels of oil and other goods daily. Ensuring the Freedom of Navigation in the Bab-el-Mandeb and the Red Sea is essential for maintaining global trade routes and economic stability, as it allows for uninterrupted transportation of goods between Europe, Asia and Africa.<sup>1</sup>

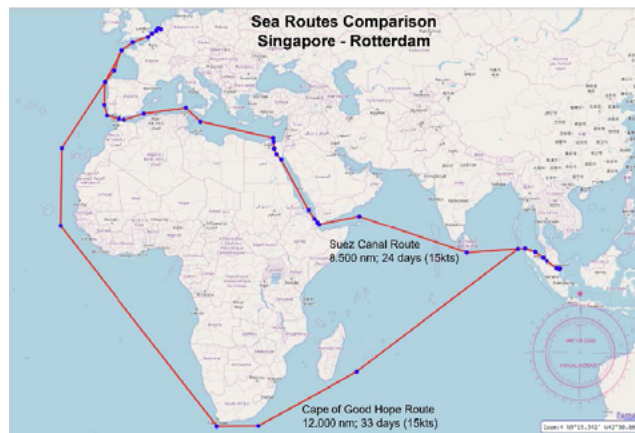


Figure 1: Sea Routes Comparison (<https://map.openseamap.org/>)

Disruptions or blockages in this SLOC could lead to significant increases in shipping costs, delays in cargo delivery, and potential economic ramifications worldwide. The grounding of the M/V Ever Given in the Suez Canal for six days in 2021 resulted in a backlog of over 400 vessels and an estimated trade loss of nearly \$60 billion.<sup>2</sup>

1 <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/bab-al-mandan-red-sea-suez-shipping-crisis-houthis-gaza>

2 <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/29/suez-canal-is-moving-but-the-supply-chain-impact-could-last-months.html>

A similar situation is in play as the flow of commercial goods through the Bab-el-Mandeb has again been endangered after Iran-backed Houthi rebels, controlling the north-west of Yemen, started attacking merchant vessels in the Red Sea since 15 November 2023.<sup>3</sup> Since the attacks on merchant shipping in the region, major shipping companies suspended ship traffic through the Red Sea due to the attacks, including MSC, Maersk, CMA CGM, COSCO, Hapag-Lloyd, Evergreen Marine Corporation, BP and Shell. They instead took a safer route, going around Africa and the Cape of Good Hope, although this route incurs an extra ten days, spends more fuel, and requires more crew time.<sup>4</sup> Maintaining open and secure maritime routes through the Bab-el-Mandeb and the Red Sea supports regional economic development by encouraging investment in port infrastructure and trade-related industries. Moreover, maritime security is critically important to the wellbeing of Yemeni civilians, who rely heavily on imports for essential needs. The Houthi assaults on merchant vessels threaten the delivery of aid to Yemen, potentially leading to devastating consequences for the population and aggravate the already severe humanitarian crisis in the country.

## YEMEN AND THE PROXY CONFLICT BETWEEN IRAN AND SAUDI-ARABIA

The Yemeni landscape, once adorned with rich history, bears for more than a decade the scars of a brutal proxy conflict between regional powerhouses Iran and Saudi Arabia involving several sponsored armed groups, militias, instructors and security forces.<sup>5</sup> Caught in the crossfire, Yemen's populace is suffering, with millions displaced and facing starvation due to relentless warfare. Iran sees Yemen as a strategic foothold, supporting Houthi rebels to challenge Saudi Arabia's influence in the region and expand its sphere of control. Saudi Arabia, fearing Iranian encroachment on its borders, leads a coalition of Arab states in a campaign to restore Yemen's internationally recognized government.

