PUBLICATION COPY

Date of publication: 20 September 2026

Evidence checked to: 20 September 2026

Assessment type: Open-source strategic assessment

AI transparency: This assessment was developed through an analyst-directed, AI-assisted workflow. AI was used for research support, source comparison, drafting, editing and visualisation. The intelligence requirement, hypothesis framing, evidential thresholds, analytical judgements and final publication decisions were directed and reviewed by Stephen J. Taylor.

Document status	Publication copy
Release status	Public release version
Information cut-off	20 September 2026, including 19 September Riyadh/Yanbu escalation
Assessment posture	Open-source strategic assessment; distributed strategic-access model; evidence-led and non-operational

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

This assessment synthesises public official records, United Nations reporting, sanctions notices, court material and attributed specialist research. References to named persons or entities are presented for analytical context and are drawn from the cited sources. Historical associations are not treated as evidence of current activity. The assessment is strategic and non-operational; it examines network architecture and maritime risk rather than providing operational guidance or adverse targeting.

Time-sensitive attack claims are distinguished from independently confirmed effects. The 19 September Yanbu strike is presented as a Houthi claim; Saudi reporting confirmed attempted attacks and interceptions but did not independently confirm the claimed impact at Yanbu at the information cut-off.

Where Century International relies on confidential interviews, private documents, mobility data or other non-public source material, those propositions remain attributed to the authors and are not treated here as independent official findings. References to ethnic, tribal or diaspora communities describe reported outreach or enabling environments and do not imply collective involvement in illicit activity.

Key Judgements

CENTRAL JUDGEMENT

The Fourth Axis is best understood not as a single integrated military front, but as a distributed strategic access architecture. Iran has an explicit interest in extending strategic depth into the Red Sea and can pursue Sudan, Eritrea, Houthi-controlled Yemen and Horn relationships as separate portfolios, each offering different forms of access, intelligence, logistics, influence or coercive leverage. The cumulative effect is geographic integration without requiring command integration. Sudan now provides the clearest contemporary example of Iranian strategic re-entry; Eritrea provides a strong historical and geographic precedent; Yemen supplies the principal kinetic component; and the Yemen-Somalia/Horn layer supplies the strongest evidence of reciprocal regional facilitation.

Judgement	Confidence	Why it matters
Iranian strategic intent to expand defence depth into the Red Sea is explicitly stated.	HIGH	Provides the doctrinal basis for treating Red Sea access as an objective rather than an accidental by-product.
Iran has re-established material military support to the SAF, including Iranian UAV capability and continuing weapons-transfer indicators.	HIGH	Sudan has again become a meaningful Iranian state-security relationship on the western Red Sea.
Iran reportedly sought permanent naval or dual-use access at Port Sudan, while Sudan reportedly rejected the request.	MED-HIGH	Shows both Tehran's access objective and Khartoum's hedging behaviour; the original basing allegation was publicly denied.
Historical Iran-Eritrea military cooperation and Assab's later use by Gulf forces demonstrate the strategic utility of Eritrean Red Sea geography.	MED-HIGH	Eritrea is a proven access geography, even though current permanent Iranian military access is not established.

Judgement	Confidence	Why it matters
Evidence of current permanent Iranian military access in Eritrea.	LOW	No verified Iranian base has been identified; Eritrea publicly states that its ports are not open for foreign military or naval use.
The Yemen-Somalia/Horn facilitation environment is reciprocal and the Houthis increasingly provide an autonomous east-shore kinetic and logistics node.	HIGH	Creates a southern layer of movement, procurement and technical exchange without requiring control by a single command centre.
The Fourth Axis is best modelled as a distributed system of strategic leverage rather than a unified command structure.	MED-HIGH	Separate state and non-state relationships can create cumulative geographic pressure, redundancy and uncertainty across the Red Sea.
The Horn layer now includes named liaison, trafficking and recruitment infrastructure, while a direct contemporary bridge into Sudan/Eritrea remains unresolved.	HIGH south / MED-LOW north	Strengthens the assessment of deliberate Houthi network-building without converting the western shore into a proven single operational chain.

Scope and analytical posture

The term “Fourth Axis” is an analytical construct for a geographically coherent system of Iranian strategic leverage. It does not imply that Sudan, Eritrea, the Houthis or Somali actors operate under one command chain, nor that Tehran itself necessarily conceptualises these relationships as a single named architecture. The central proposition is narrower: Iran can cultivate separate state and non-state relationships according to local conditions while their geographic complementarity increases Tehran’s aggregate options across the Red Sea.

In this cumulative framing, Axis One refers to pressure on Gulf exports through the Strait of Hormuz; Axis Two to pressure on Bab el-Mandeb and the southern Red Sea gateway; Axis Three to the north-eastern pressure vector against Saudi energy infrastructure and the East-West Pipeline, including the September 2026 drone attack that Saudi Arabia said was launched from Iraq [14]; and Axis Four to the western Red Sea / Horn access architecture assessed in this paper. The numbering is analytical, not doctrinal, and does not imply that all four axes operate under one command structure.

The paper separates intent, access, capability and integration. Sudan and Eritrea are assessed primarily as state-access, logistics and intelligence environments; Houthi-controlled Yemen remains the principal kinetic component; and Somalia/Puntland provides the clearest southern facilitation layer. Local agency and hedging remain central to the assessment.

1. Intelligence Requirement and Method

The core intelligence requirement is: To what extent has Iran converted a long-standing objective of strategic depth in the Red Sea into geographically complementary relationships that increase access, intelligence collection, logistics, partner leverage and coercive options - and how does the growth of Houthi capability alter the resulting risk to commercial maritime traffic and Saudi Red Sea infrastructure?

HOW THE ASSESSMENT EVOLVED

The Fourth Axis construct emerged from monitoring cumulative pressure on Saudi and Red Sea trade architecture, not from evidence of a named Iranian plan. Initial analysis focused on Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb; attacks and launch activity against Saudi infrastructure then added a north-eastern pressure vector; renewed Iranian military engagement with Sudan raised the question of western Red Sea access; and subsequent collection expanded that question to Eritrea and the Horn. The purpose is therefore to test whether geographically separate relationships are accumulating into a distributed system of strategic leverage - and to translate any change into commercial maritime consequences.

Analytic method: intelligence cycle applied to the Fourth Axis hypothesis

The cycle is iterative: new evidence can strengthen, weaken or disconfirm the model.

Collection and source discipline

Collection has drawn on UN Panel and Monitoring Group reporting, official sanctions records, maritime-security guidance, specialist research, court material and time-sensitive reporting. Highest weight is given to primary official material. Investigative reporting is used where methods and source lineage are reasonably transparent. Multiple publications derived from the same underlying interview, dataset or intelligence report are not counted as independent corroboration.

Hypothesis control

The analysis tests three competing explanations: first, a centrally directed Iranian command architecture; second, mostly independent relationships whose apparent coherence is produced by geography alone; and third, a distributed strategic access architecture in which Tehran pursues each relationship on its own terms while the combined geography creates cumulative leverage. The evidence is most consistent with the third model. A unified command structure is neither demonstrated nor required for the hypothesis to hold.

CLOSURE STANDARD

A new lead must strengthen an existing node, connect two previously separate nodes, disconfirm an earlier hypothesis or materially alter confidence. Geographic proximity, normal commercial activity, ethnicity, tribal affiliation or historic contact are not treated as evidence of illicit involvement.

2. The Architecture in One View

Figure 1. Distributed strategic access architecture

Separate relationships, geographically complementary effects - no unified command required

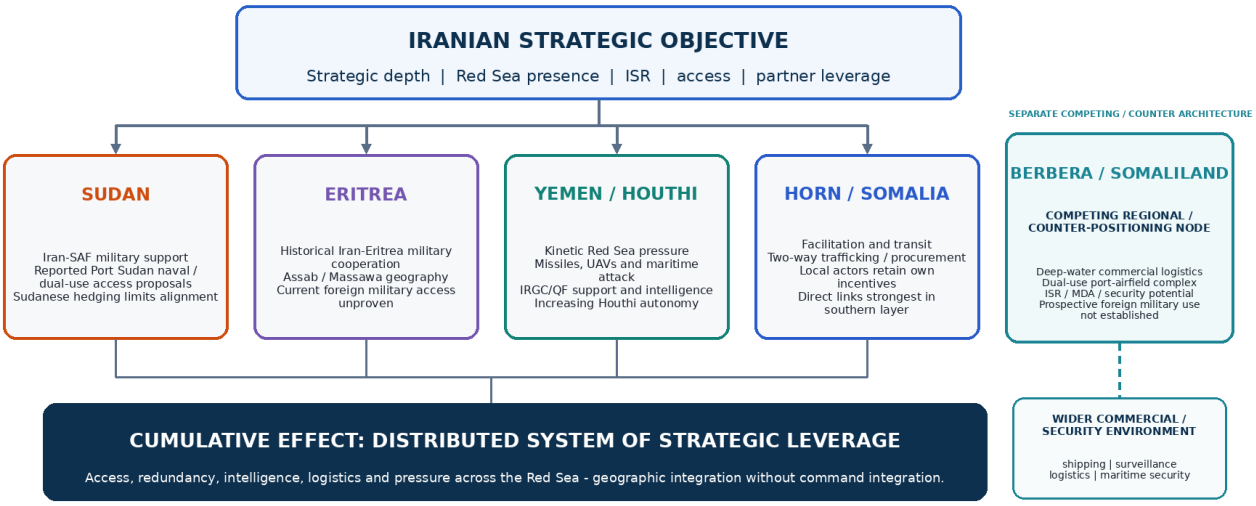


Figure 1. Distributed strategic access architecture. Separate relationships can produce geographically complementary effects without a common operational command. Berbera / Somaliland is shown separately as a competing regional / counter-positioning node and is not part of the Iranian/Houthi support architecture.

