

Towards a Broader Middle East War? The Iran-Israel “Non Official War”, Escalating at the Red Sea and Beyond with Global Consequences

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An agent of the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad was [executed in Iran](#) on December 16, according to IRNA news agency. In addition, an Israeli hacker group has claimed to have [paralyzed gas stations across Iran](#) in a cyber attack.

So much has been written on the Israeli campaign on Gaza and the West Bank, the humanitarian disaster, and its consequences. However, there is yet another angle to it, namely the escalation of the long going [fuel war](#) and of the so-called [shadow war](#) between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Jewish state, with even farther-reaching potential impacts globally way beyond the Red Sea and North Africa or the Middle East. One example of that is the fact that two of the largest shipping companies on the planet (Mærsk, and Hapag-Lloyd) have just announced they are temporarily suspending their Red Sea routes after strikes carried out by the Iran-backed Houthis. This is no small matter: we are talking about one of the world's main routes for fuel and oil shipments.

Speaking to the BBC on December 16, Mærsk stated that:

“following the near-miss incident involving Maersk Gibraltar yesterday and yet another attack on a container vessel today, we have instructed all Maersk vessels in the area bound to pass through the Bab al-Mandab Strait to pause their journey until further notice.”

The Bab al-Mandab strait, also known as the Gate of Tears, is located between Yemen (on the Arabian peninsula) and both Djibouti and Eritrea on the coast of Africa. It is through this route that ships reach the Suez Canal from south – all ships coming from the Indian Ocean, for example, have to pass through it. To avoid it means taking considerably larger routes, such as navigating around southern Africa – with larger costs.

The Houthi rebels control a large part of Yemen, and have been launching attacks on waterways almost daily as part of their campaign against Israel, which in turn has responded by deploying missile boats. Warships from the US, UK, and France have also shot down various missiles launched by the rebels. On December 15, a member of Houthi's Ansarullah politburo, Ali al-Qahoum stated Yemen is "ready" to respond to any military actions made by Israel or the US, adding that the operations will go on. Commenting on Maersk halting Red Sea journeys, Marco Forgione, director general at the Institute of Export & International Trade, said:

"This impacts every link in the supply chain... and will only increase the chances of critical products not making their destinations in time for Christmas."

As I [wrote](#) before, Israel has high stakes in Africa, way beyond its "[spyware](#)" diplomatic endeavors (often described as "buying friends by selling weapons"), the Red Sea particularly being its "back door" to coastal states such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Yemen etc. The 2020 US-brokered Abraham Accords and subsequent normalization agreements with Israel signed by countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) paved the way for security and military cooperation, which materialized itself in the [Israel-UAE joint naval drill](#) in November 2021, for instance, thus increasing Red Sea tensions.

There has been an energy and fuel crisis in the Levant (made worse by US Treasury sanctions and the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019), [affecting Lebanon particularly](#), and this context has empowered [Iranian oil diplomacy](#), as well as [Iranian-supported Hezbollah](#), with Tehran supplying fuel to allies abroad such as Syria, Lebanon, and even Venezuela.

As part of such economic warfare, long before the bold ongoing Houthi campaign, several clandestine attacks on vessels had been taking place, with Syria accusing Israel of being behind them – this is the context of today's Red Sea crisis. The Houthis seem to be willing to take this maritime proxy fuel war (and the proxy "shadow war") to a whole new level, though.

For years now, a non-official war has been going on between Israel and Iran, two dominant powers in the Middle East. In July 2022, I [asked](#) whether such a local cold war could escalate into a major regional conflict, potentially even spiraling into a global confrontation. The current situation has arguably taken us a bit closer to such a catastrophic scenario.

