



**ASWAN FORUM**  
FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT  
ملتقى اسوان للسلام والتنمية المستدامة

# A Sea of Opportunity: Security and Development Across the Red Sea



**Outcome Report**

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## **ABOUT THE CAIRO INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION, PEACEKEEPING AND PEACEBUILDING (CCCPA)**

Founded in 1994, CCCPA is an Egyptian public agency; an AU Center of Excellence in training, capacity building and research; and the Arab world's leading civilian training center on issues of peace and security. It is a major voice of the Global South on a wide range of topics, including conflict prevention and resolution, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, peacemaking, preventing radicalization and extremism leading to terrorism, combating transnational threats, climate, peace and development, and the implementation of the women, peace and security (WPS) and the youth, peace and security (YPS) agendas. <https://www.cccpa-eg.org>

## **ABOUT THE ASWAN FORUM FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT**

Acting in its capacity as the Chairman of the African Union (AU) and the Champion of Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development (PCRD) in Africa, Egypt launched the Aswan Forum for Sustainable Peace and Development in 2019. Owned by Africa, and supported by international and regional partners, the Forum is a high-level, multi-stakeholder platform that brings heads of states, leaders from national governments, international and regional organizations, financial institutions, private sector, and civil society, together with visionaries, scholars, and prominent experts, for context-specific, action-oriented, and forward-looking discussions on the opportunities, as well as the threats and challenges, facing the continent. It provides the first-of-its-kind platform in Africa that seeks to operationalize the “peace-development nexus”, by championing African solutions to African problems, including through strengthening the links between policy and practice. <https://www.aswanforum.org/>

## Context

In its capacity as the Secretariat of the Aswan Forum for Sustainable Peace and Development, the Cairo International Center for Conflict Resolution, Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding (CCCCPA) organized a closed roundtable discussion on the margins of the 62nd Munich Security Conference, titled A Sea of Opportunity: Security and Development Across the Red Sea. Convened, as part of the Aswan Cycle, the discussion sought to examine the Red Sea through a holistic peace, security, and development lens. It also built on the deliberations of the Fifth Edition of the Aswan Forum and the Aswan Report, which underscored the importance of leveraging the strategic opportunity of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden region to advance regional integration and sustainable development. The roundtable provided an opportunity for dialogue on how security and development can be pursued as mutually reinforcing objectives, how regional cooperation can be strengthened, and how the region's risks can be transformed into opportunities for stability, integration, and shared prosperity.

The roundtable was enriched by the presence of a distinguished group of participants, including H.E. Amre Moussa, former Secretary-General of the League of Arab States and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Arab Republic of Egypt; HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Chairman of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, and former Director General of Saudi Intelligence; H.E. Ambassador Seif Kandeel, Director General of CCCCPA, and of the Aswan Forum for Sustainable Peace and Development; H.E. Dr. Annette Weber, European Union Special Representative for the Horn of Africa; The Hon. Amira Saber, Member of the Egyptian Parliament; Ms. Binaifer Nowrojee, President

of the Open Society Foundations; Ms. Mina Al-Oraibi, Editor-in-Chief of The National; Dr. Maha Yahya, Director of the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center; Mr. Richard Atwood, Vice President of the International Crisis Group; and Dr. Matthew Kroenig, Vice President for Geostrategy and Fellows and Senior Director of the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security at the Atlantic Council, among others.

This report reflects the key themes, ideas, and perspectives that emerged during the roundtable discussion. Held under the Chatham House Rule, the exchange enabled participants to share views candidly; accordingly, the report presents the substance of the discussion without attributing remarks to specific individuals or institutions. To situate the conversation within its evolving context, the analysis is complemented by recent developments and relevant dynamics in the broader region.

## Introduction – A Historic Maritime Crossroads and Strategic Artery of Global Trade

The Red Sea, with its eastern and western coasts, has long been central to global trade, mobility and geopolitical competition. Since ancient times, it has served as a major maritime corridor linking Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Mediterranean world and the Indian Ocean. Its strategic significance is reflected in early infrastructure efforts, such as the Canal of the Pharaohs—the first constructed waterway during different phases of ancient Egyptian and later Persian rule. The canal linked the Nile River to the Red Sea through the eastern Nile Delta, enabling navigation between the Mediterranean and the trade routes of the Indian Ocean.