The architecture is better understood as a portfolio of geographically complementary relationships than as a linear supply chain. Sudan offers a state-security and potential port-access relationship; Eritrea offers historically demonstrated military cooperation and strategically valuable ports; Houthi-controlled Yemen supplies the strongest kinetic pressure on the eastern shore; and the Somalia/Puntland layer provides transit, procurement and reciprocal facilitation. Iran can develop or exploit each relationship separately while still gaining cumulative strategic depth across the maritime system. Berbera is deliberately outside that architecture in Figure 1: it illustrates how the same Gulf of Aden geography can support competing commercial and security positioning without evidencing Iranian orchestration.

3. Iranian Strategic Objective and the Historical Northern Foundation

Iranian interest in the Red Sea is not inferred solely from current events. In March 2024, Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, a former IRGC commander and senior adviser to the Supreme Leader, publicly called for Iran to extend its “strategic defense depth” by 5,000 kilometres and described the Red Sea and Mediterranean as strategic locations. That statement does not identify Sudan or Eritrea as components of a formal plan, but it establishes an explicit Iranian objective to expand strategic depth into the maritime space examined in this paper. [17]

Sudan has a substantial historical precedent within that strategy. Congressional Research Service reporting records that the IRGC-QF reportedly armed and trained Sudanese forces, Iranian pilots reportedly assisted Sudan’s air force, Iranian naval forces visited Port Sudan and Iran helped develop Sudan’s military-production capacity. Sudan was also repeatedly identified as a trans-shipment environment for Iranian weapons moving towards Gaza. These historical relationships later contracted sharply as Khartoum realigned towards Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. [22]

The wider western-shore environment was also real. UN Monitoring Group reporting documented Sudan-Eritrea cross-border weapons movement and identified intelligence-linked and commercial intermediaries operating through eastern Sudan and Eritrea. Separate UN reporting recorded military cooperation between Eritrea and Iran in 2009, although allegations that Iran had established a permanent naval base at Assab were disputed by Eritrea and were not established to the same evidential standard. [5][6][23]

Iran’s contemporary enabling role is likewise not limited to the transfer of weapons. In February 2024, the U.S. Treasury stated that Iranian military officials had provided intelligence support enabling Houthi targeting of vessels in the Red Sea. This demonstrates a model in which Iranian strategic effect can be generated through intelligence, finance, technology and persistent maritime support without requiring Iran to control every partner or operate from a permanent shore base. [27]

A concrete maritime precedent reinforces that distinction. U.S. Department of Defense officials have said that suspected Iranian intelligence support to the Houthis had previously come from the Iranian vessel Behshad, while also noting that Iran has maintained vessels in the Red Sea for operational purposes. The implication for this assessment is functional rather than platform-specific: maritime access can generate value through ISR, cueing, communications and persistent situational awareness without requiring a shore-based missile force. [36]

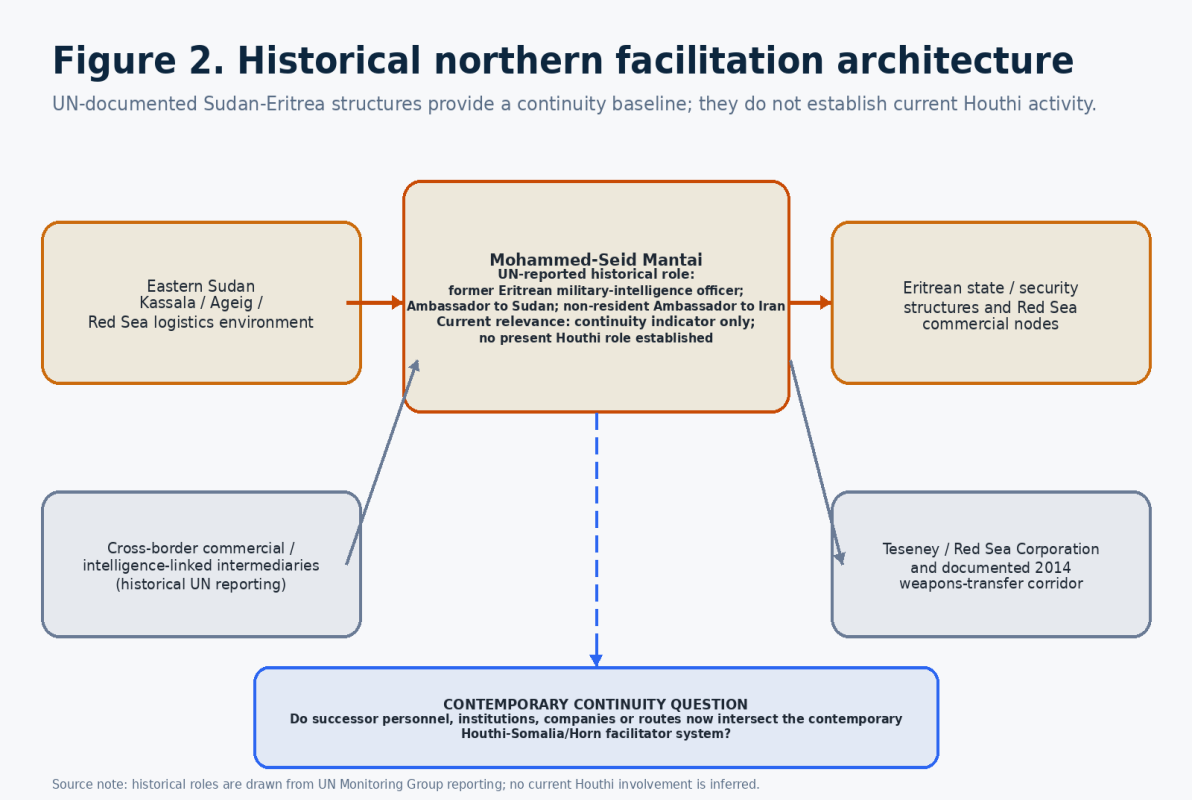


Figure 2. Historical northern facilitation architecture. The historical record establishes a continuity baseline for Iranian access and influence; it does not establish current Houthi activity or present misconduct.

4. East-Shore Leverage: Houthi Consolidation

The Houthi movement has undergone a structural transformation. Century International's 2026 supply-chain research describes a shift from predominantly receiving Iranian arms towards a hybrid system combining Iranian assistance, globally distributed procurement, local contractors and domestic Yemeni assembly or manufacture. The important analytical point is not that Iranian support has ceased; it is that external support has helped create a more autonomous east-shore military-industrial and logistics node. [4]

That autonomy increases Iran's strategic leverage even where command relationships are loose. A partner capable of sustaining its own procurement, adaptation and manufacture can impose pressure independently, redistribute conventional weapons or technical knowledge, and force adversaries to allocate defensive resources without Tehran having to direct each action.

4.1 Territorial proximity and the lower-cost threat envelope

Recent analysis by Nadwa Al-Dawsari adds an important operational dimension to the geography. Her argument is fundamentally about territorial proximity: as Houthi forces consolidate positions around Bab el-Mandeb, the movement may rely less exclusively on long-range missiles and drones because shorter-range, cheaper and more conventional weapons can become relevant against shipping closer to the coast. The significance is persistence. A threat generated from nearer terrain lowers the technical and financial threshold for repeated attack, harassment or coercive control of passage. [37]

This territorial logic is consistent with CTP-ISW geospatial analysis. Satellite imagery from 16 September showed roughly 11 kilometres of earthen berms along Houthi frontline positions north of al-Aradi, indicating an effort to hold newly acquired terrain. Separate CTP-ISW analysis noted that al-Aradi lies close enough to the strait for some artillery systems to become geographically relevant. Neither finding proves that artillery, radar, missiles, UAVs, USVs or UUVs have been forward-deployed for maritime attack; it does show why territorial consolidation changes the threat geometry. [41]

4.2 Consolidation, sustainment and capability broadening

Territorial control is being accompanied by changes in the surrounding security architecture. The internationally backed Yemeni Red Sea Coast Guard withdrew to Djibouti after the Houthi seizure of Mokha, materially degrading a Yemen-side anti-smuggling and interdiction layer opposite Horn of Africa routes. This does not establish increased eastbound weapons resupply, but it increases the importance of a key collection question in this assessment: whether small-craft and dhow routes from Djibouti, Eritrea or Sudan are being used for sustainment now that local interdiction coverage has weakened. [42]