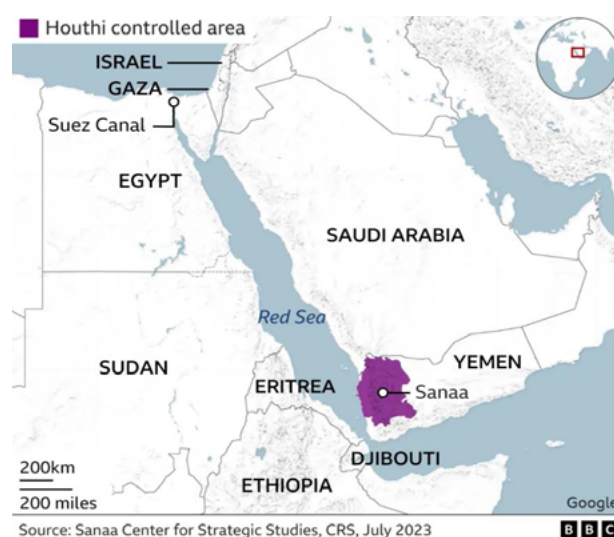


Figure 2: Houthi Controlled Area  
(<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middleeast-67955729>)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/red-sea-crisis-suez-canal-map-trade-routes-panama-canal-droughtsupply-chains-2490518-2024-01-19>  
<sup>4</sup> <https://www.crownworldmobility.com/insights/shipping-lines-suspend-operations-in-the-red-sea-and-suezcanal/>  
<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-yemen>

The conflict has exacerbated existing tensions between Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia and Shia-majority Iran, fuelling sectarian divides and regional instability.<sup>6</sup> Yemen’s dilemma has drawn international condemnation, yet efforts to broker peace remain elusive amid entrenched interests and geopolitical rivalries. Humanitarian organisations especially UN organisations struggle to provide aid amidst the chaos, with access hindered by violence and political barriers.<sup>7</sup> In this geopolitical chess game, Yemen’s sovereignty and stability are at stake for the ambitions of external powers.

## HOUTHII ATTACKS IN SUPPORT OF THE ISRAEL-HAMAS CONFLICT

After the Hamas-led attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, which sparked the Israel-Hamas war<sup>8</sup>, numerous Iran-backed militant groups throughout the Middle East, including the Houthis, voiced solidarity with the Palestinians and issued threats against Israel. Houthi leaders specifically cautioned the U.S. against intervening on behalf of Israel, warning of retaliatory drone and missile strikes in response. The Houthis actually carried out several attacks on commercial ships, once again the ongoing conflict in Yemen threatens the maritime security in the Gulf of Aden.



Source: Ambrey Analytics  
Figure 3: Yemeni Coast Incidents  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/worldmiddle-east-68363692>

Since 19 November 2023, following the hijacking of the car transporter *Galaxy Leader* by Houthi militants, there have been two additional ship hijackings. One ship, along with 25 crew members, remains in Houthi custody, while another ship has been released. Additionally, at least 10 ships have been damaged due to Houthi attacks. Although Houthis claim to target only ships which are Israeli-owned, flagged or operated, or which are heading to Israeli ports, many of the vessels which have been attacked have no connection with Israel. To cease their assaults in the Red Sea, the Houthis<sup>9</sup> have insisted on a ceasefire in the Israel–Hamas war and an end to the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip.

6 <https://cimsec.org/iran-saudi-arabias-proxy-war-yemen/>  
 7 <https://reliefweb.int/country/yem>  
 8 <https://www.cimic-coe.org/resources/isr-war-2023-cic-2.pdf>  
 9 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67614911>



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## MULTI-NATIONAL MILITARY REACTION TO THE THREAT IN THE RED SEA AND ITS APPROACHES

As reaction on the increasing threat to the regional stability and security and global implications on trade and supply chains, Operation Prosperity Guardian as a multinational military operation led by the United States was launched on 18 December 2023.<sup>10</sup> U.S. Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin unveiled the creation of an international maritime security force aimed at countering threats posed by Houthi forces to international maritime trade in the region. Presently, the coalition consists of over twenty members, with ten participating anonymously. However, certain U.S. allies, particularly European nations, have expressed reservations about the initiative. They have voiced concerns about the U.S. and Britain conducting airstrikes on Houthi positions and have hesitated to operate under Washington's command.

On 10 January 2024, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed resolution 2722 (2024) demanding an end to Houthi attacks on merchant vessels.<sup>11</sup> On the same day, the Houthis launched their most significant barrage to date, involving 18–24 attack drones and missiles targeting international ships and warships in the Red Sea. In response, on 12 January 2024, the coalition launched its first airstrikes against Houthi targets in Yemen, eliciting a vow of retaliation from the Houthis.

On 8 February 2024, the Council of the European Union decided to launch Operation Aspides.<sup>12</sup> Participating countries will include France, Greece, Italy, and Germany. For the initial phase of the mission, the nations will deploy four frigates under EU command.<sup>13</sup> Their mandate will entail safeguarding commercial shipping and intercepting attacks, though they will not participate in strikes against the Houthis on land.

