

Red Sea War : How the Houthi onslaught affected the security of the state

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the implications of Houthi attacks in the Red Sea on global maritime security and international trade. Utilizing qualitative research with literature review methodology, it explores the geopolitical and economic impacts of these disruptions, particularly in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and surrounding regions. The findings highlight a dramatic shift in shipping routes as vessels divert from the Red Sea to the Cape of Good Hope, increasing transit times and costs. The attacks also exacerbate tensions in the Middle East, impacting regional stability and global trade dynamics, especially in energy supply. The study underscores the necessity of enhancing maritime security, diversifying trade routes, and intensifying international diplomatic efforts to mitigate these challenges.

INTRODUCTION

The Red Sea, is a large bay that separates the continent of western Asia from east Africa and is located on the Arabian Peninsula. The sea is surrounded by several countries such as Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Yemen, Jordan, Palestine and Saudi Arabia. Due to its strategic location connecting the Mediterranean Sea with the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea became an important maritime route for trade and transportation in the world. In the northern part of the Red Sea, there is the Suez Canal which serves as a shortcut for ships traveling between these regions, as it reduces the distance and sailing time required (Ranzan, 2024). This route provides ships with more economical and efficient time and cost because it has shorter and safer routes than if ships pass through the long and dangerous journey by passing around the southern tip of Africa.

However, in November 2023, the Red Sea was smoldering due to attacks from non-state actors, namely the Houthis, on cargo ships sailing to the Suez Canal. In a broader geopolitical context, the Houthis, which have the support of Iran, have shown their solidarity with the Palestinians attacked by Israel by launching attacks on ships linked to Israel in response to Israeli military actions in Gaza. In this context, the Houthi attacks can be seen as part of a larger strategy to express support for groups opposed to Israel, such as Hamas, and to show that they can affect maritime security in this vital region (Behrschmidt, H. M., & Sick, 2024).

The Houthis' attacks on ships linked to Israel also serve as a political signal, affirming their position in the broader conflict between Iran and its allies against Israel and Arab countries that support Israel. This shows how the conflict in Gaza can spark reactions elsewhere, including in the Red Sea, where the Houthis seek to strengthen their image as defenders of Palestine (Carlson, 2024).

From a maritime security perspective, the Houthi offensive has led to a significant decline in shipping activity in the region. Many ships choose to avoid the traditional route through the Red Sea and switch to alternative routes, such as circumnavigating the Cape of Good Hope, which are longer and more expensive. This shows that the instability caused by the Houthis not only has an impact on regional security but also on the global economy, which is highly dependent on the smooth flow of goods through this sea route (Rodriguez-Diaz, E., Alcaide, J. I., & Garcia-Llave, 2024).

In addition, the conflict in Yemen between the Houthi rebel group and the Saudi-led coalition has a direct impact on the security of the Red Sea, as attacks targeting merchant ships, oil tankers and maritime installations using missiles, drones and other explosive devices threaten freedom of navigation and the security of national trade routes, adding to the region's already complex vulnerability due to rivalries between countries in the Middle East. Because maritime security is a crucial thing that needs to be considered that the tensions arising from the Houthi attack not only affect the global economy, but also threaten regional political stability which is feared to create a significant impact on a global scale.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

In the context of the war that took place in the Red Sea, it can be seen how threats to national security are articulated and politicized. Such as the Houthis' actions attacking ships in the region can be considered an attempt to create instability that triggers a response from other countries, especially those with strategic interests in the region. Haryanto explained how securitization theory can be applied to understand government efforts in dealing with cybersecurity threats, which can be likened to how countries in the region respond to threats from the Houthis (Haryanto, A., & Sutra, 2023). This shows that the threats faced are not only physical threats, but can also be threats to broader maritime security.

In addition, in the context of human security, research by Karisma can provide additional perspective on how conflicts in the Red Sea affect not only the countries involved, but also civilian populations affected by instability (Karisma, 2023). Human security includes the protection of individuals from threats that can disrupt their daily lives, including armed conflicts and attacks on civilian infrastructure..

In the context of maritime security, Komojoyo in his research discusses how Singapore's maritime security strategy and its impact on Indonesia, can be linked to how countries around the Red Sea respond to threats from the Houthis (Komojoyo, 2023). Countries with interests in the Red Sea must develop a comprehensive security strategy to protect trade routes and their national interests, hence the importance of regional cooperation in dealing with cross-border threats.