The capability set may also be broadening. Conflict Armament Research-linked reporting identified navigation modules and propellers potentially relevant to experimental "loitering torpedoes", while continuing to document Iranian-origin supply and local-manufacture enablement. The correct evidential status is research and development, not an operationally deployed underwater weapon. It nevertheless expands the range of maritime systems that commercial and naval planners must monitor. [43]

A separate September reporting line suggests that Houthi coercion may be selective rather than indiscriminate. Reuters reported that Houthi representatives in Muscat said non-Saudi commercial vessels would not be targeted while Saudi-linked shipping remained exposed. This is reported intent, not a safe-passage guarantee. Its relevance to the strategic paper is that ownership, beneficial ownership, charter, cargo and perceived affiliation may increasingly matter alongside geography alone. [44]

ANALYTICAL HYPOTHESIS - OPERATIONAL DISCRETION

Selective restraint toward non-Saudi commercial traffic could have a secondary operational benefit: reducing incentives for a broader multinational naval response while the Yemen-side interdiction gap creates greater opportunity for movement across the Yemen-Horn maritime bridge. The evidence does not establish this as Houthi motive. It remains a collection hypothesis that would be strengthened by observable restraint toward non-Saudi vessels coinciding with increased cross-Red-Sea logistics activity. [42][44]

5. Horn Layer: Reciprocal Facilitation Beyond Yemen

The Yemen-Somalia relationship is the strongest public evidence that the Houthi system has regional depth beyond Yemen. U.S. Treasury reporting identified Yemen-based al-Shabaab weapons-trafficking actors and described arms procurement and maritime movement between Yemen and Somalia. [2]

The 2025 UN Panel of Experts on Yemen reported increased smuggling and cooperation between the Houthis and al-Shabaab, including weapons moving from Yemen into Somalia, Houthi training relating to improvised explosive devices, drone adaptation and weapons maintenance, and Somali territory being used as transit space for weapons destined for the Houthis. This is evidence of reciprocal facilitation, but it does not mean Somali actors form part of an Iranian command hierarchy. [1]

STRUCTURAL CHANGE

The defining feature is reciprocity: Africa can function simultaneously as destination, transit space, recruitment environment and supply route. That is qualitatively different from a one-way Iran-to-Yemen corridor.

5.1 A structured Africa coordination layer

Century International identifies Abdulwahid Naji Abu Ras, a senior Houthi foreign-affairs official and former Special Forces commander, as the reported overseer of an Africa portfolio managed by senior operatives in Sana'a. The report attributes to this layer responsibility for smuggling networks, migrant-community outreach and regional recruitment. It also reports a March 2024 Sana'a meeting between Abu Ras and Yasin Kilwe, described as al-Shabaab's Puntland leader, followed by Houthi and Iranian-national travel to Somalia for discussions that included explosive-drone procurement or use. These propositions are analytically important but remain a Century investigative synthesis rather than a UN or judicial finding. [3]

The stronger conclusion is structural rather than personal: the public record increasingly supports deliberate Houthi management of external relationships rather than a collection of entirely self-organising

smugglers. That strengthens the "hub" interpretation while still falling short of demonstrating a single Iran-directed command architecture.

5.2 Named liaison and trafficking infrastructure

The 2025 UN Panel of Experts provides an independent evidential line for the Yemen-Somalia liaison architecture. It reported a Somali al-Shabaab-affiliated liaison who described facilitating nearly 400 Somalis to Houthi-controlled Yemen and identified Houthi military engineers who reportedly travelled to Jilib to provide training in improvised explosive-device manufacture, drone adaptation and weapons maintenance. Century identifies that liaison as Ahmed Elmi Samatar and names one engineer as Mohammed Gaber Balghaith Farag Makki. [1][3]

Century further reports that Abdishakur Yahye Ali, also known as "the Joker", succeeded Samatar in the liaison role. Ali was reportedly based in Sana'a from at least 2023, held a Houthi-issued Yemeni passport, and supervised preparation or repackaging of weapons for movement through Mukalla toward Bossaso before he was killed in al-Ghayda in February 2026. The same investigation links Ali Mohammed al-Halhali to trafficking management in Hadramawt and al-Mahra and describes regular contact with Bossaso-based trafficker Mohammed Omer Salem. Salem's network is linked to the Al-Bari 2 dhow, interdicted in 2020 carrying nearly 1,300 assault rifles and other small arms. [3]

Two additional Mukalla-based networks, associated in Century reporting with Shaqwi Baabad and Abubakr Abdulqadir Bamalem, are alleged to have collaborated on Houthi arms transfers; Bamalem is reported to maintain an operational hub at Bandarbeyla in northeastern Somalia. Separately, the UN Panel identifies the anonymised facilitators O.A.S., J.A.N. and I.A.M. in bidirectional Yemen-Somalia smuggling. Their identities remain unresolved in public sources. U.S. Treasury reporting on Abdullahi Jeeri, Mohamed Hussein Salad, Ahmed Hasan Ali Sulaiman Mataan and Mohamed Ali Badaas provides a separate official baseline for Yemen-linked al-Shabaab weapons procurement. [1][2][3]

A recent battlefield report may indicate a further step in that relationship, but it remains unverified independently. On 7 September, Yemen's anti-Houthi National Resistance Forces said bodies of Somali al-Shabaab fighters had been found among Houthi casualties on Yemen's west coast and said documents and personal effects supported the identification. The claim is treated here as an attributed battlefield indicator, not an established finding. If independently corroborated, it would suggest that parts of the relationship have moved beyond trafficking and training into direct personnel participation. [45]

5.3 Recruitment, diaspora and peripheral-community outreach

The Horn layer is not only maritime. Century reports that the Houthis have used African diaspora networks in Sana'a as a recruitment and access mechanism and have sought contacts among the Warsangeli, Afar, Ogaden, Oromo, Tigrayan, Rashaida and Beni-Amer communities across the Horn and western Red Sea. The reported purposes vary by case and include smuggling, intelligence collection, recruitment and relationship-building. These references must be read at individual-network level; they do not establish collective involvement by any ethnic or tribal community. [3]

The Afar case is the most developed example in the reporting. Century describes Mohammed Alawsan as a former intermediary who travelled to Yemen and helped establish a Houthi-supported training relationship; separate Century research reports that around 150 Afar men were trained between 2016 and 2024, with some later deployed in Yemen. Recruits reportedly moved in small groups by boat from the Obock area toward Yemen. The relationship later deteriorated, and more recent 2026 outreach through Eritrean opposition contacts remains reported rather than independently established. [3]

Rashaida and Beni-Amer reporting is less resolved. Century describes Houthi cooperation with some Rashaida actors on smuggling and outreach toward the Beni-Amer cross-border community, but does not publicly identify a contemporary northern facilitator set. Historical research establishes that eastern Sudan and the Eritrea-Sudan border contain mature cross-border smuggling systems; it does not establish that those systems are now controlled by the Houthis. [3][5][6]

5.4 Evidence boundary: southern facilitation is evidenced; the northern extension remains unresolved

A central test in this assessment is whether the well-evidenced Yemen-Somalia facilitation network can be connected, through identifiable people, vessels, companies, financial channels or shipments, to the western Red Sea nodes examined in Sudan and Eritrea. The detailed public-source cross-match found no defensible contemporary link between the named southern facilitators assessed above and Port Sudan, DIS, Massawa or Assab. That absence matters: the southern network can be evidenced without a Sudan/Eritrea leg, while Sudan and Eritrea remain separate access, procurement and influence questions rather than proven components of one closed Houthi supply chain. The Fourth Axis should therefore remain framed as distributed strategic leverage, not as a single integrated pipeline.

