Lords of Mecca

Glimpses of Saudi Arabia's Red Sea Vision

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PROLOGUE

And of His Signs are the ships that sail in the sea like mountains.

—Quran 42:32

The year is 1932. It is a warm February day in Jeddah as the convoy heads out into the desert. Warm, but not blistering.

All four vehicles are Fords imported from the United States. It's a tight squeeze for the more than two dozen passengers, crammed in with extra tires, spare jugs of motor oil and gasoline, and camping supplies. The caravan hugs the coastal flats of Tihamah for as long as it can, but eventually the Hijaz Mountains must be crossed. As the elevation increases, the engines groan progressively louder. Deep indentations in the rocky terrain and dark, crusty detritus testify to the region's volcanic origins. Finally, after a week on the road—far longer than advertised—the convoy arrives at its destination, the rugged area of Mahd adh Dhahab, southeast of Medina.

After a makeshift camp is established, a team of surveyors, led by the American engineer Karl Twitchell of Vermont, begins the careful process of estimating the site's geological resource potential. Samples are collected and sent back to the lab; maps and photographs are furnished to the client. The assay results, as taciturn technicians are wont to report, are "satisfactory." The American-led team has struck gold. Not "black gold," that overwrought euphemism for the petroleum the same Vermonter will soon be hunting on the eastern side of the Saudi peninsula (and eventually will find), but elemental gold, atomic number 79: the Latin *aurum*, the Persian *zar*, the Arabic *dhahab*.

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The client in question is not just anybody: he is Abdullah Suleiman, the "Minister of Everything." Although not a prince, Sheikh Suleiman has earned a place in the House of Saud as its financial mastermind. With the Holy Kingdom's inauguration mere months away, we can speculate that he is determined to wield his influence to investigate a legend he has heard all his life—that of Solomon's Mines in the biblical books of Kings, long rumored to lay somewhere along the Red Sea. Could the dilapidated mines once in operation at this remote spot, roughly equidistant from the two holiest sites in all of Islam, be revived as it is named—as the Cradle of Gold?[1]

THE PROMISING LAND

Navigation is dangerous along this whole coast of Arabia, which is without harbors, with bad anchorages, foul, inaccessible because of breakers and rocks, and terrible in every way.[2]

—Anonymous merchant, ca. AD 60

Nearly a century after the grand reopening of the Cradle of Gold, a new "Minister of Everything" is attempting to remake Saudi Arabia.[3] Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has far greater financial resources than Sheikh Suleiman could ever have mustered. I argue that much of that agenda—perhaps the greater part of it—amounts to a long under-resourced effort by Riyadh to rebalance the Kingdom's center of gravity, not by taking weight off the Eastern Province side of the scale but by adding it to the side of the Red Sea. The reasons for this shift are many.

The official Saudi agenda over the remaining years of the 2020s is bound up in Vision 2030, a largely domestic policy strategy document first released in 2016 and invariably described as "ambitious," with good reason.[4] Barack Obama welcomed its announcement in 2016, a position reiterated by Donald Trump in 2017 and by Joe Biden in 2022.[5] Supporting the Saudi plan is part of the US State Department's country strategy,[6] and the US Commerce Department has advertised it as a business opportunity for American companies.[7] Writing in the Hoover Institution publication, *The Caravan*, Karen Elliot House noted succinctly, "The Crown Prince's Vision 2030 reforms are good for the Kingdom—and also good for the US."[8] In another publication for the Hoover Institution in 2018, Dennis Ross put it this way:

> I believe we have such a large stake in the success of the Saudi National Transformation Plan. As one Saudi minister said to me when I visited the kingdom, "Welcome to our revolution disguised as economic reform." Saudi Vision 2030 is about remaking the kingdom. It is not just about diversifying the sources of revenue away from exclusive reliance on oil, but about overhauling the nation's educational system, reducing the power of the religious establishment, recognizing the role women must play in modernizing the state, and creating opportunities