Rather than just connecting the Nile to the Mediterranean, it established a passage that facilitated movement between these major maritime regions. This early undertaking highlights the long-standing importance of the Red Sea as a bridge for commerce and connectivity.

Beyond trade, the Red Sea has held deep cultural and religious significance, with narratives reinforcing the region's symbolic role in religious memory. Historically, it also played a vital role in facilitating religious mobility within the Islamic world. Pilgrimage routes connecting North Africa and the broader Mediterranean to the Arabian Peninsula often relied on Red Sea maritime networks. At the same time, the Red Sea formed part of a wider Islamic commercial system linking the Mediterranean with East Africa, Arabia, and South Asia. Muslim merchants were instrumental in developing and sustaining these trade networks, integrating the Red Sea into the broader

Indian Ocean trading world. Commodities, people, and ideas moved through these routes, reinforcing the region's role as both an economic hub and a cultural crossroads.

This historical role continues today in modern form. The Red Sea remains a critical global shipping route, carrying a significant share of international trade. Its strategic importance is largely shaped by two narrow chokepoints: the Suez Canal in the north and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait in the south. Together, these passages form one of the world's most critical maritime corridors for global trade and energy flows. Roughly 10-12 percent of global maritime trade—representing more than \$1 trillion in goods annually—passes through the Red Sea via the Suez Canal and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, making it one of the world's most important shipping arteries [1]. Its importance extends well beyond regional interests to the global economy, reinforcing the need for stability and cooperative governance. The smooth functioning of this maritime artery is therefore essential not only to regional economies but also to global supply chains, energy security, and international market stability.

Yet this strategic importance also magnifies the region's vulnerabilities, making developments in the Red Sea a matter of international concern. Recent disruptions to shipping have demonstrated how instability in this corridor can quickly affect global supply chains. Against this backdrop, the Red Sea has increasingly become an arena of strategic competition among regional and global powers seeking to secure influence over maritime security, logistics infrastructure, and critical shipping lanes.

[1] Supply Chain Now, "Supply Chain Now's Guide to the Red Sea Crisis," Supply Chain Now, 2025, <https://supplychainnow.com/supply-chain-nows-guide-to-the-red-sea-crisis>.

## **An Ever-Evolving Security Landscape in the Red Sea and the Wider Middle East**

Persistent security challenges continue to shape the strategic outlook of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden region. Armed conflict, political instability, piracy, and the growing influence of non-state armed groups – particularly in parts of the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden – pose risks to the safety of navigation and maritime security. These threats raise insurance and transport costs, disrupt trade flows, and risk the emergence of ungoverned or contested maritime spaces. For littoral states, instability undermines the economic dividends that should accrue from their geography, constraining development, and exacerbating existing governance and capacity gaps. For the wider international community, insecurity in the Red Sea reverberates across global trade networks, and reinforcing the region’s growing geopolitical and economic significance.

These dynamics have been further intensified by the war in Gaza, which has underscored the Red Sea’s structural vulnerabilities and exposed gaps in its fragmented security and governance architecture. Escalating regional tensions have heightened risks along critical maritime corridors, most notably the Suez Canal, where disruptions or perceived threats rapidly translate into the abrupt curtailment or rerouting of maritime flows with global repercussions. Moreover, conflict-affected littoral states, such as Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen, continue to generate spillover effects - from insecurity and humanitarian crises to the proliferation of armed groups and actors operating across land-sea interfaces and maritime spaces.

Recent regional escalations further illustrate how closely the security of the Red Sea is tied

to broader Middle Eastern dynamics. Rising tensions, including threats to maritime navigation and the temporary disruption of traffic through the Strait of Hormuz have drawn renewed attention to the vulnerability of key shipping routes across the Middle East. Disruptions in one part of the region can contribute to broader uncertainty, affecting commercial shipping, energy supplies, and international markets. Together, these developments emphasize how regional conflicts can have far-reaching consequences beyond their immediate geographic scope, shaping patterns of global trade and economic stability.

In an era of tightly integrated global supply chains, disruptions affecting these maritime arteries can rapidly transmit economic shocks across global markets, influencing energy flows, freight costs and international trade routes far beyond the region.