The strongest evidence remains split into two clusters: a well-evidenced Yemen-Somalia facilitation network, and a well-evidenced Iran-SAF/DIS procurement relationship in Sudan. Reporting on a Houthi-facing Port Sudan layer is developing, while current Eritrean integration remains weakly evidenced. No public evidence identified for this assessment establishes the missing bridge - a named facilitator, vessel, financial conduit or shipment that directly connects Sudan or Eritrea into the contemporary Houthi network. This limits confidence in any claim of a single Iran-directed command or supply chain. [1][3][7][8]

6. Geography: Integration of Effect, Not Command

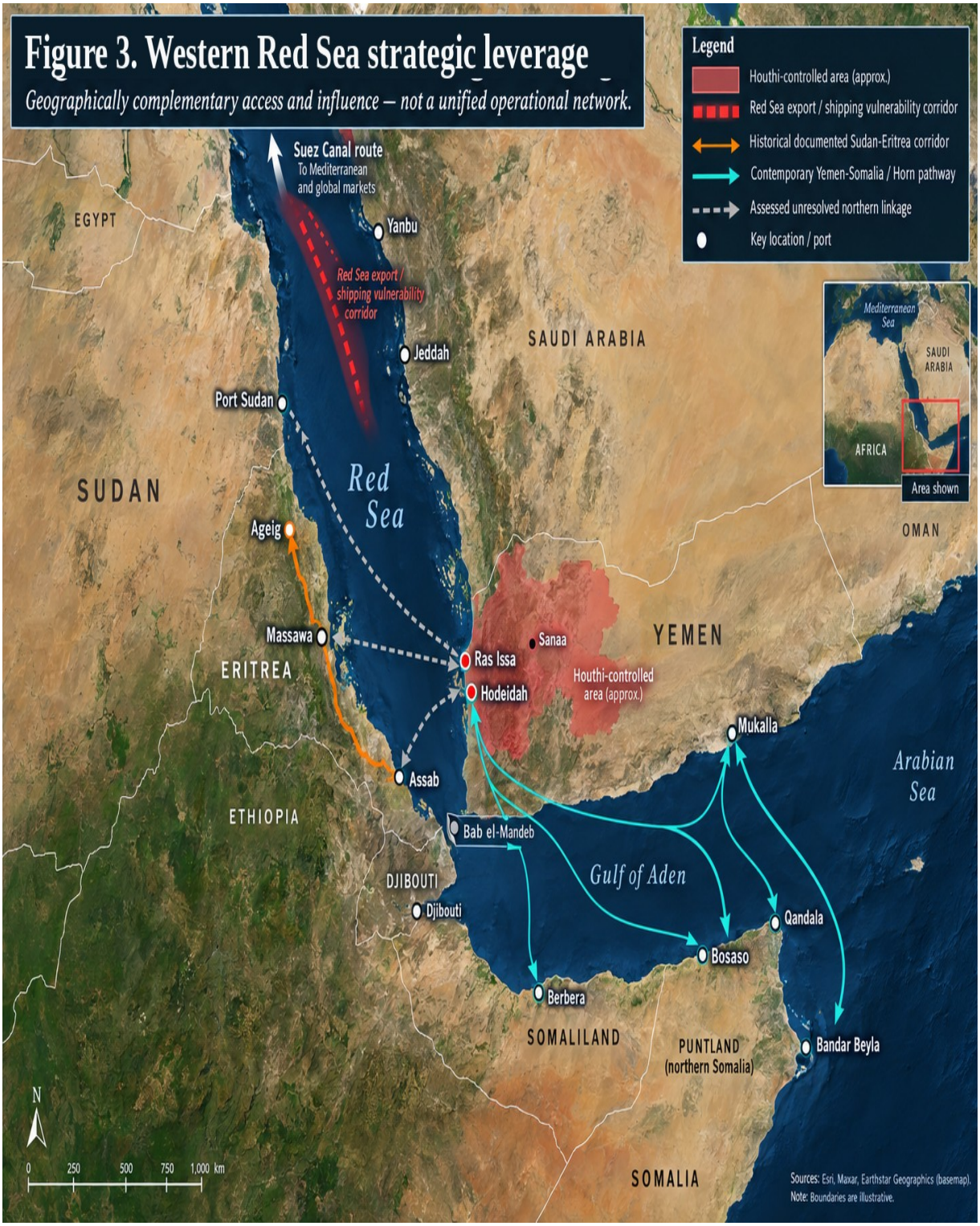


Figure 3. Western Red Sea strategic leverage map. Western-shore locations and linkages identify state-specific Iranian access and influence questions; they do not depict a verified Sudan/Eritrea-to-Yemen operational route. Yemen-Somalia pathways are shown separately because they rest on stronger contemporary evidence.

The geography is what joins otherwise separate relationships. Sudan's coast sits opposite Saudi Red Sea infrastructure and near the central shipping corridor; Eritrea's Assab and Massawa occupy positions close to Bab el-Mandeb; Yemen provides an established east-shore strike and maritime-pressure capability; and Somalia/Puntland sits directly across the Gulf of Aden. Iran does not need these actors to function as one network for their locations to become strategically complementary. Access, intelligence, logistics, naval persistence or partner pressure in one location can increase the value of positions elsewhere.

Berbera / Somaliland provides an important competing-regional counterpoint. DP World operates an established deep-water commercial and logistics port at Berbera, with a 17-metre draft and container, bulk, Ro-Ro, storage and intermodal capability. UN monitoring documented construction of the earlier UAE military base at the Berbera airport/port complex, while 2026 IISS satellite-imagery analysis identifies renewed aviation expansion, semi-buried and berm-protected storage/logistics areas and positions assessed as consistent with possible mobile air-defence deployment. AFRICOM senior leaders also toured the Port of Berbera in November 2025 to assess the security environment and review operational capacity. These indicators support treating Berbera as a credible dual-use site and a potential ISR, maritime-domain-awareness, logistics and counter-Houthi position on the African shore. [47][48][49][50]

Possible U.S. or Israeli operational use remains reported or prospective rather than established. The AFRICOM visit demonstrates military interest and capacity assessment, not an operational basing arrangement. In June 2026, Somaliland's defence minister told Reuters that there were no talks or plans for an Israeli military base, while confirming Israeli training of Somaliland security forces. Commercially, Berbera is an alternative Horn logistics gateway, including for the Ethiopian hinterland, but it does not bypass Bab el-Mandeb for Europe-Asia traffic using the Red Sea/Suez route. Analytically, Berbera is useful counter-evidence against an overly Iran-centric interpretation of the Horn: the same strategic geography is being developed or courted by competing regional and external actors, so geographic convergence alone is not evidence of Iranian orchestration. [47][49][50][51]

7. Sudan: Strategic Re-entry, Access and Hedging

7.1 Military re-entry is established

After diplomatic relations were restored in October 2023, Iran re-entered Sudan as a material military supporter of the SAF. Reuters reported that Iranian-made Mohajer and Ababil UAVs materially improved SAF surveillance and strike capability and helped the army regain ground around Khartoum. EU Agency for Asylum reporting, drawing on U.S. State Department-funded Conflict Observatory research, states that weapons transfers from Iran to the SAF via flights to Port Sudan continued with “near certainty”. U.S. Treasury actions subsequently cited SAF procurement of Iranian drones and identified Portex Trade Limited in connection with Iranian-made UAVs for shipment to Sudan. [18][19][7][8]

U.S. Treasury’s 26 June 2026 action adds a further procurement-architecture layer. Treasury states that the Defense Industries System (DIS) controls GIAD Industrial Group, also known as Sudan Master Technology, and that Target Multiactivities Company Ltd. (TMAC) is controlled by DIS through GIAD. Treasury further reported that SBL Energy Limited supplied TMAC with more than 200 shipments of explosives and explosives-related materiel since 2024. Ports Engineering Company Ltd., a state-owned Port Sudan company linked through GIAD/Sudan Master Technology, was reported by Treasury to have imported ammunition belts and boxes of weapons during the Sudan conflict. This establishes a documented Sudanese military-procurement ecosystem; it does not establish Houthi supply, Houthi involvement, or a link to the reported Port Sudan-Ras Issa movement. [46]

This evidence supports Iranian material and technical assistance, not a claim that a large IRGC combat force has deployed to Sudan. Specialist reporting describes Iranian or IRGC-linked trainers and technical personnel alongside SAF-aligned formations, but the scale and exact roles remain less independently corroborated. In October 2024 RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo also alleged Iranian military backing for the SAF. That allegation is treated as a belligerent claim; the broader finding of Iranian material support rests on independent evidence. [3][28]

7.2 Port Sudan: reported access objective and strategic value

Reporting in March and July 2024 described Iranian efforts to obtain a permanent naval presence at Port Sudan, including a proposed base or permanently stationed military vessel and, in later reporting, a dual-use commercial and military port. The original allegation was publicly denied by both Sudan and Iran, so this paper treats the basing proposition as a credible reported access effort rather than an established agreement. Later Sudan Tribune reporting said revised Iranian proposals were also rejected. [20][21]

The strategic logic is nevertheless clear. Port Sudan is the SAF-held state's principal Red Sea gateway and has served as a route for Iranian-linked military supply. A durable Iranian presence there could provide maritime persistence, logistics, maintenance access, intelligence collection and political influence opposite the Saudi Red Sea coast and along the approaches to Suez. Such access would complement Houthi pressure from Yemen without requiring Sudan to become a missile-launch platform or part of a common command structure. [17][18][20]

7.3 Sudanese hedging limits the proxy model

Sudan's behaviour argues against describing the SAF as an Iranian proxy. The current Iran-SAF relationship follows an earlier period in which Khartoum moved sharply away from Tehran: after increasing Saudi and Gulf engagement, Sudan joined the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen and severed diplomatic relations with Iran in 2016. Since relations were restored in 2023, the SAF has accepted Iranian military support, but reporting indicates that Sudan rejected permanent Iranian access in 2024 partly because of the likely consequences for relations with Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Western states. [22][20]

This is better described as hedging or transactional balancing. Tehran can gain leverage from military dependency and seek longer-term access; Khartoum can accept weapons while preserving strategic autonomy and bargaining among competing partners. For the Fourth Axis hypothesis, that is sufficient: Iranian value can accumulate through a state relationship that remains locally controlled and only partially aligned.