> for young people to reshape the economy. With nearly 70 percent of the population under age thirty, the potential for change—not to mention its need—clearly exists. If the Saudi effort succeeds—and there are big ifs, particularly given the difficulty of transforming the political and social culture within and coping with Iranian-driven threats from outside—its implications will be felt not just in Saudi Arabia. They will be felt throughout the region, with the existence of a model that might be applied more widely.[9]

Human development goals may be laudable, but they are notoriously difficult to track and quantify. The plan's three thematic pillars—a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation—are so generic they could be applied to any developing country's aspirations. Vision 2030 is a mixture of a reform agenda, economic planning, quotidian investment, and sheer vanity. There is also probably a degree of bureaucratic repackaging of off-the-shelf ideas: the Saudis have nine five-year plans sitting on that shelf, issued periodically from 1970 to 2014.

Beyond the snickering headlines warning of budget cuts, delays, and scale-backs, something important is unfolding that should not be discounted.[10] Of the five initial "giga-projects" envisioned in Vision 2030, two are Red Sea projects. First, Red Sea Global includes the touristification of the Red Sea itself and the development of Amaala, an insular resort network under construction on the Saudi coast just over a hundred miles from the Egyptian resort of Sharm el Sheikh. Second, Neom, an alleged zero-carbon set of residential and industrial subprojects to be constructed near the Gulf of Aqaba in between Sharm and Amaala, features a "linear" city, what is supposed to be "the world's largest green hydrogen plant," and a ski resort, among other projects. In terms of sheer cost—$500 billion or some eventual multiple thereof—Neom dwarfs everything else in Vision 2030. In addition, two of the four special economic zones that the Saudis are launching will be based on the Red Sea: King Abdullah Economic City in Mecca Province (Makkah) and the Jizan Special Economic Zone, hugging the border with Yemen across the sea from Eritrea. A new desalination plant at Rabigh is also under construction on the coast between Yanbu and Jeddah, where the Burj Khalifa-exceeding Burj Jeddah skyscraper is under development.

To be sure, the Persian Gulf remains a critical part of the Kingdom. The bulk of Saudi oil production occurs in the Eastern Province, and most crude exports flow through the Strait of Hormuz. Much of Saudi Arabia's value-added production, such as the refinery at Ras Tanura and the processing complex at Abqaiq, is situated on the Persian Gulf coast. Vision 2030 calls for tens of billions of dollars to be spent on other projects, as well as on the greenification of Riyadh, which is more central but lies closer to Ras Tanura than it does to "sea-side" Jeddah. The Kingdom's closest allies are the gulf-side Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, the production fields and facilities of which are located entirely on the Gulf. The US military presence has always cast its gaze first across the Persian Gulf, whether from Doha or Dhahran, before it checks on the Red Sea. The shift to the Red Sea is best understood as a broadening of the Kingdom's horizons, rather than a clumsy pivot.

A TECHNICAL INTERLUDE

And the gold of that land is good.

—Genesis 2:12

"Energy is the backbone of the global economy," according to the World Bank website. Energy is also a useful prism for examining Saudi Arabia's Red Sea strategy. The general reader need not be intimidated by the technical details, which are easy enough to grasp and illuminating.