## **Strategic Contestation and Regional Instability**

Strategic contestation in the Red Sea has intensified as persistent security threats intersect with growing geopolitical competition. The region continues to face a range of security challenges, including piracy, maritime attacks, arms and human trafficking, and terrorism. These threats not only undermine maritime security and the safety of navigation, and deepen the region’s vulnerability to external interference.

Regional instability is further compounded by the use of proxy actors by external powers seeking to expand their influence without direct confrontation. Support for armed groups operating along critical maritime corridors has contributed to heightened insecurity, including attacks on commercial shipping and disruptions to trade routes.

These dynamics complicate efforts to stabilize the region, as local conflicts become layered with indirect competition among regional and extra-regional actors. The proliferation of such proxy relationships not only fuels violence on the ground, but also undermines governance and maritime security across the broader Red Sea and Gulf of Aden environment. More broadly, the proliferation of non-state armed groups and illicit networks has become a defining feature of the region's evolving security environment. Arms smuggling routes have expanded and become increasingly interconnected, making them difficult to disrupt permanently. Even when military action temporarily disrupts these networks, they tend to re-emerge unless underlying political and governance challenges are addressed. While military responses may sometimes be necessary to protect and safeguard maritime traffic, security measures alone have proved insufficient to resolve the deeper political crises affecting the region.

In such scenarios, disruptions in the Gulf can quickly reverberate through the Red Sea system, amplifying risks to global energy supplies, commercial shipping and international markets. Together, these developments underscore the growing interdependence of the Middle East's maritime chokepoints – from Hormuz to Bab el-Mandeb – and highlight how regional conflicts are rapidly translated into wider disruptions across global trade and energy networks.

These dynamics have increasingly positioned the Red Sea as an arena of geopolitical competition involving both regional and external powers, with a growing presence of non-littoral actors seeking influence and access along the Red Sea coast. External involvement has become an increasingly visible feature of the Red Sea's strategic landscape.

Various regional actors have sought to extend their influence along the sea's western and southern coasts through security cooperation, logistical arrangements and relationships with local partners.

This growing external engagement has contributed to what is often described as a "spaghetti bowl" of overlapping security arrangements, in the Red Sea, characterized by a proliferation of bilateral agreements, ad hoc partnerships, and parallel security initiatives. Rather than a coherent governance framework, the region has witnessed the emergence of multiple and sometimes competing mechanisms for security cooperation, reflecting diverse interests and strategic priorities of both regional and external actors. In this fragmented environment, some littoral states have emerged as hubs for international military and commercial presence. Djibouti, for example, hosts multiple foreign bases and strategic facilities, illustrating the intensity of geopolitical competition surrounding this vital maritime corridor. Engagement by regional, yet non littoral states has also expanded through bilateral agreements and economic partnerships with actors across the region, including authorities along the Gulf of Aden. These developments raise broader questions about the appropriate structure of a Red Sea governance framework.

Beyond regional dynamics, broader shifts in global strategic priorities may also reshape the security architecture surrounding the Red Sea. The United States, for example, has increasingly signaled a reorientation toward the Western Hemisphere and the Indo-Pacific, while European partners are expected to assume greater responsibility for security in their own neighborhood. A similar logic may increasingly apply to the Red Sea, where littoral states – particularly Egypt and Saudi

Arabia – could play a more prominent role in providing security and stability. Such a shift would place greater emphasis on regional security arrangements, complemented by international partners.

The Red Sea functions as an international waterway whose stability carries implications far beyond the surrounding region. Its role in global trade and maritime connectivity means that developments in the region affect economic and security interests across multiple continents. This reality raises an important governance question: how to balance the central role of littoral states with the interests of external actors whose economic and strategic stakes are closely tied to this maritime corridor. A key question, therefore, concerns the potential modalities for engaging certain regional and international actors in ways that encourage constructive participation rather than allowing them to operate as spoilers.

One possible approach would be to structure such engagement through economically driven cooperation— rather than primarily political or geopolitical arrangements. This model could facilitate broader participation in areas such as trade, infrastructure development, maritime logistics, and supply-chain connectivity – while preserving the central role of littoral states in shaping strategic direction and leading governance.

