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Sharm al-Sheikh – Bab al-Mandeb: The Strategic Balance and Israel's Southern Approaches

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**Sharm al-Sheikh
Bab al-Mandeb**

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INTRODUCTION

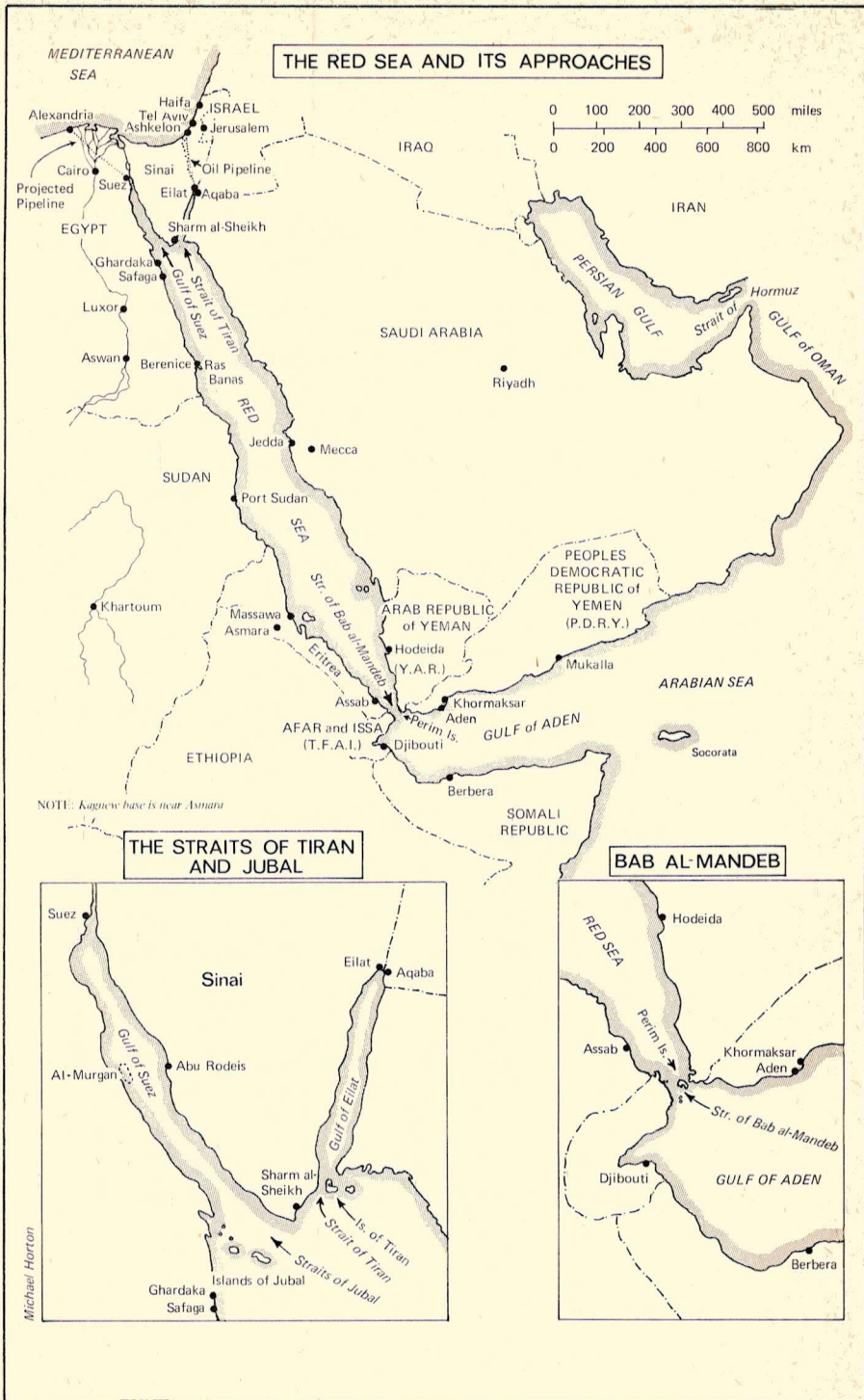
During the second week of the Yom Kippur war, the Egyptian navy blockaded the Strait of Bab al-Mandeb at the southern entry to the Red Sea. An American merchant vessel seeking to sail through Bab al-Mandeb was fired upon by an Egyptian destroyer.

This move, presumably directed against Israeli shipping, was meant to challenge the credibility of Israel's long-standing claim that it would not tolerate a blockade on its southern port, Eilat. Even more, it was designed to erode the viability of Israel's argument that retaining Sharm al-Sheikh was essential to its existence or at least to the guarantee of its freedom of passage through the Straits of Tiran. If ships sailing to or from the port of Eilat could be stopped at Bab al-Mandeb or any other point beyond Israel's striking power, there would appear to be no motivation for the retention of Sharm al-Sheikh other than that of annexing Arab territories — an intention Israel had continuously denied.

The blockade emerged from a plan put forward by the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) on various occasions since December 1967 and which had gained the approval of numerous Arab political figures and journalists. This "strategy," as it was termed by the Arab press, gradually took shape and became more realistic, mainly as a result of the active support of Libya and Syria's Ba'th regime. It is doubtful, however, if the plan would have become operational had it not been for developments in the region of the Red Sea and the revolutionary changes of the last decade in the balance of power in that area. This paper will attempt to examine the counter-claims concerning Sharm al-Sheikh against the background of these developments and the geo-politics of the region.

GEO-POLITICAL BACKGROUND

The Red Sea has served from time immemorial as a major trade route between the Far East and the Mediterranean. It is a long, narrow body of water which separates the Arabian Peninsula from the eastern coasts of Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia. At its northern end the Gulf of Suez and



the Gulf of Eilat project, respectively, to the northwest and north, separated by the Sinai Peninsula. The opening of the Gulf of Suez to sea-going ships flows for about 20 miles past the Islands of Jubal, which create the Straits of Jubal. Even before the construction of the Suez Canal in 1869, the Gulf of Suez was important in that it provided convenient access to Egypt's heartland and its Mediterranean coastal towns and served as a link in the main maritime route for trade between the continents. But its importance grew dramatically after 1869, and still further after World War II.