METHODOLOGY

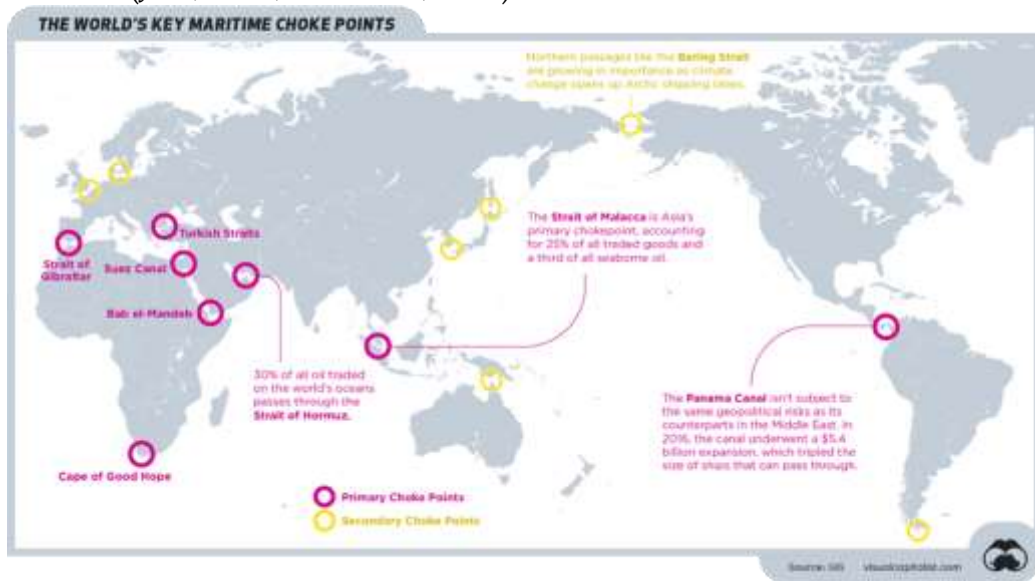
The research methodology employed in this study is a qualitative approaches According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is an appropriate approach for understanding the meaning of social and humanitarian issues. The method utilized in this study is literature review. The literature review is conducted by collecting primary and secondary data sources that involves a comprehensive review of scholarly articles and books that delve into the various dimensions of the Middle East conflict and its impact on international trade. The selected references cover a wide range of topics, including historical analysis, the role of media, ethnic conflicts, and the influence of specific actors such as Israel. Additionally, the interrelation of peace and economic interdependence, as well as the significance of cross-border trade in the Middle East, are explored. The relationship between international trade and conflict escalation is also a focal point of the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Red Sea is located between northeastern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, connecting the Mediterranean Sea via the Suez Canal in the north and the Arabian Sea through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait in the south. It has a strategic position that connects countries in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. In terms of geopolitics, the Red Sea has become an arena of competition between regional

and international powers. Yemen, with its proximity to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, has become a focal point in the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Houthis, backed by Iran, attacks on ships and infrastructure around the Red Sea show how this conflict can affect stability and security in the region (Abdulla, K. A., & Singh, 2018). In addition, these attacks also have an impact on international trade, as they disrupt shipping lanes vital for the delivery of goods and energy (Lott, 2022).

Before the escalation of the Houthi attacks, the Red Sea was known as a relatively safe trade route, but rising political tensions and armed conflicts have put security in the region under wraps. The Houthis' attacks on oil facilities in Saudi Arabia and ships sailing in the Red Sea create uncertainty for international trade actors (Jose, H. S., & Fathun, 2021).



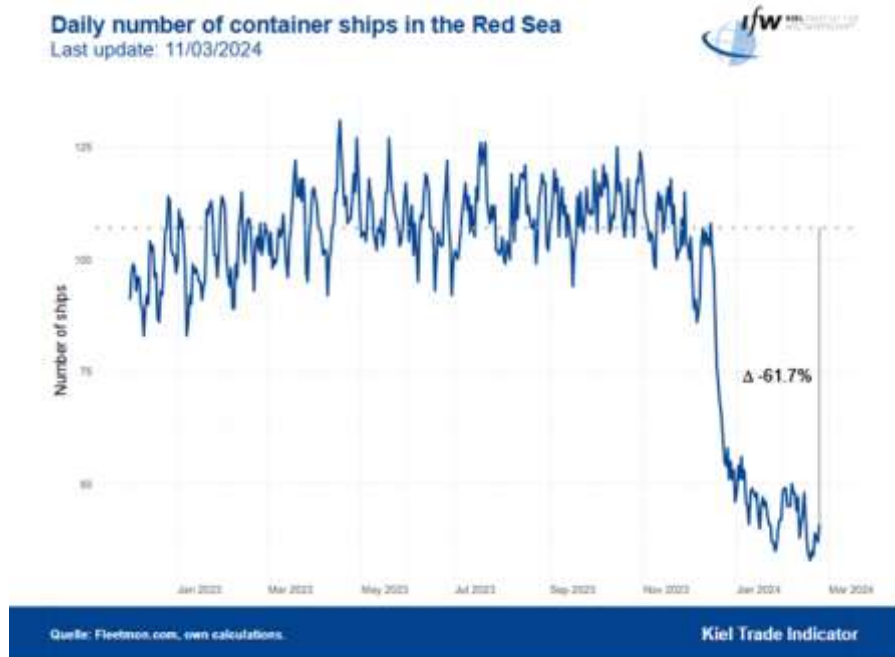
Pict 1 : The World's Key Maritime Choke Point

