

# Disputes Over the Red Sea

## **Interview: -**

More than one tenth of global trade passes through a strait that measures just twenty miles across. The Bab al-Mandab, at the southern entrance to the Red Sea, is a vital choke point on one of the world's busiest shipping lanes. But it passes through the heart of a dangerous region beset by civil wars and humanitarian crises. Great Decisions examines a region where the world's great powers can cooperate to create stability or allow deepening rifts to tear it apart. Red Sea Rivalries: A Conflict of Interests, next on Great Decisions.

**Narrator: -** The civil war in Yemen has become one of the defining conflicts of the early 21st century. Three million people have been forced to flee their homes, and 15 million are on the brink of starvation, but peace proves elusive. The Yemeni crisis has proven so intractable because foreign interventions have exacerbated the conflict.

## **Interview: -**

Gradually, the war in Yemen has consumed the entire region around it. Somalia, Eritrea, and Djibouti have each offered their airspace to the Saudi-led coalition, and several African countries have sent troops to join the fighting.

## **Interview: -**

The Saudis, obviously they didn't want to send too many of their own soldiers to fight and die in Yemen, so, they recruited others, and the Sudanese in particular have served as cannon fodder.

## **Interview: -**

As the war continues, experts worry that a failed state in Yemen could destabilize the entire Red Sea region, with ramifications that would echo around the globe.

## **Interview: -**

This is not a place where you want to see greater chaos than exists today.

## **Interview: -**

The world's maritime powers regarded the Red Sea as a relative backwater until 1869. That year, a team of French engineers and Egyptian laborers completed a decade-long project to dig a canal across the Isthmus of Suez. Suddenly, the Red Sea was part of the route connecting Europe and Asia.

**Newscaster: -**

An artificial waterway that was built for the trades and pleasures of peacetime has turned Port Said into one of the most important of the world's junctions.

**Interview: -**

Today the shipping lanes through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea remain critical for global commerce.

**Interview: -**

The world's navies also rely on safe passage through the Red Sea to reach the warm waters of the Indian Ocean.

**Interview: -**

The concern for the security of the Indian Ocean is broadly shared. Many, many navies keep ships present. For what purpose? To help assure freedom of navigation.

**Interview: -**

Some analysts predict that the countries along the Red Sea are poised for an economic boom. Foreign investment, especially in real estate, is on the rise.

**Interview: -**

The looming threat of terrorism, piracy, and war means that freedom of navigation in the region is never certain.

**Interview: -**

The richest and most powerful country on the Red Sea is Saudi Arabia. The Holy City of Mecca, just inland from the coast, has long been a center for pilgrimage and commerce. In

recent years, Riyadh has pursued an aggressive foreign policy. With tacit support from the United States, the Saudis have led the foreign intervention in Yemen.

**Interview: -**

Some observers charge that the Saudis have taken necessary steps to combat Iran. Others contend that it is the Saudis who are the aggressors.

**Interview: -**

Yemen is not the only country where regional rivalries are being played out. In Somalia, too, competing Middle Eastern governments have taken opposing sides in a domestic conflict.

**Interview: -**

In an attempt to secure the Red Sea, richer Arab countries have also sought military bases on the African side, a trend that has the potential to upend the balance of power in the region.

**Interview: -**

Some analysts worry that Arab countries are exporting their rivalries to the Horn of Africa, a part of the world with plenty of longstanding rivalries of its own.

**Interview: -**

You have a couple of splits, maybe three splits. On the one hand you have United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, some of their allies, I would put Bahrain in that category, who are pushing in one direction in the Horn, which essentially means pushing against anyone affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. You have another group, Qatar, Turkey particularly, that are, that have somewhat better relations with the Muslim Brotherhood and are going in another direction. And then Iran gets in the middle of all of this.

**Interview: -**

Many countries in the Red Sea region are under the thumb of authoritarian regimes that are profoundly unpopular at home.

**Interview: -**

In Sudan's capital city of Khartoum, hundreds of thousands of protestors took to the streets in the spring of 2019 to demand democratic reforms. They succeeded in toppling longtime dictator Omar al-Bashir, but Sudan's military is unwilling to relinquish control.

**Interview: -**

In neighboring Ethiopia, a diverse country of more than 100 million, ethnic tensions have threatened the central government.

**Interview: -**

With so much at stake, it is little wonder that many countries, including the United States, have established a military presence in the Red Sea. Recently, some officials in the Trump administration have suggested that the U.S. should commit even more assets to the region.

**Interview: -**

China, too, has entered the fray. In 2017, the People's Liberation Army opened its first overseas base in Djibouti, just a few miles from American, French, and Japanese bases. The move has raised questions about Beijing's military ambitions.

**Interview: -**

As China promotes its Belt and Road Initiative, experts disagree on how overt a role Beijing intends to play in the politics of the Red Sea region.

**Interview: -**

Some analysts worry that the U.S. is not engaged enough politically and economically around the Red Sea to offer an effective counter to China's growing presence.

**Interview: -**

The Red Sea could be an area where American and Chinese interests align, presenting a valuable opportunity for cooperation.

**Interview: -**

I mean it has in the past. I think most people in the U.S. counter-piracy efforts were quite pleased at China's contributions there.

**Interview: -**

Efforts to bring peace to the Red Sea region will test whether the international community can work together toward a common good. The stakes are high. The wrong decisions could create a fractured region of failed states and dangerous seas.