Petroleum ("oil") exists in vast reservoirs underground and undersea. There is no single chemical formula for unrefined oil ("crude") because hydrocarbon chains naturally bond with all sorts of impurities, such as nitrogen, sulfur, and perhaps other metals, in various proportions. Depending on the precise composition and pressures in play, oil can be viscous like tar or fluid like water, and black as night or transparent as soda. Wells are used to extract this oil from the subsurface; they often extract natural gas (also hydrocarbons) along with it. Both crude oil and natural gas need to be processed before they can be put to good use in the modern economy. Practically, this means that heat and chemical processes are applied to filter, separate, and treat these hydrocarbons in various subcomponent streams. This work is accomplished at oil refineries and natural gas processing facilities, where chemical reactions are made to occur based on the characteristics of the "raw" feedstock and the desired output. The result is the more familiar array of oil products, such as jet fuel and gasoline; natural gas liquids, such as ethane and propane; and pure methane, to which the term "natural gas" most commonly refers and which can be used in gaseous form to run everything from power plants to kitchen stoves. Much of these products are diverted straight to the transportation sector for near-immediate consumption in automobiles and airplanes and ships, whereas others are used to build asphalt roads or by the petrochemical industry (using remarkably similar chemical techniques) to make things like plastic. The entire value chain is a sequence of mixing and matching, heating and cooling, separating and bonding.

Underpinning much of geopolitics in the past century is the fact that hydrocarbons can only be transported in a handful of ways. Crude oil is a relatively easy case: pump it into tanks onboard ships, trucks, and trains or into pipelines, and transport it in virtually every instance to an oil refinery. The refined products are then transported from the refinery to consumer markets in the same manner, but require their own pipelines that are optimized for specific products, rather than for crude oil. Natural gas is more difficult to transport. Its gaseous nature makes it more voluminous than oil, so pumping it as gas into a tank car is an inefficient way of moving not much energy to some destination. As a result, natural gas is typically transported by pipeline to a processing facility. The only other way to move any significant volume of natural gas any considerable distance is to supercool it into liquid, which reduces its volume, and to load the now liquefied natural gas (LNG) onto a ship (an LNG carrier), which can take the cargo to yet another facility that heats it back up into gas again—and probably sends it through a pipeline in the end anyway.

The key point for the general reader is that oil and gas are made valuable by a combination of chemistry and logistics that turns the raw material into value-added products. All this requires very tangible and very specific infrastructure.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

The sacred flood of the Red Sea with its bed of scarlet sands . . . where the Sun, who sees all things, gives rest to his tired steeds and refreshes his immortal body in warm outpourings of soft water.[11]

—Aeschylus, fifth century BC

Beginning in 1970, the Saudi government began publishing five-year development plans. As mentioned, there were nine adopted prior to Vision 2030, which contains what would have been the Tenth Development Plan (2015–19), the Eleventh Development Plan (2020–24), and the Twelfth Development Plan (2025–29). As the name implies, these are exercises in central planning, even if they are replete with aspirational calls for greater privatization and market solutions that have been achieved with some success in certain areas.

All the five-year plans—every single one—state the intention of diversifying the Saudi Arabian economy and thereby government revenue beyond oil. Implicit in the diversification agenda is a prudent expansion of sea-side infrastructure to complement the gulf-side infrastructure that necessarily exists near the most productive Saudi oil fields. The First Development Plan (1970–75) explained, "Dependence on oil is the obverse of the advantages derived from the abundance of oil. . . . Moreover, it has led to the situation where further development of the economy over the coming decades is mainly dependent on growth in revenues and foreign exchange earnings from oil; a situation that must gradually be changed by diversifying production, exports, and sources of government revenue." This first plan previewed port capacity expansion at Jeddah and Jizan on the sea side and at Dammam on the gulf side. It also noted "important mineral potentials" in the Arabian Shield, a geological formation underpinning the western Arabian provinces.[12]

The Second Development Plan (1975–80) re-upped the initial port capacity expansions and added to the docket five minor ports on each of the two coasts. Two institutions created in this period proved especially important: the Royal Commission for Jubail and Yanbu in 1975 and the Saudi Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC) in 1976. The commission functioned as a "superagency" that directed the construction of two new industrial port cities—Jubail (gulf side), which would operate near the Ras Tanura oil refinery and associated oil fields, and Yanbu (sea side), the much smaller maritime counterpart that serves Medina in the way that Jeddah services Mecca. The plan focused on petrochemicals, refineries, fertilizer, and metal production in the Eastern Province. Some 20 percent of the budget was reserved for the East–West pipeline (Petroline), which to this day transports crude oil from Abqaiq to Yanbu; an accompanying natural gas liquids pipeline that follows the same route; a Red Sea export

refinery; and some sea-side petrochemical capacity. SABIC was responsible for much of this industrial activity and is still in operation.[13]