The Gulf of Eilat, on the other hand, because of geographical and political factors, remained of little importance until recent times. Its length is just over 100 miles and its average width is 12 to 18 miles. At its mouth lie several coral islands which leave only a narrow navigable channel, less than a mile wide, between the Sinai coast and the largest of the islands, Tiran, which lies off the tip of the peninsula near the uninhabited bay of Sharm al-Sheikh.

Following its war of independence, Israel's southeastern border included several miles of coastline at the head of the Gulf of Eilat which had previously been part of mandatory Palestine. There, the port of Eilat was founded in 1949. The remaining few miles along the gulf's head belong to the Kingdom of Jordan and constitute its only outlet to the sea, by way of Aqaba. The entire eastern coast of the gulf and the islands at its mouth are Saudi Arabian territory; its western coast (Sinai) had become part of Egypt at the beginning of the present century.

At its southern end, the Red Sea gradually narrows to a point where the tip of the Arabian Peninsula and the coast of Africa are separated by a distance of only 22 miles. The Strait of Bab al-Mandeb (The Gate of Tears) connecting the Red Sea with the Indian Ocean is bisected by Perim Island, controlled since the end of 1967 by the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). Facing Perim on the African coast is the French Territory of the Afar and the Issa (TFAI) and the southern part of the Ethiopian coast. Since the narrow passage between the mainland of the PDRY and Perim is dangerous for navigation, the main passage into the Red Sea in modern times has been the 16½ mile-wide channel between Perim and the African coast, which is relatively deep and free of obstructions.

THE POWERS AND THE RED SEA

Until the mid-1950s Britain's interests and influence were predominant in the Red Sea. Convinced of the Red Sea's importance for their "imperial communications," the British occupied Aden on the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, east of Bab al-Mandeb, in 1839. Aden became an outstanding asset after World War II as a result of the rapid expansion of the Persian Gulf oil industry. Yet, although the British controlled both Aden and Perim, the international character of Bab al-Mandeb was never questioned, and thousands of ships of many nations passed through the strait annually.

AMERICAN INTERESTS

At the end of World War II, however, Britain was a second-rate power, and the United States had emerged as the leader of the Western bloc of nations. In the early 1950s the United States believed that it could involve Egypt in its plan for a Middle Eastern alliance, as a link in the *cordon sanitaire* which it was trying to forge around the Soviet Union. However, the Americans did not comprehend that their plans clashed with the aspirations of the new Arab nationalism. Only after the 1956 Sinai fiasco did they realize that their policy merely served Soviet interests and accelerated the decline of the Western powers in the region.

The United States also became more involved in the politics of the Red Sea and its environs because it was aware of how vital the Suez Canal was for the economy of its European allies. It took the lead in the "maritime nations" which guaranteed Israel's freedom of navigation through the Straits of Tiran in 1957; and in Saudi Arabia, where it had important oil interests, it supported and helped build the military power of the conservative regime. Across the Red Sea from Arabia, the United States was also committed to an aid program to Ethiopia and maintained an important communications base at Kagnaw, in Eritrea.

When Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia in 1953, the United States signed a 25-year economic and military aid agreement with the latter. In exchange for the exclusive right to the base at Kagnaw until 1977, it undertook to train and equip the Ethiopian army. As a consequence of the cold war and of military, technical and political developments, Kagnaw's importance to the United States defense program grew during the 1950s and 1960s. Its personnel and that of the American training

mission in Ethiopia were supplied by way of Massawa, Ethiopia's Red Sea port. In view of Egyptian and, indirectly, Soviet control of the Suez Canal, freedom of navigation through Bab al-Mandeb was important to America; as long as the British controlled Aden and the French held Djibouti (French Somaliland), however, no problems existed.

In 1960, when it became evident that Ethiopia was preparing to annex Eritrea, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) was founded. Arab support for this predominantly Muslim separatist movement – especially from Syria's Ba'th regime – increased after Eritrea's unification with Ethiopia in 1962 and the revolution in Yemen of that same year. Somalia's independence in 1960 also complicated Ethiopia's position. The leaders of the new republic were dedicated to the idea of "Greater Somalia," which envisaged the unification of all the territories inhabited by Somalis, including southwestern Ethiopia and French Somaliland (known after 1967 as TFAI). In a country as heterogeneous as Ethiopia, territorial changes resulting from secessionist pressures could spark off a most dangerous chain reaction. A "Greater Somalia" would also have meant Ethiopian loss of vast territories, as well as Somali control of Djibouti, Ethiopia's only outlet to the Indian Ocean and thus essential to its economy.

When armed clashes broke out between Somalia and Ethiopia in the early 1960s, the sympathy of most Arab countries for Muslim Somalia and for the ELF reawakened in "Christian Ethiopia" ancient fears of submersion in the "Muslim sea." Its alliance with the United States became even more vital for its security. Ethiopia's fears also led it to welcome Israel's attentions when the latter began to develop relations with the African continent.

Because the 544 miles of the Ethiopian coast lie within the Eritrean province, several Arab countries which began to support the "strategy" of PDRY concerning Bab al-Mandeb after 1967 felt that the ELF merited help. Hence, the Marxist-oriented government of PDRY, and later Libya, joined the Syrian Ba'th in its efforts to subvert the Ethiopian government. In 1969 revolutionary military regimes came to power in Sudan and Somalia. Allying themselves with the Soviet Union, they received substantial quantities of relatively modern Russian armaments. The balance of power in the Horn of Africa was beginning to change.