7.4 Reported Houthi logistics and reverse-flow indicators

Century reports that the Houthis entered the Iran-SAF relationship as junior partners around mid-2024 and transferred at least three shipments of small arms and light weapons to the SAF on Iran's behalf. The same investigation cites multiple sources claiming Houthi operatives are present in Port Sudan and use the city as a transport, logistics and financial hub, with people and arms moving in both directions across the Red Sea. Century explicitly describes the evidence as growing but not definitive. [3]

The stronger technical indicators include reported mobility analysis showing an individual travelling from Egypt to Port Sudan and then to a Houthi-controlled informal landing site on Yemen's Red Sea coast, alongside vessel movements that matched source descriptions of cross-Red-Sea transfers. These observations support a collection hypothesis, not identification of the person, mission or cargo. Reported claims that Houthi engineers trained Sudanese personnel on Iranian UAV systems alongside IRGC personnel were not independently verified by the Century authors. [3]

7.5 The unresolved Port Sudan-Ras Issa Ro-Ro chain

The highest-value unresolved maritime edge is a roll-on, roll-off vessel described by Century. The vessel had previously maintained a regular Jeddah-Port Sudan commercial route, disabled AIS off Port Sudan in May-June 2025, made stops in Egyptian and Saudi waters, and ultimately docked east of the Ras Issa oil terminal at an informal berth in November 2025. Satellite imagery showed a security cordon and truck activity around the berth. Century estimated an approximately 3,500-ton cargo that did not appear in formal import records; Yemeni officials interviewed by the researchers said the cargo was arms. [3]

The vessel has not been identified to a defensible public-source standard in this assessment. Route similarity, deadweight, timing and AIS gaps are not sufficient to name a ship. Beneficial ownership, operator, charterer, shipper, consignee, Port Sudan agent, cargo manifest and Ras Issa consignee therefore remain unresolved. A verified commercial cargo would weaken the northern Houthi-logistics interpretation; a documented link to a Houthi front company, Sa'id al-Jamal entity or DIS-connected importer would materially strengthen it.

The negative financial cross-match should also be retained. No reliable public-source Sudanese or Eritrean corporate/address match was identified between the currently named Sa'id al-Jamal shipping and procurement entities and DIS, Portex, TMAC, Massawa or Assab. That absence does not prove separation, but it prevents the report from presenting the Port Sudan branch as closed.

8. Eritrea: Strategic Geography, Historical Cooperation and Hedging

Eritrea provides a different form of evidence. The 2011 UN Monitoring Group recorded multiple credible reports of military cooperation between Eritrea and Iran in 2009. Contemporary allegations that Iran had established a permanent naval base at Assab were strongly disputed by Eritrea and were not established to the same standard. The correct conclusion is therefore historical military cooperation and Iranian interest in Eritrean geography - not a proven permanent Iranian base. [23]

Assab's strategic utility is independently demonstrated by what happened after Eritrea pivoted towards the Gulf. UN Monitoring Group reporting in 2015 and 2016 documented the use of Assab by Saudi/UAE coalition forces, regular troop and materiel movement between Assab and Yemen, and the construction of permanent air and naval infrastructure supporting the Yemen campaign. This does not evidence Iranian control; it proves that Eritrean geography can sustain precisely the kind of cross-Red Sea logistics and military persistence that makes the location strategically valuable. [29][30]

Iran-Eritrea political contact has since re-opened. Eritrea accepted the credentials of a non-resident Iranian ambassador in December 2024, and Eritrean Foreign Minister Osman Saleh met Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi in September 2025 to discuss strengthening bilateral relations and multilateral cooperation. These are indicators of diplomatic re-engagement, not evidence of military access. [24][25]

Negative evidence remains important. In November 2025, Eritrea publicly stated that its ports were not open for foreign military or naval purposes. Century International's 2026 work also reported allegations of renewed Iranian/Houthi outreach and possible Dahlak-area trafficking, while acknowledging that satellite and AIS investigation found little or no activity at several alleged sites. The present assessment is therefore that Eritrea is a strategically important access opportunity and historical precedent, but not a confirmed contemporary Iranian military node. [26][3]

CURRENT DISTINCTION

Sudan: stronger contemporary indicators, missing connective facilitator. | Eritrea: stronger historical architecture, weaker contemporary Houthi evidence.

8.1 Informal-network indicators do not close the Eritrea branch

Reported outreach to Afar, Rashaida, Beni-Amer and other cross-border communities increases the number of plausible human and smuggling interfaces around Eritrea, but none currently resolves the required contemporary facilitator, vessel, company or financial bridge. The Massawa aviation line should likewise remain an indicator rather than a cargo event: operator history and airport capability do not establish what a specific flight carried, who received it or whether it supported Houthi activity. The Eritrean branch therefore remains materially weaker than the Yemen-Somalia network and weaker than the established Iran-SAF procurement relationship.

9. Evidence Confidence and Competing Explanations

Figure 4. Evidence confidence by component

Confidence reflects evidence quality and source independence, not strategic importance.

Component	Confidence	Basis
Iranian objective to expand strategic depth into the Red Sea	HIGH	Direct statement by senior Iranian military adviser; consistent maritime behaviour
Iran-SAF military support since 2023	HIGH	Reuters, US Treasury and Conflict Observatory / EUAA reporting
Reported Iranian attempt to secure Port Sudan naval or dual-use access	MED-HIGH	Multiple reports; original basing allegation was publicly denied by Sudan and Iran
Sudanese hedging rather than proxy alignment	HIGH	Accepted Iranian support while reportedly rejecting basing; long record of balancing Gulf and Iranian ties
Historical Iran-Eritrea military cooperation	MED-HIGH	UN Monitoring Group reporting; permanent Iranian-base claims were contested
Current permanent Iranian military access in Eritrea	LOW	No verified Iranian base; Eritrea publicly says its ports are not open for foreign military/naval use
Yemen-Somalia reciprocal facilitation network	HIGH	UN and US Treasury evidence of two-way trafficking, procurement and support
Fourth Axis as distributed geographic leverage system	MED-HIGH	Convergence of stated intent, access efforts, strategic geography, partner capabilities and maritime effects
Fourth Axis as a single integrated command structure	LOW	No evidence requiring unified command; the hypothesis does not depend on it

Figure 4. Evidence confidence by component. The model gives high confidence to Iranian strategic intent and Iran-SAF military support, while explicitly separating those findings from weaker evidence of permanent western-shore military access.

9.1 Best-fit model: distributed strategic access

The evidence does not support describing the Fourth Axis as a single centrally commanded Iranian front. Nor does it require that conclusion. The best-fit model is a distributed strategic access architecture: Tehran can treat Sudan, Eritrea, Houthi-controlled Yemen and Horn relationships as separate portfolios, each shaped by local bargaining and local interests, while their geographic complementarity increases Iran's cumulative access, intelligence, logistics, redundancy and coercive leverage.

9.2 What would materially strengthen or weaken the model

- A formal or recurring Iranian naval, military-logistics or dual-use access arrangement at Port Sudan, Massawa or Assab.
- Persistent Iranian maritime ISR or support activity demonstrably connected to Houthi targeting or Red Sea operations.
- Sustained Iran-linked military airlift, technical personnel or logistics through western Red Sea ports beyond episodic wartime supply.
- Independently verified Houthi use of Sudanese or Eritrean infrastructure for logistics, finance, intelligence or personnel movement.
- Continued rejection of foreign military access, diversification towards rival Gulf partners, or prolonged absence of operational use would weaken the western-shore component of the hypothesis.

These indicators test whether Iran's geographic leverage is deepening. None is required to demonstrate a unified command structure; the central question is whether access and influence are accumulating in strategically complementary locations.

10. Strategic Leverage Without Command Integration

The central hypothesis is no longer "Can these nodes be proven to form one operational network?" It is: how much strategic leverage can Iran accumulate from separate relationships occupying complementary geography? Sudan can offer state access and military dependency; Eritrea can offer strategic port

geography and a history of transactional access; Yemen provides the strongest kinetic pressure; and the Horn provides facilitation, transit and procurement depth.

Those functions do not need to be synchronized. One relationship may produce intelligence access, another logistics, another commercial cover, another naval persistence and another direct strike pressure. Reverse movement of weapons, personnel or technical knowledge from Yemen into Africa remains one possible function, but it is no longer the defining test of the architecture. [1][3]

The strategic effect is cumulative optionality. Even partially aligned or hedging partners can widen the number of places from which Iran can observe, support, supply, influence or impose costs. This is “joined-up” at the level of geography and state strategy rather than necessarily at the level of operational command.

11. Why the Fourth Axis Matters: From Chokepoint Risk to Corridor Risk

The strategic and commercial significance of the Fourth Axis lies less in proving a new western-shore launch front than in understanding how distributed access can change the geography and duration of perceived maritime risk. A state-access relationship, intelligence foothold or logistics position can matter commercially even if no weapon is launched from that territory.