The Third Development Plan (1980–85) called for the establishment of a natural gas "gathering" capability, which is far more crucial than it may sound. As discussed, natural gas is often produced alongside crude oil. For the first several decades of Saudi oil production, not much was done with the "associated" gas production. Even today in other places around the world, such gas is vented into the atmosphere or burned ("flared"). Under the Third Development Plan, the Saudis constructed a program to pipe the gas to processing centers, where it was "sweetened" by removing sulfur and methane; it was then piped to fractionators, where natural gas liquids (ethane, propane, butane) could be separated out and used for other purposes, such as petrochemicals.[14] This system served as "the blood and oxygen" of the new industrial port cities Jubail and Yanbu that were launched in the Second Development Plan.[15] New series of oil refineries were also built in Jeddah and Riyadh and planned for Jubail, Yanbu, and Rabigh (the latter two being on the sea side). In general, the development of Jubail proceeded faster than in Yanbu.

By the time of the Fourth Development Plan (1985–90), the Saudis could boast of five major ports: Dammam and Jubail on the Gulf and, on the Red Sea, Jeddah, Jizan, and Yanbu. Through these ports flowed products generated at the then-six operating oil refineries; equally importantly, these ports also served as receiving stations for the importation of material and equipment necessary to construct new infrastructure and industrial capacity. The plan noted,

> Based on its experience the Kingdom recognized the *dual character of the oil wealth*: oil can be (and in the long run will be) a source of economic strength; however, it can also be a source of weakness at times, as demand for oil is subject to both cyclical movements in the world economy and technological innovations. Hence, to reduce the resulting uncertainty in planning parameters and the vulnerability of dependence on a single commodity, the Government is determined to expand its oil-related industries (refineries and petrochemicals) and to develop the other producing sectors of the economy through a full range of measures.[16]

Here it is important to note that moving "beyond oil" in the mind of Saudi central planners then meant moving beyond *crude* oil, not oil per se. Refined products and petrochemicals are simply value-added goods derived from crude oil; to borrow from the lexicon of physics, the result of work being performed on it. The Fourth Development Plan, however, did include a genuinely non-oil-focused discussion of mineral expansion opportunities and suggested that the "finite nature" of oil and gas would "necessitate the development of viable alternatives, such as nuclear energy."[17] (We revisit nuclear energy later.)

During the following two decades of central planning, much of the preceding became a familiar refrain. The Fifth Development Plan (1990–95) referred to "a vigorous policy throughout successive development plans to make optimal use of its oil resources," noting a headcount of nine refineries at the time (up from six) and the expansion of petrochemical export capacity.[18] The Sixth Development Plan (1995–2000) asserted that "sustainable long term

development requires a reduced dependence on the exploitation of depletable crude oil resources as the main source of national income."[19] (Note, again, the caveat: depletable *crude* oil resources, not oil per se.) By the Seventh Development Plan (2000–2004), there were eight major ports (up from five in the Fourth Development Plan). Central planners prophesied that the petrochemical industry would "spearhead the Kingdom's diversification efforts."[20] The Eighth Development Plan (2005–9) called for expanding the oil refinery in Riyadh and the port of Jeddah, increasing refined product storage at Jizan, and building new chemical plants at Yanbu.[21]

The Ninth Development Plan (2010–14), the last plan before the unveiling of Vision 2030, contained three ideas that stood out. The first two were a pair of rail projects: one would link Mecca-Medina-Jeddah via high-speed passenger trains (operational as of 2018), and the Landbridge Project would link Damman to Jeddah, from the Gulf to the sea.[22] The third idea harkens back to a brief mention in the Fourth Development Plan:

> Given the current state of technology, two sources stand out: solar, and nuclear energy. However, nuclear energy is probably the best option for providing an important share of the energy needs of the Kingdom, which requires establishing the infrastructure and the legislative and education systems needed to pave the way for entry into this field, so that the Kingdom can begin building its first nuclear power plant within the next decade.[23]

That first nuclear power plant has yet to begin construction, but it has been in various stages of active discussion for years. Its location also remains to be determined, though the recently constructed nuclear power plants of the United Arab Emirates are located (obviously) on the Gulf. The drive for nuclear power is partly fueled by economics—the Saudis currently use petroleum-fired power plants for about one-third of their electricity generation, which is extremely inefficient—and partly by prestige.

The preceding developmental history highlights several recurring themes. There is the shift from crude oil to refined products, the construction of all kinds of capacity (industrial, petrochemical, port, etc.) on the Red Sea in addition to the Persian Gulf presence, and the need to develop infrastructure linking oil and gas produced in the Eastern Province to processing centers distributed around the country. The Tanker War of the 1980s, the Persian Gulf War, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the long-running battle against al Qaeda, and periodic flare-ups with the Iranians testify to the value of geographic diversification of any and all types of energy processing and industrial capacity. The ports near the Hijaz are not immune to threat from the Houthis, for example, but the threat is not catastrophic.

There is a general understanding that some sort of non-crude-oil future awaits the Kingdom. There are dramatic aspirations, some achieved successfully and others making slow progress. One such recurring aspiration—extracting mineral wealth—is worth examining in some detail. I noted that the First Development Plan (1970–75) referred to the Arabian Shield mineral potential and that the Fourth Development Plan (1985–90) included an extended discussion of mining opportunities. In fact, minerals have popped in and out of Riyadh's aspirational planning ever since Sheikh Suleiman's gambit at the Cradle of Gold (*Mahd adh Dhahab*).

Saudi Arabia and Sudan launched the Red Sea Commission in the 1970s with the aim of developing untold mineral wealth just off their respective coasts. *Aramco World*, the eponymous company's official magazine, described this opportunity in 1981: "According to geologists, the entire Arabian Peninsula is slowly rotating counterclockwise, and—over geological lengths of time—gradually closing the Strait of Hormuz, narrowing the Arabian Gulf, and widening the Red Sea. As a result of this tectonic movement, deep rifts have opened at the bottom of the Red Sea through which mineral components from within the Earth are being spewed into the seawater by volcanic processes."[24]

Explorers quickly identified one particularly promising area, termed Atlantis II Deep, with an estimated $3 billion in copper, silver, and zinc deposits.[25] The valuable portion of these "mineral components" would be mixed in with nearly 100-foot layers of mud—lots of mud, lots of *salty* mud, lots of salty, *fine-grained* mud with "the consistency of soft toothpaste," as *Aramco World* would later observe.[26] As is common in the mineral industry, separating the desired commodity from the unwanted rock is a time-intensive and often complicated industrial process in its own right. These resources remain "untold" to this day because they were never developed, despite much talk about a feasibility study and joint pilot program in the 1980s that never seemed to get off the ground and into the sea.[27] In 1986, the US Geological Survey reported that the Saudis had already spent $40 million to explore Atlantis II Deep and that another $120 million would be required for development.[28] It is possible that chemical sampling revealed low-quality mineral ores, or that banal bureaucratic politics killed the funding, or that the mud problem could not be solved, or that the mysterious mining of the Red Sea in the summer of 1984 (allegedly by Islamic Jihad) that damaged more than a dozen ships made insurance unaffordable, or that the unstable political situation facilitating Omar al-Bashir's autocratic rise in Khartoum (culminating in the 1989 coup d'état) proved too much to bear. Yet, the suggestion of a joint Saudi–Sudan minerals project in the Red Sea has never gone away completely.