Nonetheless, the United States was unwilling to replace the relatively

obsolete arms of Ethiopia's army or to increase its involvement in that country. By 1971, having developed new weapons and communications systems, the United States was far less dependent on its Kagnew base. On the domestic scene, American political figures, journalists and scholars warned their government that unless it withdrew from Ethiopia it might become involved there in a situation similar to Vietnam. Moreover, the United States had earlier secured from Britain the lease of the island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, a site admirably suited to a communications center. Hence, despite the growing Soviet activity in the Red Sea region, the Americans decided in principle to disengage gradually from Ethiopia. This decision, together with the closure of the Suez Canal and the British evacuation of Aden in 1967, meant that the West's limited interest in freedom of passage through Bab al-Mandeb sharply declined.

RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

Until its political debacles in the Sudan in 1971 and in Egypt in 1972, the Soviet Union gave the impression of advancing in the Red Sea region as rapidly as the West withdrew from it. Soviet aid to Yemen and its presence in that country increased significantly after the Nasser-supported 1962 revolution there which threatened the *status quo* in the Arabian Peninsula. Although Saudi Arabia managed, with American aid, to overcome Egypt's pressures, the British in southern Yemen were unable to withstand the wave of Arab nationalism, and by the end of 1967 they evacuated the area. But the new government of Yemen was formed by the Marxist revolutionary National Liberation Front (NLF), rather than by its rival pro-Egyptian nationalist organization. Thereafter, the strategically important PDRY (southern Yemen) became the focus of Russian interest in the region and the recipient of its limited military aid. The Soviet Union also appeared to acquire the use of naval and other facilities in southern Yemen.

Unable to gain a foothold in Ethiopia, the Soviet Union signed a military and technical aid agreement with Somalia in 1962. The power of the Somali army was gradually built up over the following years, and naval and other military installations were developed by the Russians for their own use and for the Somali armed forces. Russia's influence also began to grow in the Sudan and became dominant following Nurneiri's revolution in 1969. Although the communists were a min-

ority in Numeiri's government, they were instrumental in the creation of stronger military and political ties with Russia. The Soviet Union obtained military facilities in Sudan and was also said to have acquired the use of naval bases on Egypt's Red Sea coast, as well as airfields in the Egyptian hinterland. Obviously, despite the closure of the Suez Canal, the Russians were interested in acquiring and developing facilities and bases in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

The Red Sea region was important for Soviet aspirations in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf, particularly once the Suez Canal would be reopened. Moreover, after the United States developed the Polaris A3 missile, with a range of 2,500 nautical miles, in 1964, Soviet military experts realized that it could be deployed against Russia's soft under-belly by nuclear submarines operating in the Gulf of Aden. Not wishing to attract American attention to the area, the Russians at first proposed a denuclearization of the Indian Ocean. However, following the British withdrawal from Aden and their declaration of intent in 1968 to evacuate the Persian Gulf by 1971, a small Russian fleet appeared in the northwestern corner of the Indian Ocean. Thereafter, several Russian warships, which sail all the way from Vladivostok on a rotation system, were always to be found in the area. The limited activity and size of this fleet seemed to indicate that the Russians were trying not to alarm the Americans, especially at a time when the latter were considering the withdrawal of Western military presence from the Persian Gulf.

Clearly any incident involving Bab al-Mandeb, especially while the Americans were still using Kagnew, could draw unwanted attention to the region. Hence, until the end of 1971 the Soviet Union may have been instrumental in restraining its Arab allies – mainly the PDRY – from interfering with Israeli shipping in the Red Sea.

ISRAEL AND FREEDOM OF NAVIGATION IN THE RED SEA

The problem of freedom of navigation to Eilat through the Straits of Tiran was a major motivation for Israel's preemptive wars in 1956 and 1967. Shortly after its independence, Israel had determined to develop commercial and other relations with the countries of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. Following the Rhodes armistice agreement with Egypt, it tried to implement the right of "innocent passage" through the Suez

Canal. When these attempts were foiled by the Egyptians, Israel pinned its hopes on developing Eilat as its outlet to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. However, despite the fact that the coast of the Gulf of Eilat was shared by four nations, Egypt claimed that the Straits of Tiran was not a recognized international maritime passage, and impeded the free navigation of ships to and from Eilat by stationing coastal artillery near Sharm al-Sheikh. Undeniably, the blockade of Eilat was the main cause for the stagnation of the port, and in fact slowed down the development of the entire Negev. To some extent it also interfered with the development of relations between Israel and several Asian and (later) African countries, and denied Israel access to the relatively inexpensive oil resources of the Persian Gulf.

Already at this early stage it was clear that the motivation for the Egyptian move was strategic and political. At the least, the blockade of Israel's southern maritime approaches was meant to coerce Israel into surrendering to the Arabs the southern part of the Negev, including Eilat, thus creating a corridor between Egypt and the Asian-Arab countries. In 1955-56 it became evident that Egypt considered such a land-bridge essential for its plans and was determined to obtain it. The need for such a corridor became even more pronounced following the unification of Egypt and Syria (UAR) in 1958, especially when pro-Nasserite upheavals in nearby countries were stymied by Western intervention and by Egypt's inability to help its pan-Arab supporters. When the UAR collapsed in 1961, Egypt's President Nasser claimed that an important factor in the failure of that "historic attempt" to unite the Arab world was the lack of territorial continuity between Egypt and Syria. Thus when Nasser ordered the UN forces out of Sharm al-Sheikh and closed the Straits of Tiran in May 1967, his aim was, if not to annihilate Israel, at least to force it to give up, *inter alia*, the southern part of the Negev.

When Israel was compelled to relinquish the territories it had captured in the 1956 Sinai war, the necessity of ensuring its freedom of navigation through the Straits of Tiran was recognized. Consequently, in addition to the guarantees given to Israel by the "maritime nations" — primarily the United States — a unit of the UN peace-keeping force was stationed in Sharm al-Sheikh. In the following ten years the town and port of Eilat gradually grew in size and importance. Israel's political and commercial relations with East African and Asian

countries were more vigorously developed, and a 12-inch oil pipe-line was constructed between Eilat and Haifa to handle all the country's oil needs.