The current Red Sea threat remains heavily associated with Houthi-controlled Yemen, Bab el-Mandeb and the southern Red Sea. What a western-shore access layer adds is uncertainty and redundancy: more potential points for intelligence collection, logistics, maritime support and political influence, and therefore a wider area that operators and naval planners may need to monitor. That is a corridor-risk problem rather than proof of a second launch coast.

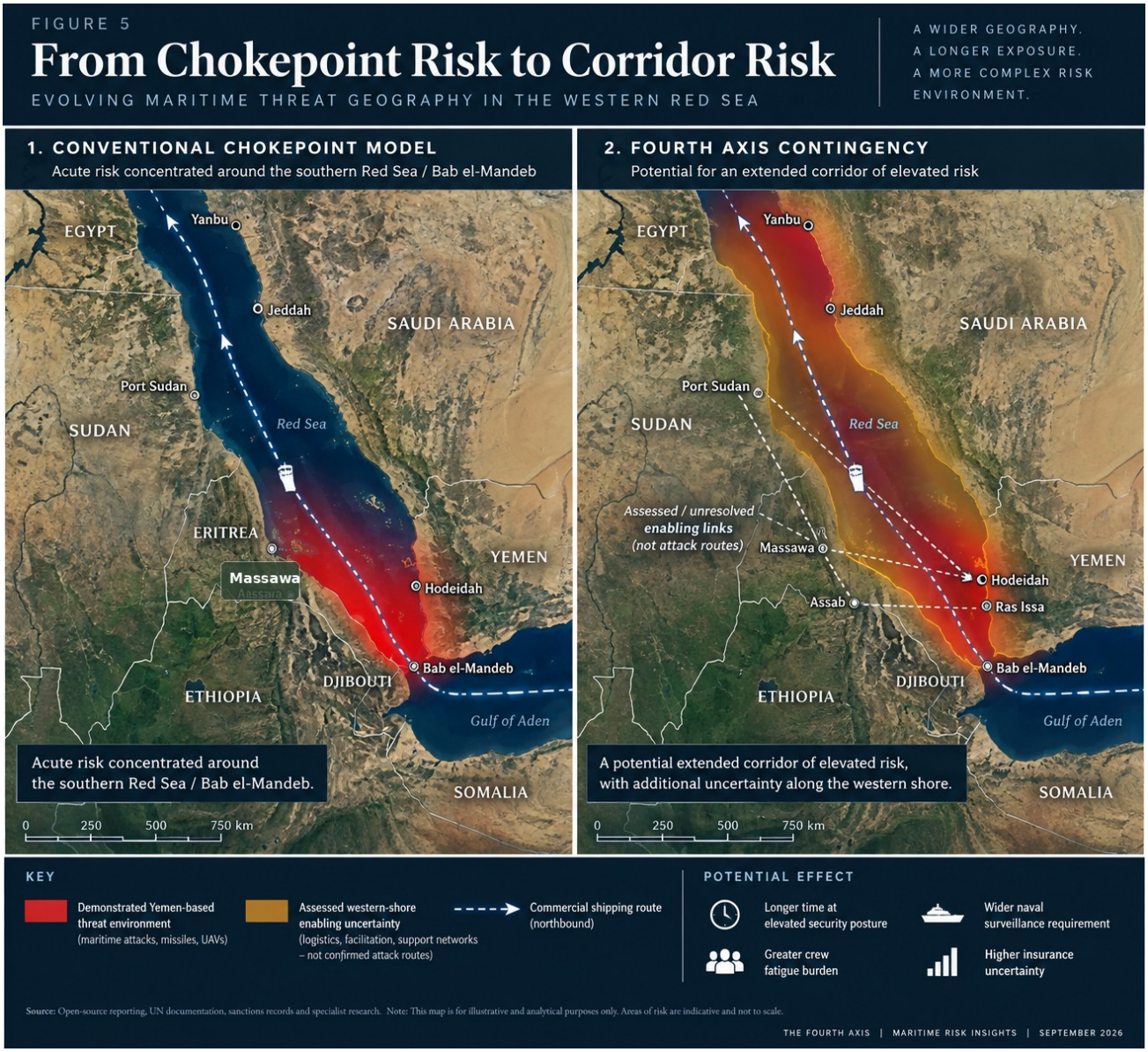


Figure 5. From Chokepoint Risk to Corridor Risk. The western-shore layer represents a strategic-access contingency - logistics, ISR, persistence and influence - rather than a confirmed attack route or launch architecture.

Corridor risk should not be read as a forecast that the entire Red Sea becomes one uniform high-threat zone. The northern approaches to Suez introduce a different political, naval and escalation environment, including greater Egyptian sensitivity to disruption around the canal and its approaches. No evidence reviewed for this assessment establishes that Iran or the Houthis currently intend to create that broader confrontation. The commercial collection question is therefore whether threat, uncertainty and defensive demand extend far enough north to degrade confidence in the Yanbu-Suez route without requiring a deliberate escalation around Suez itself.

CORE COMMERCIAL IMPLICATION

The intelligence threshold that changes insurance and voyage planning may be lower than the threshold required to prove a new military front. The 19 September 2026 Houthi claim of ballistic- and cruise-missile and drone operations against Riyadh and Yanbu illustrates how quickly the northern Red Sea energy system can become part of the active risk picture, even when attempted attacks are intercepted or their effects remain contested. Credible evidence of western-shore access, surveillance, staging or logistics could therefore alter risk assumptions before a first attack is attributed to that geography.

12. The Force-Dilution Effect

A chokepoint and an extended sea lane impose different defensive burdens. EUNAVFOR ASPIDES is already mandated to safeguard freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and surrounding waters and has been extended to 28 February 2027. [11]

The burden is now explicitly multinational. On 30 July 2026 Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Defense convened chiefs of staff and representatives from 43 countries, alongside the EU delegation, around the Kingdom's initiative to establish a Multinational Maritime Defense Alliance for the Bab al-Mandab Strait, Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Saudi Arabia was designated the founding and leading state and host of the headquarters. On 6 August Rear Admiral Abdullah bin Salem Al-Shehri was appointed commander, with responsibility for joint maritime-defense operations, operational planning and coordination among member states and with other maritime coalitions. On 18 August the Saudi Cabinet said the alliance had entered institutional and operational activation. [31][32][33]

This matters because a wider sea-lane architecture consumes more than additional frigates. Persistent protection requires maritime and airborne ISR, intelligence fusion, air- and missile-defence readiness, replenishment, merchant liaison, command-and-control, communications, maintenance, basing and trained crews. If the area requiring elevated vigilance expands from the Gulf of Aden and Bab al-Mandab farther into the central or northern Red Sea, those functions must be sustained over greater distance and for longer periods even when continuous close escort is neither possible nor necessary.

Italy's defence minister publicly called for additional ships in the Red Sea on 18 September 2026, illustrating that naval resource pressure is already a live policy issue. [16] The Italian case should not be read in isolation: the Saudi-led alliance is a separate regional attempt to share the same defensive burden, while ASPIDES continues as an EU framework. The emerging picture is therefore one of overlapping national, regional and multinational maritime-security structures that must generate ships, crews, logistics and situational awareness at the same time.

The opportunity cost also extends beyond the Red Sea. NATO's Standing Naval Forces draw on Allied frigates, destroyers and supporting vessels and operate across the Atlantic, Baltic, North and Mediterranean Seas as a core element of Alliance deterrence and maritime readiness. NATO is simultaneously sustaining activities such as Baltic Sentry and Eastern Sentry amid continuing concern about Russia and the security of the eastern flank. [34][35] A ship assigned to a Red Sea mission is not automatically 'removed from NATO' - national, EU, coalition and NATO tasking can overlap and rotations vary - but high-end hulls, air-defence interceptors, maritime aviation, replenishment capacity and trained crews are finite. Longer or more geographically dispersed Red Sea commitments therefore reduce force-generation margin elsewhere unless navies increase available forces, deployment tempo or supporting capacity.

The strategic effect is best described as force dilution rather than naval defeat. A wider threat geography can compel defenders to distribute scarce high-end capabilities, extend deployment cycles and accept opportunity costs in other theatres. That is an effect of the threat environment; it is not evidence that Iran or the Houthis designed their campaign principally to draw NATO forces away from Europe. For commercial operators, however, the consequence is similar: a larger defensive footprint can affect escort availability, response time, insurance assumptions and confidence in sustained maritime protection.

12.1 Piracy resurgence as a parallel force-dilution problem

A separate but commercially relevant development is the 2026 resurgence of Somali piracy. Willem H. van der Kooi highlighted the April-May cluster as evidence that the Red Sea and East Africa passage is again exposed to Pirate Action Groups at the same time that naval attention is concentrated on Houthi and wider regional threats. Official reporting independently confirms the hijackings of HONOUR 25, SWARD and EUREKA, while EUNAVFOR later tracked four ongoing piracy incidents off the northern Somali coast. [38] [39]

The operational feature that matters most is extended reach. UKMTO/JMIC assessed that a hijacked dhow was likely being used as a mothership and that offshore Pirate Action Group capability remained credible out to about 500 nautical miles. On 28 April a tanker approximately 500 nautical miles east of Mogadishu reported a larger wooden vessel and two smaller craft approaching before turning away after armed guards were observed. The episode demonstrates that the piracy envelope is not confined to the immediate Somali littoral. [38][40]

This should not be folded into the Fourth Axis as evidence of Houthi control of Somali piracy. No such command relationship is established here. The relevance is systemic: piracy exploits the same permissive maritime geography, commercial cover, dhow infrastructure and gaps in persistent law-enforcement coverage that make clandestine logistics difficult to suppress. It therefore competes for the same surveillance, patrol, merchant-liaison and response capacity that is already being stretched by Houthi missile, UAV and maritime threats.