In addition to the aborted Red Sea effort, the Saudis have sought to develop other domestic mining sites. On the sea side, *Mahd adh Dhahab* was developed alongside a second gold mine at Sukhaybarat, some 150 miles to the northeast (putting the latter more into the central region than the Red Sea coast). A state-owned official mining corporation called Maaden was created in 1997 to handle these projects and soon developed others, including a phosphate play in the north and an aluminum complex on the Persian Gulf. Most recently, the Saudis have announced their willingness to invest $15 billion[29] in mining projects around the world and to spend nearly $200 million on mining exploration domestically.[30]

A TURBULENT HISTORY

There was a very great war, one brother with another . . . and they fought to be Lords of Mecca.[31]

—Itinerary of Ludovico di Varthema, AD 1510

Far from a strategic backwater, the Red Sea figures prominently in the geopolitical history of human civilization—and not just because of Moses. In ancient times, the empires of the Greeks, Hellenes, Romans, and Byzantines included Egypt, but never extended farther south into Nubia (present-day Sudan) and Ethiopia. The Roman province of Arabia Petraea—present-day Suez and Jordan—did not extend eastward into the deep desert, and a Roman invasion of Arabia Felix (present-day Yemen) utterly failed. Tacitus writes of Emperor Nero's "secretis imaginationibus agitans" vis-à-vis the Roman Empire's eastern provinces, principally Egypt.[32] Lists of the Red Sea's villages are provided in ancient geographies by Pliny the Elder, Strabo, and Ptolemy, with minor variations among them. There is tremendous uncertainty about the precise location of many of these "ports"—they did not blossom into great cities that survive to this day—but it is generally accepted that they served as waypoints in the spice trade; for example, Leuke Kome on the Arabian coast and Myos Hormos on the Egyptian coast.[33] In late antiquity, Christian Ethiopia—its capital Axum was approximately "a week's journey" from Adulis on the Red Sea—invaded southern Arabia in response to a massacre of Christians in AD 523, only to be evicted by the Persians a few decades later. Axum invaded Nubia in the third and fourth centuries, and Arabs crossed the sea and captured present-day Eritrea in the seventh and eighth centuries.[34]

The period of Islamic conquest is well known as either side of the northern Red Sea fell under the sway of a succession of caliphates. The Hijaz, with its vast "maritime frontage on the Red Sea," imported gold and grain from newly Islamicized Egypt and reconstituted a canal linking the Red Sea to the Nile—a pharaonic predecessor to the Suez Canal (and, for that matter, to the SUMED crude oil pipeline that currently links the Red Sea to the Mediterranean).[35] In the 1180s, the Crusader Reynald of Châtillon raided the Arab coastline and blockaded Aqaba with a small fleet of ships that his camels had carried overland to the Red Sea, apparently threatening the Islamic holy sites.[36]

In the modern period, the area witnessed a volatile mix of imperial rivalry, holy war, and great power competition. The Ottoman Empire and the Egyptian Khedive nominally controlled the region but were unable to unify it and maintain persistent and consistent authority. Egypt acquired Suakin and Massawa, port cities along the Red Sea, from the Ottomans in 1865, but the Khedive went bankrupt after a failed war against Ethiopia.[37] Britain forcibly brought Egypt under its control and forged the oddly named "Condominium" with Egypt and the Sudan; one scholar amusingly described this concept as "a means of evading the international controls and privileges which made Egyptian government such a nightmare."[38]