After the Six-Day War, when the short-lived Egyptian blockade of the Straits of Tiran was broken, Israel became even more determined to establish its freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. Eilat's maritime trade was further developed, its communications link with the northern part of Israel was improved, and its port facilities were expanded. Several East African and Asian countries began to use the land-bridge between Eilat and the Mediterranean. Consequently, trade through Eilat grew at a rate of more than 15 percent annually, and by 1972 about nine percent of Israel's exports and five percent of its imports passed through its southern port. Above all, a 42-inch pipe-line was constructed between Eilat and Ashkelon on Israel's Mediterranean coast, which by 1972 enabled the country to control an annual transit trade of about 30 million tons of oil — originating mainly, it is claimed, in Iran. Several pumping stations under construction would enable Israel to exploit the pipe-line's full capacity of 60 million tons annually and export it to European countries. The oil refinery in Haifa was substantially expanded and a new one was built in Ashdod, near the pipe-line's Ashkelon terminal. Funds for the construction of a third refinery near Eilat were allocated in the 1972-73 fiscal year. (It was later decided to transfer construction of the refinery to Abu Rodeis.)

The Israeli pipe-line has obvious attractions for European customers. It has functioned successfully for several years until the recent war, and it is not affected by local political upheavals, as is the case with other pipe-lines in the Arab countries. It has been argued that if the Suez Canal were to reopen, the Israeli pipe-line would lose its value; but the very fact that international oil companies and the Egyptian government were about to embark upon the construction of a similar pipe-line between the Gulf of Suez and Alexandria just before the 1973 war, and that such plans continue even during the negotiations at Geneva, indicates the fallaciousness of this claim. Economists have indeed shown that the use of modern super-tankers has made the long sea route around the Cape even more economical than the shorter Suez Canal route which accommodates only smaller tankers. But super-tankers necessitate the building of suitable terminals and pipe-line networks in the oil-consuming countries. The reopening of the canal in its present

dimensions does not constitute a threat to the Israeli pipe-line; nor would it be a threat in the near future, since meaningful expansion of the canal will take about eight years to complete. The Israeli pipe-line has an extra advantage in that its Ashkelon terminal is very near southern Europe, thus enabling its customers to reship oil by small and medium size tankers which can utilize the existing facilities in the various European ports.

Clearly, Israel's entry into the international oil market, although relatively modest, has provided it with a motivation for action, and has created an area of conflict which cannot be overlooked in assessing its interests in the Red Sea. The numerous reports in the Arab press on Israel's oil installations and trade through Eilat reflected Arab awareness of the growing importance of the Israeli pipe-line and maritime activities in the Red Sea.

BAB AL-MANDEB: THE NEW ARAB STRATEGY AGAINST ISRAEL

In December 1967, as the British were departing from Aden, a unit of the South Yemeni National Liberation Front (NLF) captured Perim Island. Shortly afterwards Abdul Fattah Isma'il, the secretary-general of the NLF which formed South Yemen's government (PDRY), announced that his country would use Perim to block the passage of Israeli ships through the Strait of Bab al-Mandeb. The NLF is ideologically related to the Marxist-oriented Palestinian guerrilla movements, and has always championed the Palestinian cause and opposed the existence of Israel. Hence, although the declaration of Abdul Fattah Isma'il was clearly in contradiction to international law, it was not received with surprise.

FACTORS SUPPORTING FREEDOM OF NAVIGATION

The threat to close Bab al-Mandeb to Israeli shipping was repeated on several occasions by members of the PDRY government, but it was not taken seriously until about 1971, because South Yemen did not possess the means to carry out this threat. Moreover, in the late 1960s, so extreme and illegal an action could have had serious repercussions and could even have brought counter-actions from several governments in the area and from the super powers. Thus, at least until June 1971, an unofficial truce concerning maritime activities in the region existed

between the Arab countries of the Red Sea and Israel. And, although the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb were relatively deserted following the closure of the Suez Canal, they continued to bear a two-way traffic of Israeli tankers carrying oil northwards to Eilat, and of Egyptian tankers carrying oil from the Al-Murgan field in the Gulf of Suez (which produced 12 million tons of oil annually by 1973) to markets in the Far East and Africa, and they witnessed the movement of a variety of cargo boats.

About 1970 the cautious Saudis decided to expand their refinery in Jeddah substantially, and tankers carrying Saudi oil began to sail in the Red Sea. In the PDRY, the British Petroleum refinery — the only foreign asset which was not nationalized — continued to operate. As the PDRY has no oil of its own, all the crude oil refined in Aden is brought there by tankers. Although the Aden refinery is not exploited to its full capacity of nine million tons a year, it supplies all the country's oil requirements, and is a substantial source of the PDRY's badly-needed foreign currency. The Jordanians also enjoyed the unofficial truce in the Red Sea; their trade via Aqaba grew by 300 percent between 1970 and 1972 and included most of the fuel consumed by Jordan. As for Sudan, the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and Ethiopia, the Red Sea is their only outlet to the open waters of the ocean, and ships *en route* to the ports of these nations constantly sail through Bab al-Mandeb. It is evident, therefore, that all the countries of the Red Sea had a certain stake in the freedom of passage through Bab al-Mandeb, and they all stood to lose if the southern part of the Red Sea became an arena for military activities.

THE CHANGING POLITICAL SITUATION

In 1971, the Israeli tanker "Coral Sea" was attacked in the Strait of Bab al-Mandeb by a commando unit based on Perim, with the collusion of some of the PDRY leaders. The attack was an indication of the rapidly-changing situation in the area. The United States was debating the possibility of a complete withdrawal from Ethiopia, and its interests in the Red Sea were minimal. By mid-1971 the Soviet Union had lost its foothold in the Sudan, and a year later its experts were ordered out of Egypt by President Sadat. Indeed, by 1972 anti-Soviet Arab nationalism had succeeded *de facto* in dispossessing the Russians of all their facilities in the Red Sea, with the exception of their doubtful

foothold in the YAR. But even earlier, the Soviet Union, always pragmatic in its attitude and policy, was beginning to shift the focus of its interest from Egypt to Iraq, and from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf. While the PDRY, heavily dependent upon Soviet aid, remained an important element in Russian strategy in the region, it managed to preserve its ideological and political independence.