Van der Kooi's policy argument is that high-end naval assets can suppress incidents but are an expensive substitute for sustained maritime law enforcement. For this assessment, the narrower commercial implication is that route substitution can exchange one risk for another. A vessel reducing exposure to a chokepoint threat may spend longer in waters where piracy, mothership-supported approaches and limited policing capacity remain credible. [38]

13. Yanbu: Why Northern Red Sea Exposure Already Matters

Recent events demonstrate that northern Red Sea infrastructure is already relevant to the Houthi threat without any validated Sudanese or Eritrean attack axis. Reuters reported that disruption to Saudi Arabia's East-West Pipeline threatened a significant share of global oil supply and constrained exports through Yanbu. On 19 September 2026, the Houthis claimed two operations using a large number of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and drones: one against “sensitive sites” in Riyadh and another against Saudi Aramco facilities at Yanbu. The Saudi-led coalition confirmed that a ballistic missile fired towards Riyadh was intercepted and said attempted attacks against Yanbu and several other locations were thwarted. The claimed strike on Yanbu itself was not independently verified at the information cut-off. [14][15]

The resilience logic is central. Saudi Arabia's East-West Pipeline and the Yanbu export system provide strategic redundancy when Hormuz is constrained by moving crude to the Red Sea. That redundancy loses commercial value if northbound Red Sea transit, loading infrastructure or the defensive environment around the western export system also becomes materially uncertain. The significance is therefore not simply that Yanbu can be struck from Yemen; it is that pressure on the Red Sea can erode the reliability of the principal workaround to Gulf-side disruption. [14]

19 SEPTEMBER 2026 - CURRENT ESCALATION MARKER

Houthi forces claimed a multi-vector package of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and drones against Riyadh and Yanbu. Saudi reporting confirmed an intercepted ballistic missile towards Riyadh and said attempted attacks against Yanbu and other locations were thwarted. The episode strengthens the assessment of northern Red Sea corridor relevance while leaving the claimed Yanbu impact unverified. [15]

This is an important corridor-risk marker. It demonstrates that Yemen-based Houthi systems can already impose simultaneous defensive demand on the Saudi capital and the northern Red Sea energy system. The Fourth Axis question is therefore not whether Sudan or Eritrea are required to place Yanbu at risk; they are not. The question is what additional uncertainty, redundancy and geographic complexity a validated western-shore facilitation network could create. A long-range strike from Yemen demonstrates reach; a future event credibly enabled from a separate western Red Sea node would indicate a change in the structure of the battlespace itself. [15]

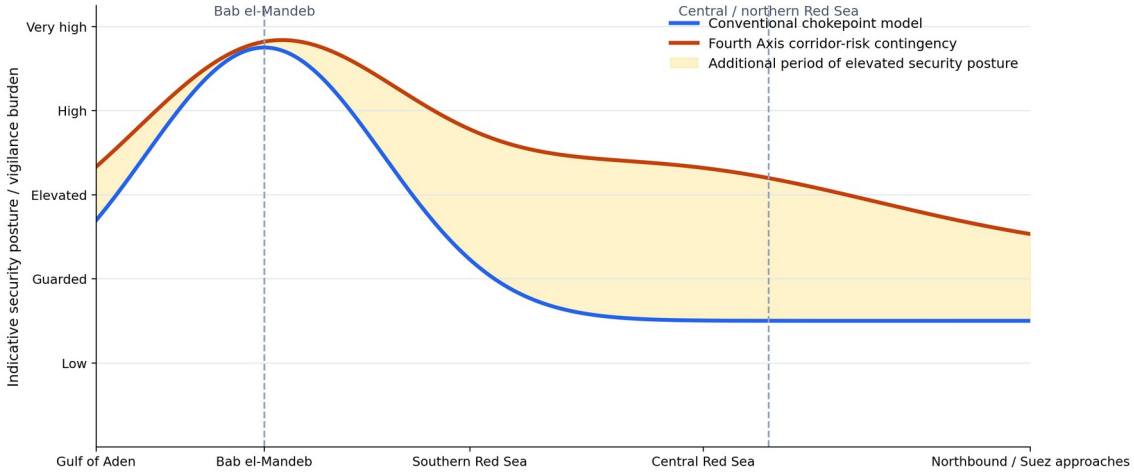
14. Time at Risk: Crew and Security-Posture Burden

For shipowners, masters and insurers, duration of exposure matters alongside probability of attack. A short, geographically concentrated danger window can be managed differently from a security posture sustained for a substantial portion of a Red Sea transit.

UKMTO industry guidance for high-threat transit explicitly identifies fatigue, welfare, psychological stress, watchkeeping redundancy and rest-hours management as security considerations, describing fatigue and psychological stress as critical risk multipliers during prolonged high-threat operations because they can degrade situational awareness, communication and decision-making. [12]

Figure 6. Exposure duration and security-posture burden

Conceptual comparison: concentrated chokepoint risk vs an extended corridor-risk contingency.



Analytical implication: a longer high-alert window can increase watchkeeping, rest-management and crew-welfare pressure even without a confirmed western-shore attack capability.

Figure 6. Exposure duration and security-posture burden. Conceptual comparison, not an operational risk forecast; it illustrates how a longer geographic threat window could extend high-alert conditions.

The commercial consequence is not simply more guards or equipment. It is a human-performance problem: longer periods of enhanced vigilance increase the burden on bridge teams, rest planning, communications and company security management.

15. War-Risk and Insurance Relevance

Insurance markets respond to credible threat and uncertainty, not only confirmed casualties. Reuters reported that southern Red Sea war-risk premiums rose from roughly 0.3% of vessel value to more than 1% after renewed Houthi attacks in July 2026, with some voyages attracting rates approaching 3% depending on exposure. [13]

This creates a plausible commercial transmission mechanism: credible evidence of new access or intelligence capability -> revised risk geography -> higher premiums and security costs -> carrier and charterer reassessment -> possible diversion or reduced traffic. The Fourth Axis therefore matters commercially even if Sudan and Eritrea never become integrated attack platforms.

Marine exposure also transmits through secondary liabilities, not only direct physical damage. A deteriorating security picture can create deviation and delay, cargo deterioration, crew and welfare claims, salvage and general average exposure, pollution-response costs, contractual disputes, congestion and liabilities arising from route or port changes. The materiality of each channel depends on policy wording, vessel type, cargo, trade and geography.

For insurers and P&I clubs, the portfolio question is accumulation. Simultaneous pressure across Hormuz, the southern Red Sea and Saudi western infrastructure can correlate losses that would otherwise be treated as separate voyage or event risks. The decision need is therefore a common operating picture showing which fleets, routes, ports, cargoes and counterparties are exposed, how confidence has changed, and which indicators justify changes to pricing, limits, deductibles, security requirements or aggregation controls.

16. Implications for Commercial Maritime Stakeholders

For P&I clubs, war-risk underwriters, shipowners, charterers and security managers, the distributed-access model is principally an uncertainty, persistence and exposure-duration problem. The relevant questions increasingly include:

- How much of the voyage remains within an elevated threat environment?
- How predictable is the origin and direction of the threat?
- Does the vessel need to sustain enhanced watchkeeping and security readiness for longer?
- Does crew fatigue become a material security variable?
- Has the defensive maritime footprint expanded beyond the traditional southern danger area?
- Are insurers still pricing the Red Sea primarily as a chokepoint problem, or is corridor exposure becoming commercially relevant?
- Does route substitution reduce Houthi exposure while increasing exposure to Somali piracy or extended-range mothership activity?
- Are naval and maritime-security resources being divided between area air/missile defence, escort, counter-smuggling and counter-piracy tasks?

16.1 Decision relevance by stakeholder

Stakeholder	Decision relevance
Shipowner / charterer	Assess whether elevated security posture extends over more of the voyage; review route, schedule, bunker, crew-rest, port-call, charter-performance and diversion consequences.
War-risk / hull / P&I underwriter	Test whether risk geography, additional premium assumptions, limits, deductibles, aggregation controls or voyage-specific terms need review; watch for correlated exposure across vessels, cargoes and counterparties.
Maritime security company / CSO	Plan for a longer intelligence, watchkeeping and readiness problem rather than a short chokepoint event; monitor naval coverage, reporting latency, communications, crew burden and changes in threat origin.
Cargo / energy / trade interests	Assess loading reliability, cargo delay, freight and bunker costs, alternative routing, supply-chain resilience and the continuing reliability of the Yanbu-Suez alternative when Gulf routes are constrained.

