



MENA Regional Waters:
A Workshop on the Red Sea/Arabian Sea Smuggling Conundrum
Prepared by the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies
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Executive Summary:

From 18 to 19 May, the Near East South (NESAs) Center for Strategic Studies conducted a workshop focused on the security environment in the Red and Arabian Seas. Focusing on the activities of smugglers, traffickers, and violent extremists in the maritime domain and coastal environments, this workshop brought together 34 participants from seven regional states.

This workshop was conducted digitally due to the ongoing pressures of the pandemic environment. A component part of NESAs's ongoing investment in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) focused programming, this program was supported by United States Central Command (USCENTCOM) and sought to initiate discussions with regional partners about the increasingly crowded and complicated waters surrounding the Arabian Peninsula.

The program used panel sessions to feature analysis by prominent subject matter experts. Subject matter experts hailed from the United States Naval Academy, I.R. Consilium, the Pacific Forum, and the United National Office on Drugs and Crime, among others. The event culminated in a discussion featuring the European Union's Special Representative for the Horn of Africa, the NESAs Center's Director, and a senior analyst from CNA. The two-day event is also the first part of a two-part series on these waters. The second iteration will be conducted digitally in September of 2021 and follow a tabletop game format to allow participants the chance to take the ideas generated in part one and experiment with how to build policy ideas for addressing maritime challenges.

Themes:

- The Red and Arabian Seas is gradually becoming a cauldron for transnational crime. The smuggling that existed in the region is diversifying, merging with other criminal elements (like VEOs), and increasing in scale. It threatens to challenge regional states and regional multilateral institutions. While many local and international institutions are aware, it is not a main priority for many states.
- The region exists as a model for maritime multilateral cooperation. Combined Maritime Forces remains one of the most successful multilateral maritime security efforts in history. EUNAVFOR and other European and regional implemented efforts tied to the mid-10s emergence of piracy off the Horn of Africa do remain active in the region and seek to address new circumstances. Regionally led efforts, such as a Red Sea initiative

being led by Saudi Arabia are being stood up. Yet, illicit actors are adapting to multilateral efforts.

- Unsteady regional development contributes to maritime criminality. Failing states, widespread inequality, and lack of economic opportunity are common in the region. States have limited ability in some cases to respond to the demographic necessities and that in turn leads communities, particularly coastal communities, to explore illicit means for gaining income. What is being observed in the Red and Arabian Seas is not isolated to the water – it is symptom of a larger economic illness on land.
- Geographic reality and history mean more than state boundaries. This region's coastal populations have long traded with one another. It became part of the historical tradition of the peoples in the Red and Arabian Seas. National boundaries that seek to delineate regional trade are not going to alter that history.
- The open question of what regional states want in littoral zones. Due to scale of maritime challenges and the logistical hardships of covering such expansive areas, it is difficult to develop a comprehensive methodology for addressing maritime challenges.
- Capabilities/Capacities Debate in the region. Evidence from throughout the wider IOR reveals that there is a transformation in how regional navies, coast guards, and maritime law enforcement approach the maritime domain. There was an established pattern of regional states seeking to progress the capacity of their maritime security services by adding assets, equipment, arms, and vessels. This proved often ineffective. More and more regional states seek to maximize the capability of what they currently have by making services better integrated with neighbors, more professional, able to build and sustain better information systems, and so forth.

Methodologies:

- Multilateralism – cooperative efforts at addressing maritime challenges came up routinely, but multilateralism is not a silver bullet that fixes all. The reality of a multipolar world, the sheer number of challenges, and persisting regional tensions mean that cooperation is a must, but it must lead to specific action.
- Data Management and Access – the days where data was hard to come by are gone, even for lesser developed states. Data management is the issue now – navigating the large amount of data sets available to best determine ways to address challenges in the maritime domain. Regional states know the scope of illicit trafficking in the region and know that it cannot all be stopped or even impeded. To be more effective, data must be tied to operations efficiently and effectively to not only increase costs on illicit networks, but to also compete with the speed by which those illicit networks adapt.
- 'Radical Information Sharing' – the scale of illicit network activity has reached a scale where it threatens regional stability and security. These actors cannot be ignored. Yet, states have limited resources to use for addressing the problem set. Sharing information in a network manner is one option – from regional states to non-regional actors to academic/private sector institutions. What is widely known to be a problem by State A must be known as a problem within State B.
- Exercises/Best Practice Exchanges – to better reach an environment where information sharing is more common (and deep), regional states can increase the frequency by which their maritime services consult with one another. An effective method for this is exercises that allow various state actors to gain familiarity with the procedures and

patterns of their neighbors. An alternative model proposed was best practice exchanges – where states inform their partners what has proven effective for them in countering maritime challenges. Regardless, building familiarity among state actors in an operational setting is key.

Recommendations:

- Act in the short-term to accomplish long-term objectives. Given political sensitivities and a lack of regional integration, large objectives to address illicit networks at sea are not feasible. Short-term actions that serve as low-hanging fruit for regional cooperation, however, should be designed to serve a long-term (and large-scale) objective.
- Invigorate regional conversations about blue economic growth. Some regional states are emphasizing the blue economy, while others are not. Encourage regional discussions, such as what has occurred in the Mediterranean, the Bay of Bengal, and the Pacific Island States.
- Explore the logic of a regional Information Fusion Centre – the model of Singapore, India, and Madagascar.
- Better understand the routes used by illicit networks and the origins/destinations of their goods. Such a map can help to address myriad problems.
- Preemptive Planning – plan for the crises that could emerge to have better responses ready and to reveal areas of particular vulnerability (example of the Suez blockage early in 2021)

Polling Questions:

The below questions were asked to all who took part in the program. Responses are listed from most popular to least.

What factor do you think is the most influential in driving illicit networks within the Red/Arabian Seas?

1. Economic Factors
2. Political Disputes
3. Ease of Opportunity
4. Other
5. Geography

If you had to prioritize addressing regional instability in order to counter illicit traffickers, what would be your first priority?

1. Addressing the conflict in Yemen
2. Enhancing efforts at countering violent extremist organizations
3. Working to stabilize the Horn of Africa
4. Other
5. Seeking to ease tensions among Gulf States

If the Red/Arabian Seas region could find solutions to maritime problems by looking elsewhere, what region would you look to first?

1. Bay of Bengal/Eastern Indian Ocean
2. Mediterranean Sea
3. ASEAN/Southeast Asia
4. Other
5. Gulf of Guinea

Addressing the problem of illicit networks in this region is complicated and requires many steps. What step would you take first to address the problem?

1. Invest in deepening Maritime Domain Awareness
2. Increase the depth and frequency of coordination with neighboring states
3. Invest in more substantial information sharing efforts
4. Other
5. Invest in enhancing maritime operational capabilities

What element of maritime domain awareness do you feel this region needs to make the most substantial investment in?

1. More regular access to regional maritime information, such as an Information Fusion Center
2. Interagency/Whole-of-Government efforts directed towards maritime security
3. Other
4. Greater access to information systems/technological applications
5. Working towards helping senior national leaders have a more complete understanding of maritime security