Numerous machinations in the late 1800s propelled the African coast of the Red Sea into the international forefront. In 1868, Britain invaded Ethiopia to rescue some missionaries, marching across the countryside, waging war, and withdrawing quickly. Meanwhile, the Suez Canal opened for operations in 1869 at the northern end of the Red Sea. Italy acquired Assab near the Bab el Mandeb strait at the southern end in 1882 (from the Rubattino Company, which purchased the area in 1869), invaded present-day Eritrea in 1885, and cobbled together a trio of Somaliland sultanates in the 1889–91 period. Italy, however, was defeated in its attempt

to conquer Ethiopia in 1895–96. Ethiopia, Britain, and Egypt all fought the Sudanese Mahdi, a multistage war that included the infamous slaughter of Gordon at Khartoum in 1885 and Kitchener's revenge at Omdurman in 1898. This culminated in the Fashoda crisis, in which Kitchener confronted French forces and precipitated the latter's withdrawal via Djibouti on the Horn of Africa.[39]

The Red Sea of the twentieth century has been neither more placid nor more disconnected from global affairs—the reverse, in fact. Britain blocked Russian access to the Suez during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5), forcing the Baltic Feet to circumnavigate Africa—in the manner of Vasco de Gama—to relieve the Japanese siege of Port Arthur.[40] The Italo-Ottoman War (1911–12) featured Italian naval raids on Ottoman ports along the Yemeni coast. During World War I, the wild tales of Lawrence of Arabia center on the Hijaz and the Sharif of Mecca, despite the cinematic shots of desert camels, with Lawrence in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* describing Yanbu as "half a city of the dead."[41] The Red Sea has figured into the calculations of European powers eager to establish grand geographies—the French effort to stretch a horizontal line from West Africa to Djibouti, the British vertical line from Egypt to Kenya, the Italian *spazio vitale* from the Mediterranean to the Gulf of Aden. In the 1930s, Italy attempted to pull the Saudis into its orbit, donating cannon and aircraft, training Arab pilots, and purchasing camels for use in Ethiopia.[42] One Italian soldier, unnamed, described Eritrea as "a tormented landscape like a stormy sea moved by the wrath of God."[43] Italy hoped to construct a modern naval port at Kismayo in Somaliland, which would have used German steel and iron in a vainglorious attempt to link the European Axis powers with the Imperial Japanese Navy operating in the Indian Ocean.[44]

The more familiar post-1945 era has continued to feature great violence, often far from the eyes of Western media. The Suez Canal Crisis of 1956 figures prominently in many histories of Britain's imperial decline. In the 1960s, Egypt invaded Yemen but ignominiously withdrew. Ethiopia and Eritrea fell into civil war, and the Saudis blockaded the Straits of Tiran, Israel's access point to the Red Sea from the port of Eilat.

Over the past hundred years, the region has been remarkably unstable in terms of political governance of individual countries. Egypt has changed rulers many times—from the Khedive to the British, to the Fouad monarchy, to the Revolution—as has Yemen and its various iterations. The instability of Somaliland is attested by the number of Somalilands there have been: French, British, and Italian. Ethiopia, although notoriously never colonized by a European power, has not had direct access to the sea since Eritrean independence in 1993. Sudan has witnessed coups, revolution, and the creation of a brand-new country, South Sudan, which also has no direct access to the sea.

Only Saudi Arabia has managed to preserve its coastline under the rule of one steady power, the House of Saud. The only change was coincident with the founding of the Kingdom as the preeminent peninsula power: in 1934, it acquired by force of arms the provinces of Asir, Jizan, and Najran from Yemen.

THE STRATEGIC UNDERCURRENT

[Jeddah] is no more than a mart between Egypt and India.[45]

—Carsten Niehbuhr, ca. 1774

The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 mandated that each presidential administration produce an annual "national security strategy report," commonly referred to as the NSS, for the United States.[46] Eighteen such documents have been produced to date, beginning in the Reagan administration. Every president has published at least one.[47] Yet, the term "Red Sea" appears only a single time across nearly four decades of reports—in the Clinton administration's NSS published in July 1994 and then only in reference to coastal pollution.[48] This will probably change.