Sources : <https://safety4sea.com/which-are-the-worlds-most-important-maritime-choke-points/>

Based on the following map quoted from the safety4seas website, there are 8 main chokepoints in the map of world trade routes by sea, 2 of which are at the end of the Red Sea, namely Bab el-Mandeb which is close to Yemen where usually ships departing from Asia to Europe enter the Red Sea through this chokepoint, then at the end there is the Suez canal which is located close to the European continent.

However, since the Houthi attack in November 2023, there have been very significant changes to this trade route. According to data from the Kiel Institute, the number of containers passing through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal decreased in February 2024 when compared to January 2024. And at the same time, the number of containers passing through Africa's Cape of Good Hope increased by three times.

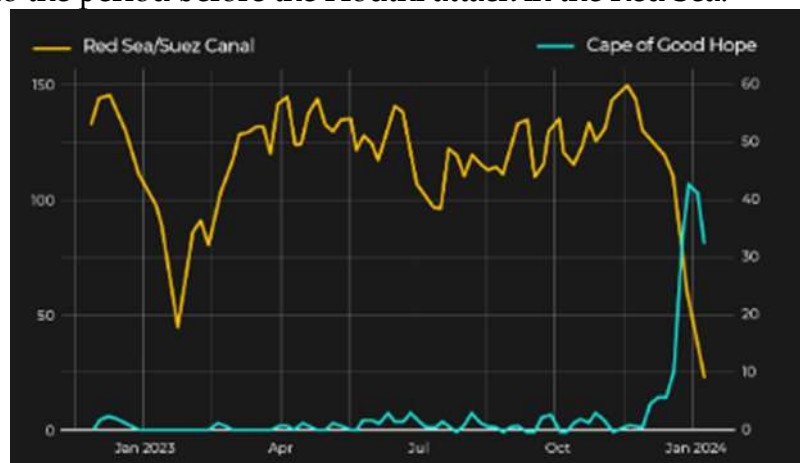
Currently, an average of around 40 containers pass through the Red Sea, but when compared to last year where there were 100 containers passing through the Red Sea every day. This figure is close to the lowest figure that occurred in mid-January 2024.



**Pict 2 : Daily Number of Container Ships in the Red Sea
Period : Januari 2023 – March 2024**

Source : <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/publications/news/renewed-slump-of-ship-transits-in-the-red-sea-after-slight-stabilization/>

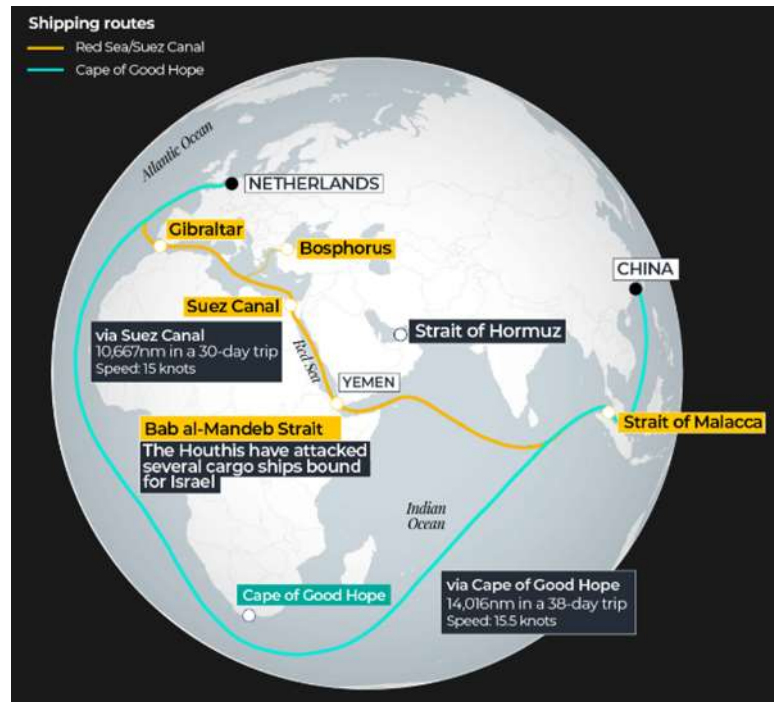
From the picture above. It can be seen that the downward trend in the number of ships crossing the Red Sea has decreased drastically from November 2023 to March 2023. The decrease is very large, a decrease of 61.7% when compared to the period before the Houthi attack in the Red Sea.