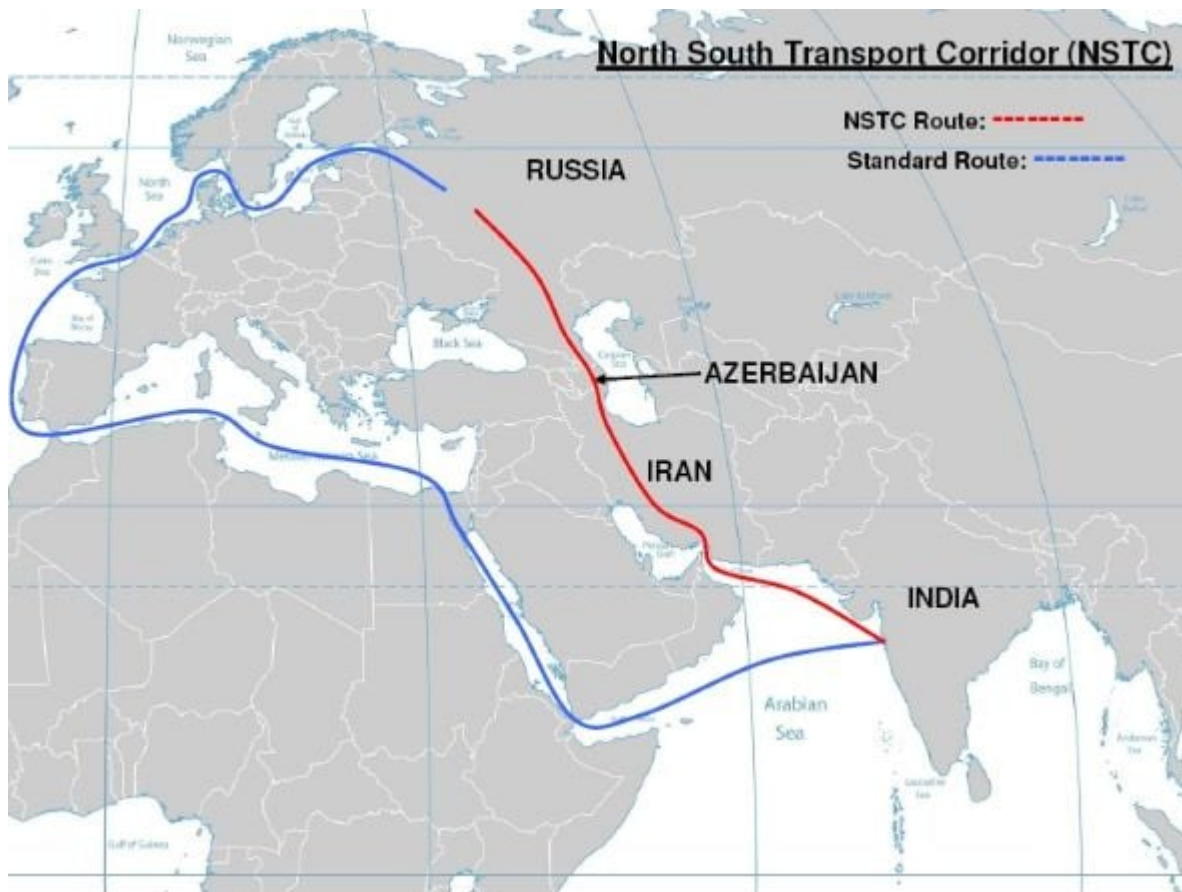
It would be ill-informed to think of the Houthis in Yemen (or Hezbollah in Lebanon, for that matter) as mere Iranian pawns. Such groups obviously have their own popular base, agenda and agency as political and social actors. In any case, Iran does lend its support to them in a number of ways, and a larger Iranian-Israeli proxy war is indeed one of the angles to it.

The level of alignment between the Islamic Republic and Hezbollah (also a Shiite organization) cannot possibly be compared to that between Iran and Hamas (a Palestinian Sunni group). However, Tehran's cooperation with Hamas has been on the rise, with the latter's leader Ismail Haniyeh having met with Iran's foreign minister in Qatar last month. How far this cooperation goes still remains to be seen. Tehran cannot "control" its "proxies" – much the same way Washington cannot do so with its Israeli ally. In this complex equation, there is a large degree of unpredictability and ample room for backfiring.

It should be noted that the Persian nation is an emerging power and should not be

underestimated. Due to its strategic location, for thousands of years, it played a key role as a route along the Silk Road for transporting goods from west to east. In the last decades, due to conflicts, sanctions and all kinds of infrastructures problems, such a potential has not been exploited.

Current conditions are changing, though. The aftermath of Washington's [failed neocolonial nation-building in Iraq](#) for one thing has been [an empowered Tehran](#). There is also the promising [North-South Transit Corridor \(NSTC\)](#), which does have the potential not only to counter US endeavors to isolate Iran and Russia economically, but actually to create a new promising route and an alternative to the Suez Canal.



In any case, the West does not want full escalation: top US military leaders have traveled to Tel Aviv to pressure Israel into avoiding major combat and a wider regional war by restraining itself and maintaining a more limited campaign. It remains to be seen whether a radicalized and emboldened Jewish state will refrain from crossing yet another redline – and whether the other actors involved will do the same: managing tensions from fully exploding is no simple task.

The Israel-Palestine conflict has always been a [polarizing issue](#) in Africa and the Middle East, particularly, and now it is also [dividing the West](#), with European authorities [crushing](#) pro-Palestine demonstrations. The intensification of it plus the escalation of the Israel-Iranian “shadow war” will offer the Western and pro-Israel political elites an opportunity to further push its demands for “[alignmentism](#)” (while eroding the Western narrative on “human rights”, as Tel Aviv’s campaign is facing unprecedented criticism), much the same way it will pose a diplomatic challenge to nations worldwide. There is just too much at stake, in humanitarian, ethical, religious, ideological, geoeconomic and geopolitical terms.

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