The commercial value of the assessment is therefore anticipatory rather than predictive: it identifies which observable changes should cause a stakeholder to revisit an existing operating, underwriting or security assumption before a route is formally closed or a new western-shore attack capability is demonstrated.

16.2 Commercial and transit monitoring dashboard

Dashboard field	Decision use
Transit conditions	Track route availability, delays, listed-area changes and material shifts in traffic patterns; avoid treating a single-day flow change as a trend.
Confirmed attacks / attempts	Separate confirmed attack, attempted attack, warning and unverified claim using IMO, UKMTO/JMIC and credible naval reporting.
Vessel target profile	Monitor whether ownership, beneficial ownership, charter, cargo, flag or port-call characteristics are associated with changing threat patterns.
Capability + geography	Track the effective engagement environment - missiles, UAV/USV activity, ISR/cueing and any credible change in launch or support geography - rather than coastline alone.
Counter-maritime posture	Track escort and patrol availability, surveillance coverage, merchant liaison, air/missile-defence burden and whether protection remains chokepoint-focused or becomes corridor-wide.
War-risk / P&I conditions	Track additional premiums, coverage terms, listed areas, broker advisories, exclusions, deductibles and material changes in underwriting appetite.

Dashboard field	Decision use
Operator behaviour	Track carrier suspensions, rerouting, convoy/group transit, delays, AIS behaviour, port-call changes and freight-rate or bunker-cost consequences.
Trigger for reassessment	Escalate after a confirmed attack on the relevant vessel profile, credible new operating geography, material premium/coverage change, major carrier suspension or reduced naval protection.

This dashboard is a monitoring framework, not a voyage recommendation. Its purpose is to convert the strategic assessment into observable commercial triggers that can be updated as the operating environment changes.

This assessment does not provide voyage-specific security advice. Operators should continue to use current flag-state, UKMTO, JMIC, naval and insurer guidance and conduct voyage-specific risk assessments.

17. Indicators to Watch

17.1 Indicators that would strengthen concern

- Forward deployment of artillery, radar/EO/IR, anti-ship missiles, UAVs, USVs/UUVs, communications or launch/recovery infrastructure at newly held Bab el-Mandeb coastal or island positions.
- Observable application of Saudi-linked targeting criteria to merchant vessels by ownership, beneficial ownership, management, charter, cargo, port-call history or perceived affiliation.
- Evidence that the Yemen-side Coast Guard withdrawal is producing increased eastbound sustainment, dual-use or military cargo across the Horn-Yemen small-craft bridge, or that an effective replacement interdiction screen has failed to emerge.
- Progression from experimental underwater-weapons research to a fielded system, including identifiable launch, recovery, guidance or support infrastructure.
- A formal or recurring Iranian naval, military-logistics or dual-use access arrangement in Port Sudan, Massawa or Assab.
- Recurring Iranian military or dual-use airlift into Port Sudan, particularly where cargo, operators or technical personnel can be independently resolved.
- New Iran-Eritrea defence agreements, naval visits or port-access arrangements beyond diplomatic re-engagement.
- Persistent Iranian maritime ISR or support-vessel activity that can be linked to Houthi targeting or Red Sea operations.
- Independently verified Houthi use of Sudanese or Eritrean infrastructure for logistics, intelligence, finance or personnel movement.
- War-risk pricing or listed-area assumptions extending materially north of the traditional southern Red Sea danger zone.
- Expansion of naval protection, surveillance or merchant-liaison requirements across a wider Red Sea area.
- Repeat Pirate Action Group operations at 400-500 nautical miles or greater, especially mothership-supported approaches affecting vessels rerouted around Houthi risk.
- Independently corroborated evidence that Houthi-linked facilitators are materially enabling pirate groups with weapons, navigation equipment, finance or tasking; absent such evidence, piracy should remain analytically separate.

17.2 Disconfirming or risk-reducing indicators

- Iran-SAF military cooperation contracts materially, or recurring military airlift and technical-support indicators cease.
- Sudanese authorities continue to reject permanent Iranian naval or dual-use military access and deepen balancing relationships with competing regional partners.
- Eritrea continues to exclude foreign military basing and no repeat Iranian naval, logistics or defence-access pattern emerges.
- Suspected western-shore logistics or ISR leads fail to produce repeatable activity or independently verified onward Houthi utility.

- Interdiction, diplomacy or political realignment materially reduces Houthi resupply, maritime attack tempo or reciprocal Yemen-Horn facilitation.
- War-risk pricing, listed-area assumptions, carrier restrictions and naval protection requirements contract rather than expand over a sustained period.

The assessment should be allowed to weaken as well as strengthen. The Fourth Axis is useful only if evidence can move confidence in both directions.

18. Assessment

The Fourth Axis is best understood as a distributed system of strategic leverage rather than an integrated military front. Iranian intent to expand strategic depth into the Red Sea is explicitly stated; Iran-SAF military support is established; reported attempts to obtain Port Sudan access are significant though disputed and unsuccessful to date; and Eritrea provides both historical Iran-linked military cooperation and independently demonstrated strategic port utility. Houthi-controlled Yemen remains the principal east-shore kinetic node, while the Yemen-Somalia/Horn layer provides the strongest evidence of reciprocal regional facilitation.

The network research in this assessment sharpens that judgement. The southern Yemen-Somalia architecture is supported by named liaison, trafficking and recruitment structures as well as official UN and Treasury evidence. Sudan presents a separate, developing Houthi-facing case, including reported Houthi presence, bidirectional movement indicators and the unresolved Port Sudan-Ras Issa Ro-Ro chain. But the decisive connective northern facilitator is still missing, and the named southern networks have not produced a defensible direct Sudan/Eritrea cross-match. Eritrea remains a plausible access geography with historical precedent, not a demonstrated contemporary Houthi corridor.

The detailed source and network review did not establish a transaction-level bridge between the well-evidenced Sudanese procurement architecture and the separately well-evidenced Yemen-Somalia/Houthi facilitation architecture. That negative finding is analytically significant: it supports retaining the Fourth Axis as a distributed strategic leverage/access model rather than describing it as a proven single supply chain or unified command network.

Additional developments widen the commercial problem without changing that evidential boundary. Territorial consolidation and fortification around Bab el-Mandeb lower the range and cost threshold for maritime threat systems; the withdrawal of the Yemeni Red Sea Coast Guard weakens a local interdiction layer; and experimental underwater-weapons research broadens the future capability set without yet demonstrating a fielded system. The resurgence of Somali piracy creates a parallel extended-range security problem in the Gulf of Aden and Somali Basin. None of these developments proves a unified Iranian command plan; together they increase the persistence, geographic spread and defensive-resource burden associated with keeping the Red Sea route open. [37][41][42][43][38][39][40]

Sudan and Eritrea should therefore be treated as separate strategic relationships, not as subordinate parts of one Houthi network. Sudan demonstrates how wartime military dependency can create opportunities for Iranian access while the host state continues to hedge. Eritrea demonstrates how a strategically located Red Sea state can shift between external partners and monetise access without surrendering permanent alignment. Their relevance lies in the options their geography can create for logistics, ISR, maritime persistence and influence.

Berbera reinforces that evidential boundary from the opposite direction. A strategically located Horn port can develop substantial commercial capacity and dual-use security infrastructure, and attract interest from competing external actors, without belonging to the Iranian/Houthi network. Its inclusion therefore sharpens the existing geographic-control safeguard rather than changing the core distributed strategic-leverage judgement. [47][48][49][50][51]

ASSESSMENT
The Fourth Axis is best understood as a distributed strategic access architecture: geographically complementary Iranian relationships that can be developed in silos yet still create cumulative strategic leverage. Iran's objective to expand strategic depth into the Red Sea is evidenced; the Sudan relationship has materially re-opened; Eritrea provides historical cooperation and strategic geography but no verified current Iranian base; Yemen supplies the principal kinetic pressure; and the Horn supplies reciprocal facilitation depth. The central risk is the accumulation of access, ISR, logistics and partner options - not the existence of a single integrated command network.

For commercial maritime stakeholders, the principal implication is a possible shift from chokepoint exposure to corridor exposure. The risk is not that a fully integrated western-shore strike architecture has been demonstrated; it is that accumulating access, intelligence and logistics options could widen the area of uncertainty, extend periods of elevated vigilance and increase naval, insurance, crew and security-management burdens.

The value of the Fourth Axis assessment is not that it predicts an Iranian attack from Sudan or Eritrea. Its value is that it identifies an emerging strategic option early enough to monitor it. For commercial decision-makers, the practical task is to watch for evidence that changes route assumptions, exposure duration, naval coverage, insurance pricing, crew burden or portfolio accumulation - and to change operating or underwriting decisions when observable thresholds are crossed rather than when speculation alone increases.

For a shipowner, war-risk insurer, P&I club, cargo interest or maritime-security provider, the core judgement is therefore conditional but actionable: take the expanding Red Sea risk geometry seriously, retain the distinction between evidenced capability and hypothesis, and maintain a decision framework that can respond quickly if the western-shore access picture deepens.

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