INVOLVEMENT OF THE HORN OF AFRICA

In recent years the Arab-Israeli conflict has also become closely inter-related with the complex of tensions in the Horn of Africa, as some Arab leaders sought to exploit these tensions for furthering their strategy against Israel.

By 1971 the balance of power had changed in the Horn of Africa to the detriment of Ethiopia. Not only did the ELF intensify its activities as a result of the massive aid which it had received from the PDRY and Libya, but there was a possibility that Sudan and Somalia might act together against Ethiopia. Moreover, France, in an attempt to win Arab favor, reversed its previous policy and informed Ethiopia that it had no intention of opposing a Somali attempt to take over TFAI, and that if hostilities were to break out, it would withdraw from the territory. The crisis in the Horn of Africa was averted in 1971 because of internal developments in Sudan and the political manipulations of Ethiopia's aged emperor. The fact remained, however, that during the following two years, while the United States was disengaging itself from Ethiopia, most Arab countries intensified their pressure on Addis Ababa to rethink its relations with Israel and the West (mainly the United States). In addition, Libya, the PDRY and Syria formulated and followed a more aggressive policy against Christian Ethiopia.

Clearly, the Arabs felt that the international character of the Strait of Bab al-Mandeb constituted a weak point in their strategy against Israel. However, as long as they did not control the African side of the Strait, they could not effectively close the passage to Israeli navigation. Thus "Arabization" of the Eritrean and the TFAI coast became an important objective of Arab policy.

EGYPT: A RELUCTANT PARTICIPANT

The extensive press and radio coverage given by the Arab countries since 1971 to the need to strike at Israeli shipping in the southern part of the Red Sea indicated that the "new Arab strategy" against Israel

was gaining wide-spread support. This was evident as well in occasional reports about the fortification of Perim by the PDRY, in the growing Arab activity in the region, and in the financial aid given by Libya to the ELF, to other anti-Ethiopian subversive movements and, despite its Marxist ideology, even the PDRY.

The Egyptian government had doubtless been aware for some time of the importance of the Red Sea arena in any future confrontation with Israel, and of the implications of a blockade on Bab al-Mandeb for Israel's claims concerning "secure borders" in general and Sharm al-Sheikh in particular. But, conscious of the possibly serious outcome of a military operation near Bab al-Mandeb, Egypt was reluctant to give official sanction to such a plan. As Egypt was the only Arab country with any sort of navy in the Red Sea (see below), it was nearly impossible to carry out the final stages of the plan against Israel without Egypt's active cooperation.

ISRAEL'S ATTEMPT TO COUNTER THE ARAB STRATEGY

The "Coral Sea" incident had far-reaching repercussions. It hardened Iran's determination to gain control of the islands in the Strait of Hormuz (between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman) and, despite vociferous Arab threats, these islands were captured by Iran at the end of 1971. It made Ethiopia more aware of the importance of Djibouti, its only outlet to the Indian Ocean, and prompted Addis Ababa to intensify its efforts to obtain military aid from its allies. As for the United States, the incident caused attention to be focused more sharply on the activities of the Soviet Union and its allies in the region. (The director of the CIA, Richard Helms — currently US Ambassador to Iran — visited Israel immediately after the incident.)

Israel became aware of the vulnerability of its shipping in waters virtually controlled by the Arabs, and came to see that if she were unable to safeguard her ships' passage through the Red Sea, her arguments for keeping Sharm al-Sheikh would be dangerously eroded. Israel was also aware of Arab activities in the Horn of Africa; the political-military significance of the possible annexation of the TFAI by the Somali Republic, and of the disintegration of Ethiopia were obvious. It was clearly to the economic and strategic advantage of Israel to help maintain the *status quo* in the region. Consequently, efforts were made to further strengthen Israel-Ethiopia relations and, as far as it was

within Israel's ability, to aid in the development of the economy of that kingdom and the preservation of the integrity and unity of its government.

AID TO ETHIOPIA

After 1971, it would appear that Israel's technical-economic aid program to Ethiopia and, it has been claimed, the specialized military aid it rendered the Ethiopian armed forces, were expanded. Greatly exaggerated reports about Israel's military aid to Ethiopia had appeared in the Arab and world press consistently, ever since the 1960s. Following the 1971 visit to Ethiopia of Israel's military chief of staff, General Bar-Lev, the Arab press published extensive reports and articles about Israel's growing aid to Ethiopia and its presence in that country. It was alleged, for instance, that Israel had undertaken to supply Ethiopia with electronic equipment, a radar network, coastguard and missile boats. It was also claimed that Israeli officers were training the Ethiopian army in the use of new tactical weapons and electronic equipment, and that some of its officers were stationed in Ethiopian ports and were training the Ethiopian navy. Although these reports were strongly denied by the Ethiopians, they may have contained a kernel of truth. It was, however, highly improbable, in view of the expected Arab reaction, that the Ethiopians would permit such activities, or that Israel would supply Ethiopia with costly sophisticated weapons systems which Israel itself found difficult to obtain.