Present-day concerns in the region include recurring attacks by Houthi rebels against international shipping; direct Houthi missile or drone attacks against Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates, as well as retaliatory strikes; persistent instability in the Horn of Africa caused by or reflected in the prevalence of piracy, Islamic militants, and refugee flows (e.g., from Eritrea to Saudi Arabia); and civil war in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia. As recently as 2008, Eritrea and Djibouti went to war over disputed territory, costing more than a hundred lives and prompting the deployment of Qatari peacekeepers. And, of course, there was the Saudi-led (largely Arab) intervention in Yemen over much of the past decade.

This pattern suggests that greater emphasis on the Red Sea is not purely a question of energy security and portfolio diversification vis-a-vis the persistent Iranian threat. Building redundancy and alternative logistics mitigates such risks to some degree. The Saudis have historical reasons to spend more time on the Red Sea, which are in *addition* to Persian Gulf risk mitigation, not *instead* of it. The Red Sea has challenges of its own. Witness, for instance, the retaliatory Israeli airstrike in July 2024 against the Houthi-controlled port of Hodeidah—the very same port, incidentally, that Nasser used to deploy Egyptian troops in his ill-fated invasion of Yemen.[49]

Mecca is often described as a city "in the middle of the desert," but it is only about forty miles from the Red Sea coast. That description is more appropriately applied to the Empty Quarter, the Rub' al Khali. To the extent that Quranic references to "the sea" refer to an actual sea, it is likely the Red Sea, not the Persian Gulf. Per Islamic tradition, the Prophet Muhammad, who (with his merchant-uncle) never traveled farther north than present-day Syria, may have set his eyes on the Mediterranean, but he spent his life in the Hijaz. To spare them from persecution in Mecca, Muhammad dispatched a group of his followers in the early days of Islam to seek refuge across the Red Sea in Christian Ethiopia, where they were reportedly welcomed with open arms.

As the most stable and wealthy of all the countries that share a coastline on either side of the Red Sea, the Kingdom may find it tempting to play the role of a regional power (or at least a

regional power broker). Arguably this is already occurring: consider the Yemen intervention, financial support to Egypt and Jordan, cooperation with US-led annual military exercises involving the port of Yanbu and elsewhere, and Saudi Arabia's leadership of its own multi-national Thunder from the North military exercise in 2016. If some sizable fraction of Vision 2030 bears fruit alongside the long-standing Saudi drive to expand industrial capacity on the Red Sea, including more desalination, petrochemicals, and shipping, then the Kingdom may be forced to play this role in greater depth than ever before—if for no other reason than to defend its own interests. Security deployments of various kinds may also be required if Saudi Arabia develops a real portfolio of mining interests in Africa, for example. Indeed, its investments in LNG export terminals on a global scale—much of the cargo of which may transit the Suez Canal and Bab el Mandeb—may tempt a further widening of the strategic lens.

In the near future, the Kingdom will not be able to "pivot" from the Persian Gulf, where its crude oil production will always remain. However, by focusing more attention on the Red Sea as a strategic region, it returns to the land of its birth, the land it never truly left as the Custodian of the Holy Mosques, the land from where, atop the mountains of the Hijaz, the Prophet surely gazed on this Sea.

Truly, here, I am a disposer of men,
A very dragon among them.
From a glimpse of my claw they recoil.
Kings come kissing the back of my hand, while
The poor find an oasis in its palm.[50]

—Qatada ibn Idris, Emir of Mecca, ca. AD 1200

NOTES

1. K. S. Twitchell, *Saudi Arabia: With an Account of the Development of Its Natural Resources* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947), 142–48. I have taken the liberty of mildly dramatizing Twitchell's narrative. For biographical details about Suleiman, see Mohammed Almana, *Arabia Unified: A Portrait of Ibn Saud* (London: Routledge, 2023, originally published by Hutchinson Benham, 1980), 199–225 (Kindle edition).

2. *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea: Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean by a Merchant of the First Century*, trans. and annotated by Wilfred H. Schoff (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912), 30.

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