Pict 3 : Trade Route Passing Red Sea and Cape of Good Hope

Source : <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2024/mapping-red-sea-shipping-attacks/>

Based on the picture above, there is the opposite of what happened in the Red Sea, where ships that initially crossed the Red Sea now turn around and prefer to pass through the Cape Of Good Hope, because the only way to remain can ship either from Asia to Europe or America and vice versa. The number of ships passing through Cape of Good Hope began to increase from November and peaked in January 2024, while ships crossing the Red Sea decreased.



Pict 4 : Comparison Shipping Routes from China to Netherland

Source : <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2024/mapping-red-sea-shipping-attacks/>

The comparison of the distance and delivery time from China to the Netherlands is very significant, normally shipping from China to the Netherlands takes 30 days of shipping, but if you pass the Cape of Good Hope, the travel time required for shipping from China to the Netherlands is getting longer, which is 38 shipping days. In other words, the fulfillment of needs in the countries affected by this attack, because usually ships passing through the Red Sea have a faster time than if they have to go around the Cape of Good Hope Africa. In addition to travel time, fuel is also the main concern in shipping by sea, considering the longer travel time, the fuel needed for the delivery of these containers is also greater.

According to Damayanti, tensions in maritime areas such as the Red Sea can affect the stability of global oil supply, which is one of the main commodities through which shipments are made. In addition to oil, ships carrying commercial goods are also targeted by attacks (Damayanti, A., Meresin, A., & Karyoprawiro, 2022). This attack not only threatens the safety of shipping, both human resources working on the ship and the losses incurred by the shipping owner, but also causes significant disruption in the global supply chain. This causes a scarcity of goods in the domestic markets of countries that depend on imports from the region. According to Kurniawan, this disruption can trigger a surge in the price of imported goods, thereby affecting inflation and people's purchasing power. Given that oil is one of the main commodities shipped through the Red Sea, it is possible that countries that depend on oil imports could face an energy crisis, which could trigger a surge in fuel prices (Li, F., Yang, C., Li, Z., & Failler, 2021). In addition, the scarcity of containers and ships also needs to be considered, because with a longer travel distance, it can result in the accumulation of goods at the port and a shortage of containers for the delivery of other goods.

Apart from the world economy, geopolitical factors are also crucial things that need to be reviewed, considering that many countries depend on this path. The attack became part of broader tensions in the Middle East, as many international actors were caught up in a complex rivalry. Because since the Houthis took over Sana'a from Yemen in 2014, the situation in Yemen has become increasingly laborious, and with military intervention from the Saudi-led coalition, and support from western countries seeking to restore an internationally recognized government (Clausen, 2022). These tensions not only affect Yemen, but also impact neighboring countries, especially Saudi Arabia, which feel threatened by the existence of the Iranian-backed Houthis (Van Der Kroft, 2021).

The geopolitical uncertainty caused by the Houthi attacks is feared to result in losses with reduced investment and increased borrowing costs for countries involved in trade with Yemen, in addition to countries involved in the military coalition in Yemen, such as Saudi Arabia may face greater economic losses due to their increased military spending and the impact of international sanctions. and the worst possibility of this attack is an escalation of the conflict beyond the region, even feared to become a regional war involving major powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. If this happens, not only will there be great human losses, but the threat of a global recession resulting from the disruption of economic stability due to disrupted economic sectors.

The policies of countries around Yemen have also been affected by the Houthi offensive. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are increasing their military spending and strengthening alliances with other western countries to confront this threat (Ansari, D., De Oca Leon, M. M., & Schlüter, 2021).

The attacks in the region, escalating political tensions in the Middle East, which was already fragmented by prolonged conflict and rivalry, reflect a larger dynamic in proxy conflicts involving Iran and Arab states seeking to maintain control over this strategic trade route (Jose, H. S., & Fathun, 2021). The stability of the region is also threatened because the uncertainty posed by these attacks could prompt countries to increase their military spending, diverting resources away from economic and social development (Abdulla, K. A., & Singh, 2018).