In addition to the reports of Israeli aid to Ethiopia, the Arab press published numerous accounts about the construction of Israeli — and in some cases American — naval and air bases on islands belonging to Ethiopia or on unoccupied islands and sand bars not far from Bab al-Mandeb. These reports originated in most cases in Aden, and their prominent display in the Arab press was meant to serve the PDRY's interests, both in its relations with the Arab countries and in its struggle against "American imperialism," the Ethiopian regime and Israel. On several occasions the South Yemenis went as far as to accuse Saudi Arabia and the (northern) Yemen Arab Republic of complicity in the "American plots in the region," or at least of closing their eyes to them. This was only to be expected, as the regimes of Saudi Arabia and, to some extent, of the YAR were considered arch-enemies of the Aden government, which held itself to be the spearhead of scientific socialism

and Marxist revolution in the region. The PDRY supported the rebellion in Oman as well as subversive Marxist-oriented movements in Yemen (YAR), Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf countries; it was therefore nearly isolated in the Arab camp.

The allegations about Israeli bases on the Ethiopian mainland or on its islands had no truth in them and were repeatedly refuted by the Addis Ababa government. Even if Israel had been tempted to apply for such bases, it is unlikely that the cautious Ethiopians would have dared grant such a request. Moreover, isolated military installations on tiny islands near Bab al-Mandeb were worthless from a military point of view.

EXPANDING ISRAEL'S STRIKING RANGE

After the "Coral Sea" incident, it was imperative for Israel to deter the Arabs from taking further "strategic" actions in the area of Bab al-Mandeb. Above all, it was important to convince them that even at Bab al-Mandeb they would not be beyond the reach of the long arm of the Israeli armed forces. Indeed, if Israel could show that its striking power reached as far as the Gulf of Aden, it was likely that the super powers would prevent any attempt to interfere with Israeli freedom of navigation in the Red Sea region, because such action could lead to a dangerous escalation of tensions near the main sea lanes used by the super-tankers carrying oil from the Persian Gulf.

It is therefore significant that in 1971 Israel's army spokesman revealed the fact that the country's aeronautical industry had converted American Stratocruisers into "flying tankers" capable of refueling Israeli Phantoms, Skyhawks and Mirages in mid-air. This meant that Israeli aircraft could strike at targets well beyond Bab al-Mandeb and Aden. In March 1972 "Pentagon sources" disclosed that Israel was about to launch, or was already deploying in the Red Sea, an unspecified number of a new version of the Sa'ar missile boat, which not only carried the improved Gabriel missile, but was larger, faster, more heavily armed, and had a wider cruising range than the original French-built boats. The purpose of leaking this information was quite evident.

In truth, however, at the beginning of 1972 Israel's dockyards had just begun constructing the new missile boats ordered by the Israeli navy. When the Yom Kippur war broke out in October 1973, Israel's navy had only two such boats, both in the Mediterranean. Although

these Reshef-type missile boats and their smaller sisters (the Sa'ar excelled in their performance during the war, and succeeded in paralyzing the Syrian and Egyptian navies in the Mediterranean, the fact remained that Israel's navy did not have a flotilla of long-range missile boats in the Red Sea in October 1973. This was easily verified by the Russians through their satellites, and obviously the Egyptians were informed of this fact. Thus, although the Israeli counter-strategy concerning Bab al-Mandeb may have been theoretically viable, it failed to serve as a deterrent because it was not operational without the Reshef missile boats and the support of the Israeli airforce (fully-occupied in helping to repulse the Arab armies).

THE SUEZ CANAL AS A COUNTER-STRATEGY

Since 1971 the Israeli government has realized that the Red Sea had lost its previous significance to the super powers and was of little interest to them. This development was viewed unhappily by Israel because it served the cause of the Bab al-Mandeb "strategy" advocated by the extremist Arab regimes. The proposal suggested by Israel's defense minister, Moshe Dayan, on several occasions in the last two years — that Israel withdraw a short distance from the Bar-Lev line and that the Egyptians be allowed to reopen the Suez Canal as a first step towards a peace settlement — may have been meant *inter alia* to avert the dangerous situation which was gradually emerging in the Red Sea. The reopening of the Suez Canal would mean that Bab al-Mandeb and the Red Sea would again be swarming with hundreds of tankers and ships of every nation, making it difficult for the Arabs to interfere with Israeli shipping. However, Dayan's proposal was rejected by Egypt, which insisted on a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula before reopening the Canal. Israel's indirect attempt to reawaken the waning international interest in the Red Sea had failed.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE "NEW ARAB STRATEGY"

By 1973, although fully aware of the Soviet naval presence in the Gulf of Aden and of Russian influence in Somalia and the PDRY, the United States evinced little concern about the reopening of the Suez Canal or about political strategies involving the Red Sea. Its attention by this time was focused on the Persian Gulf, where it was determined to safeguard the stability of its local allies and maintain the flow of

their oil to the West. It was completing the withdrawal of its personnel and shipping the remnants of the equipment from its Kagnew base to the strategically-located island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean.

ETHIOPIA MOVES TOWARDS BREAKING RELATIONS

The repeated refusal of the United States to modernize Ethiopia's army narrowed that country's political options. Already by the 1960s elements in the Ethiopian ruling circles and among the younger intelligentsia had advocated the adoption of a policy of non-alignment, and the improvement of relations with the Arab countries – even at the expense of relations with Israel. By 1971 the Ethiopian government was no longer in a position to ignore this pressure. Relations with mainland China (P R C) were established at the end of 1970, and more attention was paid to Soviet overtures. When Ethiopia's request for modern arms and financial aid was once again refused by the United States at the beginning of 1973, Emperor Haile Selassie visited Moscow on his return from Washington. Although received cordially, the emperor found that the Russians were not as eager to grant aid to Ethiopia as they had been in the past. Moreover, if Haile Selassie had hoped to reawaken American interest in his country by courting Moscow, he was utterly mistaken; the United States remained indifferent to Ethiopia's future policy. With its limited means, Israel clearly could not provide the modern weapons which Ethiopia sought. Consequently, despite the fact that Israeli aid to Ethiopia was increased in 1972 and 1973, more voices were heard in Addis Ababa urging appeasement of the Arabs by limiting Israel's presence and activities in the country.