Within this framework, established mechanisms such as the Red Sea Council should serve as the core institutional platform, with littoral states retaining primary decision-making authority. External actors could then be incorporated through complementary or tiered forms of partnership that support Council members through economic and technical cooperation and investment, without undermining the leadership.

Such an arrangement would help balance inclusivity with regional ownership, ensuring that the littoral states of the Red Sea remain at the forefront of shaping the governance and future of the region.

## **Global Stakes in Regional Stability**

The region must maintain a clear sense of realism regarding what can and cannot be achieved in the near term. The challenges surrounding the Red Sea are not solely the responsibility of the littoral states; they represent a broader international concern. As such, the wider international community has an important role to play in supporting initiatives that promote stability, security, and sustainable development across the region.

Disruptions along this route carry immediate implications for supply chains, energy markets, and commercial shipping across Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Ensuring the security and stability of this corridor is thus a matter of shared international interest.

Recent developments have further underscored the Red Sea’s growing relevance in global energy geopolitics. The region provides potential alternative export routes for oil and gas that can partially bypass the Strait of Hormuz in times of crisis, including pipeline networks and maritime corridors linking Gulf energy producers to the Red Sea. These alternative pathways highlight the strategic value of maintaining stability along the Red Sea, particularly during periods of heightened tension affecting other major global energy chokepoints.

The stability of the Red Sea is also of particular strategic importance to Europe, with approximately 22 percent of European Union (EU) trade transiting through this corridor, which also hosts critical subsea

connectivity infrastructure essential to Europe's digital and economic networks. The EU's active security presence in the region, including through initiatives such as EUNAVFOR Atalanta and Operation ASPIDES, reflects the significance of these interests.

The international community has already demonstrated a degree of engagement, including through security cooperation and other forms of support. Nevertheless, it remains essential that all actors with influence in the region encourage restraint, constructive dialogue, and responsible behavior. Such efforts are critical to fostering conditions conducive to peace, stability, and prosperity along this vital maritime corridor. At times, external dynamics and competing geopolitical interests have complicated regional cooperation efforts. In this context, constructive engagement by partners with influence across the region can play a valuable role in encouraging dialogue and supporting peaceful approaches to emerging challenges.

## **Stability Beyond Security: Economic and Human Dimensions**

Discussions on the future of the Red Sea region must move beyond a narrow security lens and incorporate the broader economic and people-centered dimensions that shape stability and long-term peace. While maritime security and geopolitical competition often dominate policy debates, sustainable stability depends equally on addressing humanitarian challenges, supporting post-conflict recovery in littoral states and unlocking the economic potential of the Red Sea's resources and extensive coastlines.

At the center lies the human dimension, which remains inseparable from the region's security and governance dynamics. The Red Sea corridor has become a major route for irregular migration, human trafficking, and

displacement, particularly affecting populations moving from the Horn of Africa toward the Arabian Peninsula and beyond. These movements are often driven by a complex combination of conflict, economic hardship, environmental stresses, and weak governance. Smuggling and trafficking networks frequently intersect with broader security challenges, including organized crime and fragile state institutions and capacities. Addressing these issues requires coordinated international responses that balance humanitarian protection with security considerations. Strengthening legal migration pathways, improving border governance, supporting protection mechanisms for displaced persons, and investing in livelihood opportunities are all critical elements of a more comprehensive approach.

Closely linked is the need to advance post-conflict reconstruction and development efforts in conflict-affected littoral states, particularly in parts of the Horn of Africa and Yemen. In many cases, instability is rooted in deep structural drivers such as economic hardship, weak state capacity, access to resources, and limited employment opportunities for young populations. Post-conflict recovery must go beyond immediate humanitarian relief to rebuild state institutions, restore basic services, and create inclusive economic opportunities that address the root causes of conflict and fragility. Strengthening local governance, investing in education and health systems, and supporting community-level reconciliation initiatives can build more resilient societies capable of sustaining peace.

In this context, the security-development nexus becomes particularly important. Security interventions alone cannot produce lasting stability if underlying drivers of conflict remain unresolved.

Conversely, development initiatives cannot succeed in environments where insecurity undermines governance and investment. Integrating these dimensions – through coordinated policies that combine peacebuilding, economic development, and strengthening state institutions – offers a more sustainable pathway for conflict prevention and long-term regional stability.