This condition exacerbates the political dynamics of the region that is already divided. In addition to the Yemen war, there are other interrelated conflicts, such as the crisis in Syria, tensions between Sunnis and Shiites, as well as the struggle for influence between major powers such as the US, Russia, and European countries. The instability caused by the Houthi offensive has affected not only Yemen, but also neighboring countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman, all of which are involved in this conflict in various capacities.

The attacks launched by the Houthis in the Red Sea have a direct impact on countries located along the trade route. One of the most affected is Saudi Arabia, which has seen attacks on oil facilities and other critical infrastructure. In addition, the Houthis' attacks on commercial and military vessels have also shaken the global economy, with possible disruptions in energy supplies from the Arabian Gulf.

The Saudi-led coalition is increasingly facing difficulties in maintaining stability in the region. In addition to the civil war in Yemen, countries such as Bahrain, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia are also involved in other conflicts, such as the crises in Lebanon and Syria. The continuation of the Houthi conflict increases the threat to the security and political stability of the Gulf states and also encourages sharper polarization between Sunni and Shiite states

Furthermore, these attacks divert the world's attention from peace efforts in the Middle East region. International focus on the Yemen war is diminishing as attention shifts to other conflicts, including the war in Syria and growing tensions between major powers. Countries such as the US and Russia have different interests in these conflicts, with the US more supportive of Saudi Arabia and Russia closer to Iran.

Globally, the Houthi attacks add to tensions in international relations, especially with regard to the security of strategic trade routes. The Red Sea is a major route for the delivery of goods, and disruptions in the region could increase shipping costs and undermine global economic stability. One example of the immediate impact is the surge in world oil prices after attacks on Saudi oil facilities, which shook global energy markets.

In addition, these attacks pose a threat to international shipping and commercial ships crossing the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Red Sea. If this conflict continues, it could affect the economies of major countries such as China, India, and European countries, which have a high dependence on these trade routes.

Directly, the Houthi offensive in the Red Sea may not be related to the war between Israel and the Palestinians. However, the tensions caused by the Houthi offensive and related conflicts could affect the dynamics in the Middle East region as a whole, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

As tensions between major powers such as the U.S. and Iran increase, and as sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shiites deepen, conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian war can be affected by changes in alliances and foreign policy. Iran, which backs the Houthis, is also a major supporter of groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. As such, the Houthi offensive could be seen as part of a larger dynamic in the Middle East that has influenced the way major states and regional actors respond to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In addition, the instability caused by conflicts in the Middle East, including the Houthi offensive, could worsen the Palestinians' position in peace talks, as international attention is divided. Major states tend to focus more on conflicts that are closer to their interests, which makes peace efforts between Israel and the Palestinians increasingly difficult to achieve.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Houthi offensive in the Red Sea, which began in November 2023, has had a significant impact on global trade routes. The Red Sea, formerly known as a relatively safe trade route, is now a major point of geopolitical tension affecting stability and security in the region. Attacks on ships and infrastructure around the Bab el-Mandeb Strait as well as oil facilities in Saudi Arabia have disrupted international trade flows and increased global shipping costs. As a result, the

number of containers passing through the Red Sea has dropped dramatically, with ships opting for alternative routes through the Cape of Good Hope in Africa. In addition, the geopolitical tensions caused by these attacks have the potential to worsen the political situation in the already conflict-torn Middle East region, and lead to further polarization between Sunni and Shiite countries. The impact is not only limited to Yemen, but also affects neighboring countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as well as affecting international relations more broadly, including in the context of tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia

1. Marine Security Handling :

Further efforts are needed to improve the security of trade routes in the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Coordination between the countries involved and international parties must be strengthened to prevent attacks on trading vessels and other vital infrastructure.

2. Diversification of Trade Routes

To reduce reliance on the Red Sea route, countries using this trade route would do well to explore diversifying routes, such as routes through the Cape of Good Hope, although this risks adding to the cost and delivery time.

3. Geopolitical Monitoring

Governments and international organizations need to pay more attention to geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East region, because the tensions that occur can affect global economic stability, especially related to energy supply and commodity prices.

4. The Role of International Diplomacy :

Stepping up diplomatic efforts to ease political tensions between countries involved in this conflict, including supporting dialogue and peaceful solutions to avoid further escalation that could affect global security

FURTHER STUDY

Future research could focus on enhancing maritime security in the Red Sea through regional and international collaboration, assessing the economic impacts of diversifying trade routes like the Cape of Good Hope, and studying the geopolitical dynamics fueling Middle East tensions. Additionally, exploring the effectiveness of international diplomacy in resolving conflicts and promoting stability could provide valuable insights for securing global trade and maintaining economic stability.

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