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## CIMIC CONTRIBUTION TO OPERATIONS IN THE MARITIME DOMAIN

Following the NATO definition<sup>14</sup>, CIMIC “integrates the understanding of the civil factors of the operating environment and that enables, facilitates and conducts civil-military interaction to support the accomplishment of missions and military strategic objectives in peacetime, crisis and conflict.”

In accordance with AJP 3.19 “the maintenance of the freedom of navigation, sea lines of communications, key infrastructure, energy flow, protection of marine resources and environmental safety, are all in the interests of both national and international security. CIMIC encompasses CMI activities and the integration of civil factors of the maritime operating environment.”<sup>15</sup>

Safeguarding these aspects of maritime security requires a comprehensive approach involving various instruments of power, e.g. diplomatic efforts, military patrols, law enforcement, international agreements, and cooperation among nations.

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11 <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/yemen/#:~:text=This%20resolution%20demanded%20that%20the,undermine%20navigational%20rights%20and%20freedoms.>

12 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2024/583/oj>

13 [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eunavfor-operation-aspides\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eunavfor-operation-aspides_en)

14 NATO's Military Council Joint Standardization Board (MCJSB), as of 4 August 2022

15 AJP 3.19 Draft para 2.10, as of September 2023



The importance of CIMIC becomes clear in addressing challenges in the maritime domain. CIMIC involves coordination between military forces and civilian actors, such as government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and private sector entities. By integrating civil factors into military operations and strategies, CIMIC aims to enhance effectiveness, minimise negative impacts on civilian populations, and promote stability and security.

The interconnectedness of various maritime security concerns underscores the need for a multifaceted approach to address them effectively. Not only military measures but also cooperation with civilian entities and international partners is needed to achieve common security goals.

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## **CIMIC CONTRIBUTION TO OPERATIONS PROSPERITY GUARDIAN & OPERATION ASPIDES**

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In general, cooperation among coastal states, non-military actors and maritime stakeholders is crucial for addressing challenges to Freedom of Navigation as well as ensuring continued economic prosperity and stability in the region.

In this context, CIMIC activities could support the respective force commanders by:

- Establishing and maintaining a liaison network to stakeholders in Host Nations (HN), coastal and bordering states and non-military actors in the area to facilitate information exchange and coordination;
- Providing analysis and assessment of the civil environment with regard to the deconfliction of merchant shipping and military operations;
- Contributing to the preparation of the Common Operating Picture, the HQ Battle Rhythm, Integrated Air and Missile Defence and the Joint Targeting Process;
- Establishing and organising procedures for warning and protection of merchant traffic;
- Coordinating CIMIC activities among various military entities in the area;
- Minimising harm against civilians in the area, e.g. fishing vessels, dhows<sup>16</sup>, etc.;
- Minimising the impact on the delivery of Humanitarian Assistance to areas not under Houthi control.

Although many NATO nations are participating or will participate in operations in the Bab-el-Mandeb and the Red Sea, NATO as an organisation is not (yet) involved in any of them. However, it should be investigated, to what extent NATO capabilities like the NATO Shipping Centre (NSC) could be integrated in the planning and execution of the operations, for example:

- Using the NSC capabilities for Naval Cooperation and Guidance for Shipping (NCAGS) and the Allied Worldwide Navigational Information System (AWNIS) disciplines to interact with and coordinate safeguarding of merchant shipping;
- Coordinating national NCAGS stakeholder efforts and providing a platform for information exchange;
- Theatre-level coordination and liaison to regional shipping coordination centres;
- Providing a central information platform for merchant traffic with information on the threat, the region affected, military measures implemented, call-in points, protection best practices and contact for emergencies;
- Providing access to merchant shipping data of position, movement, crew, cargo and communications details.

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<sup>16</sup> Dhow: A type of ship commonly used in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea and Indian Ocean.



## SUMMARY

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The Bab-el-Mandeb strait plays a pivotal role as a maritime chokepoint linking the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean, enabling the transit of millions of barrels of oil and various commodities every day. Safeguarding the Freedom of Navigation in the Bab-el-Mandeb and the Red Sea is imperative for upholding the integrity of international trade routes and ensuring economic stability.

In response to the escalating threat to regional stability and security, major shipping companies suspended ship traffic through the Red Sea. In reaction to the persistent attacks, several nations have dispatched naval units to protect shipping routes. This effort entails not only military actions but also collaboration with civilian entities and international partners.

By integrating civil factors into military operations and strategies and enabling civil-military interaction, CIMIC contributes significantly to enhance effectiveness, minimise negative impacts on civilian populations, and promote stability and security.

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