Alongside these challenges lie significant and largely untapped opportunities. The Red Sea region has the potential to act as a catalyst for deeper Arab-African economic integration and as a gateway connecting Africa with Europe and Asia. Strategic investments in ports, logistics corridors, shipping services, industrial zones, and the blue economy could reposition the region as a hub of connectivity and shared growth. Realizing this potential requires more than physical infrastructure alone, it depends on coordinated policies, harmonized trade procedures, sustainable management of maritime resources and sustained investment in human capital.

The extensive coastlines bordering the Red Sea represent both a shared responsibility and a major economic opportunity. Stretching across thousands of kilometers, this maritime space underscores the interconnected interests of the states and communities that depend on it. With cooperative engagement and sustained commitment, the region has the potential to serve as a platform for enhanced economic connectivity, strengthened maritime governance, and broader collective prosperity.

## Conclusion

Conflict in the Red Sea region is not a new phenomenon. Historically, the area has been shaped by successive layers of geopolitical competition—from early maritime trade rivalries and imperial expansion to the colonial period and the Cold War rivalries. The Red Sea has long functioned as a crossroads where global and regional interests intersect. The key question today is not whether the region has experienced conflict before, but whether current conditions might create an opportunity for a different trajectory.

One factor shaping this possibility is the evolving global economic environment, characterized by increasingly transactional approaches to international trade – particularly among major global economies – which have introduced new uncertainties into the global system. Concurrently, these disruptions may encourage countries to diversify economic relationships and explore alternative trade routes and regional partnerships. Within Africa –as demonstrated during the Fifth Edition of the Aswan Forum–discussions around economic corridors and regional infrastructure are increasingly focused on strengthening intra-African trade and connectivity [2], reflecting a growing recognition that overreliance on external markets exposes economies to geopolitical volatility and protectionist policies. In this context, economic cooperation around the Red Sea could provide an opportunity to develop new forms of connectivity benefiting multiple regional actors and help bridge continents. The current period of global economic fragility adds urgency to such efforts. Meanwhile, purely state-led initiatives may at times face limitations in generating sustained momentum, as governments inevitably approach negotiations through national interests and regional sensitivities.

In such circumstances, focusing on economic cooperation and practical development–initiatives may offer an effective entry point for constructive engagement. Advancing shared infrastructure projects, trade corridors, maritime logistics networks, and port development–could create tangible benefits that encourage collaboration, even among states with differing political positions. This echoes historical experiences elsewhere, such as the early stages of European integration, which began with cooperation in strategic industries through the European Coal and Steel Community, binding former rivals through shared economic interests before deeper political integration emerged. By focusing on areas of mutual economic gain, this model demonstrates how cooperation can gradually build trust, strengthen interdependence, and create space for more substantive political dialogue over time.

Such an approach also highlights the important role of relevant stakeholders. The private sector–particularly the global shipping and logistics industry–has a direct stake in the stability of Red Sea maritime routes and could serve as a key partner. Equally important, communities directly affected by conflict must have a stronger voice in shaping regional initiatives, and their participation can influence policy choices, particularly when populations mobilize around issues that directly affect livelihoods and economic opportunity.

Regional initiatives and frameworks must sit at the center of these efforts. Advancing the Red Sea Council as the principal platform for regional cooperation will be critical to coordinating strategy and mobilizing collective action.

This includes promoting initiatives that operationalize a development–security nexus, such as the recently launched Suez–Red Sea Economic and Maritime Initiative (StREAM). As a comprehensive blueprint, StREAM underscores the blue economy, environmental transformation, and the development of advanced port systems as concrete pathways to deeper economic integration and long-term prosperity across the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden region.

Ultimately, meaningful progress will require a multi-layered approach combining governmental cooperation, private sector engagement, community involvement, and sustained capacity building. Regional coordination frameworks and councils are central, but their effectiveness will depend on moving beyond political dialogue to identify practical areas of shared economic and developmental interest. Strengthening institutional capacity, supporting local expertise, and investing in human capital will be essential to sustaining these efforts. By linking security, development, and economic connectivity, the Red Sea region could gradually shift from a space defined by competition and instability toward one characterized by cooperation, resilience, and shared prosperity.



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