Ethiopia was also challenged by an expansion of ELF activities as an outcome of an internal ideological upheaval and the support provided by Libyan money and arms. Moreover, encouraged by the "progressive" Arab countries, in 1973 the Somali Republic revived its territorial claims upon Ethiopia and its demand for the annexation of the TFAI. The pressure on Ethiopia reached its peak early in 1973, on the eve of the conference of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), when Libya and Somalia repeatedly attacked Ethiopia on the issues of the Somali territories, Eritrea, and Ethiopia's relations with Israel. These problems assumed more acute dimensions because of the religious composition – over 40 percent Muslim – of officially-Christian Ethiopia.

Despite the fact that Israel was the only country in the region with which Ethiopia had a strong common interest, and which was willing

and able to give some aid to the latter's forces, the rapid deterioration of Israel's position in Africa made it increasingly difficult for Ethiopia to retain friendly ties. Israel was therefore asked to maintain a low profile in Ethiopia, and relations between the countries became cooler. Finally, when some of Israel's staunchest friends in Africa broke off relations during the Yom Kippur war, Ethiopia followed suit, although many in Addis Ababa doubted if this act would diminish the Arab pressures on their country.

Thus, although the "progressive" Arab countries did not succeed in "Arabizing" the African side of Bab al-Mandeb, they did ensure its non-intervention in the Arab "strategy." Moreover, with France wooing the Arabs, Ethiopia "neutralized," and both Russia and the United States virtually out of the Red Sea, there was little chance of opposition to any Arab plans in the region. On the contrary, several factors minimized such opposition.

SOVIET NEUTRALIZATION OF WESTERN INTERVENTION

Following the loss of its footholds in the Red Sea, the Soviet Union appeared to be content with the facilities it had acquired in the socialist countries along the Gulf of Aden and in Iraq (the last as the result of the treaty of April 1972). Moreover, the development of the advanced Poseidon missile (with a range well beyond that of the Polaris A3) by the United States meant that the Russians no longer had to fear an American naval presence in the Gulf of Aden. There was no need, therefore, to conceal or diminish the role of their navy and its facilities in the Indian Ocean. On the contrary, with their eyes on the Persian Gulf and the importance they attributed to relations with certain Arab countries, the Russians wished to impress upon the West that it could not ignore their interests when formulating policy in the region. Thus the Soviet fleet in the Gulf of Aden did not serve as a restraining factor in relation to the activities of Arab extremists. Rather, although still small in size and lacking air cover, this fleet served as a partial guarantee against American-Western naval intervention in the area. This was especially important when the Arab countries began to debate the use of the "oil weapon" in their struggle against Israel.

THE GROWING INDEPENDENCE OF THE OIL-PRODUCING COUNTRIES

By 1972 the traditional relationship between the super powers and several of the developing nations in the Middle East was in the process

of rapid change. In the past this relationship had been, to some extent, an outgrowth of the financial and military inferiority of the relatively backward countries in the area. But following the emergence of the cartel of oil-producing countries – OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) – and the increasing demand for fuel in the world, the balance shifted. Most of the factors which had made the oil-producing countries dependent on the Western industrialized nations were greatly diminished, if they existed at all. This was especially true of the Arab oil-producing countries organized in OAPEC (Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries), which jointly control more than half of the world's proven oil reserves. In the last two or three years some of these countries managed to accumulate vast currency surpluses which gave them, and to some extent all the Arab countries, freedom of action and a sense of importance and power completely disproportionate to their size, population and stage of development.

It is doubtful, therefore, that in 1973 the Soviet Union was willing, or even able, to restrain its "allies/clients." The same could be said in part about the relationship between the United States and the oil-producing countries. In point of fact, in order for the super powers to protect their interests and reduce their trade deficit with the Arab countries, they stepped up the supply of sophisticated arms to them, a matter which further increased the Arabs' ability to act independently.

Until the middle of 1973 the outstanding supporters of the "new strategy" against Israel in the southern part of the Red Sea were the PDRY and Libya. The latter was fanatically dedicated to "Islamic nationalism" and to the extermination of Israel, and seemed to be the more active and successful partner in this campaign despite its geographical distance from the region. The PDRY, which is adjacent to Bab al-Mandeb and controls Perim, has vociferously and frequently declared, in oft-repeated Radio Aden and other mass-communication media, that it is "dedicated to the struggle against Israel despite its poverty and despite the fact that it is surrounded by enemies." On several occasions since 1971 it was reported that the PDRY was fortifying Perim; in 1972 it became evident that long-range artillery had been placed in position facing the strait. When a French destroyer tried to approach the island during a tour of visits to Arab ports in 1972, it was shelled, and several of its sailors were wounded. The artillery in

Perim also had the backing of Libya which had achieved political successes in the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. In the latter area it was the prime mover in the truce between the two Yemens, and unrealistically urged that the two countries unite in order to ensure Arab cooperation in an area that was critical to the confrontation against Israel. Nonetheless, Arab blockade of Bab al-Mandeb remained a complicated matter — both because the African side of the strait was still “neutral,” and because a blockade was an illegal action in peacetime. Most important, the blockade strategy was impractical unless it could be maintained by a navy, which clearly necessitated the active participation of Egypt.

ARAB NAVAL STRENGTH

According to *The Military Balance, 1973-1974*, published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (London), the PDRY's navy consists of seven small, obsolete vessels manned by 200 sailors. The backbone of its small airforce is 15 MIG 17s. YAR has five fast patrol boats (FPB), two landing craft, and 300 sailors. Sudan's slightly larger navy, with 600 men, consists of six coastal patrol boats and two landing craft. Saudi Arabia has two torpedo boats, nine patrol boats, three other light craft, and nine coastguard hovercraft. Most of this navy, however, is stationed in the Persian Gulf, and although it is said that Saudi Arabia has 19 warships on order from the United States, their delivery is not imminent.

Undoubtedly the largest and most impressive Arab navy — at least on paper — is that of Egypt. But most if not all of its vessels are relatively old, and with the exception of some OSA and Komar-type missile boats (ex-Soviet), it hardly operated in the 1967 and 1973 wars. Part of the Egyptian navy remained in the Red Sea after the Six-Day War, but some of its units fell prey to the attacks of Israel's airforce, navy and naval commando units during the war of attrition and in 1973. Egypt's Red Sea navy is thought to be composed of two Skory-class destroyers (ex-Soviet), two relatively old submarines (ex-Soviet), a flotilla of missile and torpedo boats, several mine-sweepers, and a variety of smaller craft. It is in rather poor shape because of lack of suitable facilities and poor maintenance in its main bases in Safaga and Ghardaka. Probably fearing Israel's airforce, it made only one attempt to challenge the tiny Israeli Red Sea fleet during the last war. Conse-

quently, the latter was able to virtually blockade the Gulf of Suez off the Straits of Jubal during October-November 1973. Nonetheless, the Egyptian navy is operational, and its power and size are quite impressive in comparison to all the other navies in the Red Sea.

Thus the relatively heavy warships at Egypt's disposal and the facilities available for their servicing in the Arab countries adjacent to Bab al-Mandeb enabled the blockade of that strait. Israel, which had only light craft with a limited cruising range in the Red Sea, was unable to counter the blockade. The Israeli navy, which was sufficient to neutralize the attempt to seal off Sharm al-Sheikh, could not operate as successfully in more distant waters.

The radical changes in the situation in the Red Sea region discussed in this paper, and Israel's failure to build up the power of its own navy in this arena, paved the way for the much-publicized (but officially undeclared) blockade of Bab al-Mandeb by the Egyptian navy (supported by the tiny navies of YAR and PDRY) during the Yom Kippur war.

CONCLUSION

As expected, the Egyptian blockade of Bab al-Mandeb enabled Israel's enemies (and led some of its friends) to question the validity of its case for retaining Sharm al-Sheikh. If maritime shipping to or from Eilat could be stopped, as the Egyptians proved, at Bab al-Mandeb or at any other point beyond the range of Israel's striking power, Israel's claims to Sharm al-Sheikh would seem to have no justification. The apparent logic of such an argument, however, is fallacious. It is based upon the fact that the Arabs (primarily the Egyptians) were able to achieve temporary military-naval superiority at a point beyond Israel's fighting reach. However, despite the fact that Israel's deterrent tactics failed to prevent the blockade of Bab al-Mandeb — mainly because the naval factor was missing — the concept behind the Israeli strategy and its claim to continued control of the Straits of Tiran were not proven wrong.

The navigable channel of Tiran is less than a mile wide (compared to the 16½ miles of Bab al-Mandeb) and can easily be blocked by coastal batteries. Moreover, although the Gulf of Eilat is shared by four nations, it serves only two of them and sees relatively limited maritime

activity. Twice in the past, the Egyptians used dubious interpretations of international law to justify the peacetime blockade of Eilat. The Egyptian arguments were, nonetheless, not dismissed off-hand by the family of nations.

There is no question, however, about the international status of Bab al-Mandeb. One should note, in this respect, that Egypt never officially announced the blockade of the strait, and quietly agreed to lift it once a cease-fire was reached, while in the past it was adamant concerning the blockade of Tiran. Indeed, the presence of the United Nations peace-keeping force at Sharm al-Sheikh did not deter Nasser from renewing the blockade at Tiran in 1967, once he felt that he was sufficiently strong to do so. International guarantees backed by the United States, France and Britain were of no value when Egypt, supported by the Soviet Union, refused to lift the blockade. Circumstances may arise in the future when similar guarantees may prove as worthless as those of the past.

If Israel were to have the ability and the option to mount counter-blockades or to strike at anyone interfering with its shipping in the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb, or even beyond it, the Arab countries of the region might rethink the advisability of their "new strategy." Although it is difficult at present to envisage the possibility of Israeli sea-air strikes against enemy bases and ports in the Red Sea, at Perim, or Aden, or of sea battles in the Gulf of Aden near the major maritime routes of the Persian Gulf, such moves, if made, would certainly not be taken lightly by the super powers. The American naval presence near Bab al-Mandeb since October 1973, and the Soviet silence (with the exception of a mild article in *Pravda*, published only on December 12, 1973) concerning that presence, could well be indications of such anxiety. Moreover, the United States recently acquired the right to expand the naval and air base at Diego Garcia, probably as a result of the possible strategic implication of the future opening of the Suez Canal, and the growth of Soviet naval power in the western part of the Indian Ocean. Possession of Sharm al-Sheikh, and the crucial extra range this naval and air base provides, is a key to Israel's options.

Above all, it is quite possible that as an outcome of the recent war the Suez Canal will be reopened in the near future. The Egyptians, in fact, have already issued tenders for its dredging and clearing, and Japan has announced its willingness to grant a loan for such a purpose. Loans

have also been secured for the construction of the Egyptian Suez-Alexandria pipe-line, to be built by an American firm. When thousands of ships and tankers again ply the lanes of the Red Sea, a blockade against shipping to Israel will be highly improbable, and Israel will have the legal right to act against a flagrant violation of international law. This assumption is logical, however, only if Israel retains control of Sharm al-Sheikh: a blockade could still be carried out with impunity at the Straits of Tiran if it were to be closed by the Arabs despite international guarantees, as was the case in the past. In such an eventuality, Israel would be unable even to maintain a navy in the Gulf of Eilat, and might find itself in a most precarious situation. The fact that both sides will be holding the keys to the gates of the major passageways to the Red Sea will serve as a contribution to the stability of the region.

Sharm al-Sheikh is of no direct importance to Egypt. It is, however, essential for the protection of Israel's shipping and oil industry, as well as for the protection of Eilat and the southern Negev, always coveted by Egypt. If Israel were to give up Sharm al-Sheikh it would not only jeopardize its security and interests, but might in fact provide a catalyst for the next round in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

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