

Mocha in the Red Sea Security Equation:

Significance of Houthi Escalation in Bab al-Mandab

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Introduction

Between 9 and 14 August 2026, the city of Mocha and the area surrounding its port on Yemen's western coast came under an escalating wave of Houthi attacks involving approximately 40 missiles and 46 drones, according to Sadiq Duwid, the official spokesperson for the National Resistance, on Friday, 14 August.

The escalation began on 9 August with a large-scale attack that, according to the Yemeni military, killed seven people—four military personnel and three civilians—and wounded 30 others. Air defenses also reported intercepting 11 drones. On 11 August, the attacks extended into the Bab al-Mandab Strait with the targeting of the commercial vessel Tihama, killing four crew members and two Yemeni rescue personnel and wounding ten others. The Houthis then renewed their bombardment of Mocha on 14 August with six ballistic missiles, while the government reported four civilian deaths. The death toll from this wave of attacks reached at least 17 in less than a week: 11 in Mocha and six in the maritime attack. [\[1\]](#)

The recurrence of attacks within such a short period shifts Mocha from a location exposed to sporadic strikes into a sustained pressure point on the western coast front. This coincides with broader shifts in the Red Sea following the Houthis' declaration of a naval blockade against Saudi Arabia in July 2026, which was followed by route changes by some tankers and a decline in transit through Bab al-Mandab. The Red Sea has also gained importance as an alternative route amid disruption to navigation through the Strait of Hormuz, increasing the security and strategic value of the southern entrance to the Red Sea. [\[2\]](#)

This paper proceeds from the premise that the targeting of Mocha cannot be explained solely by the presence of military objectives in and around the city. Mocha combines a port under development, an airport under preparation, access to Taiz's inland hinterland, and immediate proximity to Bab al-Mandab. These factors give the city growing strategic value, but they do not yet make it a fully developed center of power. Its actual weight will depend on the ability of the government and the forces operating on the western coast to integrate the port, airport, and road network into a coherent system of protection, surveillance, and support.

The central question is whether the repeated Houthi attacks are simply an extension of the current military escalation, or whether they also aim to keep the western coast under pressure, raise the cost of Mocha's development, and prevent the city from acquiring a larger role in the balance of power around Bab al-Mandab and the southern Red Sea.

From Yemen's Escalation to the Red Sea Maritime Security Equation

During 2026, Houthi escalation expanded from land fronts into the Red Sea and the wider regional arena, with missiles, drones, and maritime systems becoming principal instruments of pressure. After the declaration of a naval blockade against Saudi Arabia on 20 July, the effects of the threat quickly appeared in shipping movements: tankers altered their routes, and transit through Bab al-Mandab fell in the following days to its lowest levels in months.^[3]

The significance of this development extends beyond the war in Yemen. Bab al-Mandab is part of the trade and energy network linking the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. Reports from the U.S. Energy Information Administration indicate that roughly 4.2 million barrels per day of crude oil and petroleum products passed through the strait in the first half of 2025, while an estimated 12–15 percent of global seaborne trade transits the Red Sea. The Houthis therefore do not need to close the strait to generate economic and strategic effects; raising risk levels and insurance costs can be sufficient to alter shipping companies' routing decisions.^[4]¹

These developments have changed the relationship between territorial control and the ability to exert influence. Control over Bab al-Mandab's security is no longer tied exclusively to direct possession of the strait or to a conventional naval fleet. Missiles, drones, and asymmetric maritime systems can project threats from considerable distances. In this equation, Mocha lies at the intersection between the Houthis' capacity for disruption and the need of anti-Houthi forces for a position near the strait that can provide surveillance, support, and protection.

Mocha's Strategic Importance and the Limits of Its Emergence as a Strategic Hub

Mocha's importance derives from its location on Taiz's western coast and its proximity to the southern entrance of the Red Sea, combined with a port that can be expanded, an airport under development, and the possibility of linking both facilities to Taiz's population and economic hinterland. Mocha does not rival Hodeida in its current scale, nor Aden as a larger urban and economic center. Its comparative advantage lies instead in the possibility of combining maritime, air, and land functions in a single location close to Bab al-Mandab.

This potential has gradually begun to take material form. In March 2025, Mocha Port

handled exports of Yemeni agricultural products to Gulf States and the Horn of Africa. In December of the same year, a memorandum of understanding was signed to rehabilitate and develop the port at a reported cost of approximately \$138.9 million. The plan includes a new berth, container yards, warehouses, and silos, with a target capacity of 195 vessels and about 2.275 million tons annually. In May 2026, Saba News Agency reported progress in port rehabilitation and in the technical and engineering preparations for Mocha Airport. [5]

Mocha nevertheless remains in a capacity-building phase. Operations are limited, development projects are incomplete, and overland connectivity with Taiz requires further work. Security threats also raise the cost of investment and operations. Mocha can therefore be described as a strategic asset still under formation. Its ability to gain greater weight will depend on completion of the port, airport, and road links, as well as on the provision of protection and surveillance sufficient to operate these assets as a single system.

The experience of ports around Bab al-Mandab demonstrates that geopolitical value does not result from berths and throughput capacity alone. A port acquires strategic importance when it is connected to transport networks, an economic hinterland, and systems of protection and surveillance. From this perspective, Mocha's future depends more on its ability to connect with Taiz and the wider western coast than on port expansion alone.

Houthi Drivers behind the Targeting of Mocha

The latest Houthi attacks reveal three interrelated objectives that can be inferred from the pattern of targeting and the trajectory of escalation:

First, weakening military and logistical capabilities in Mocha: The Houthis stated that the 9 August attack targeted concentrations of Saudi forces and weapons depots. This is consistent with the group's use of missiles and drones against support centers and military concentrations, and with Mocha's role as a major support base for forces deployed along the western coast. [6]

Second, raising the cost of Mocha's development and its emergence as a hub for anti-Houthi forces: Expanding the functions of the port and airport, together with greater supply and surveillance capacity, increases the city's importance on the western coast. Continued bombardment keeps these facilities under threat, raises the cost of protecting and operating them, and slows Mocha's development into a stable logistical and security center.

Third, keeping the western coast and Bab al-Mandab within the range of Houthi pressure: The Houthi group does not control Mocha, Mayyun Island, or the strait itself, but since 2023 it has demonstrated an ability to affect navigation from areas far beyond the immediate lines of territorial control. The attacks on Mocha highlight that locations outside Houthi control remain exposed to their fires and disruptive capabilities.

These objectives combine immediate military requirements with a broader effort to shape the security environment of the western coast. Weakening an adversary's capabilities serves ongoing operations, while maintaining a persistent threat keeps Mocha and the surrounding coast unstable and limits the emergence of a coherent secure zone near Bab al-Mandab.

Bab al-Mandab: Ports and Regional Centers of Power

Mocha operates within a wider network of ports, islands, and logistical centers surrounding Bab al-Mandab. The Houthis control Hodeida and Salif, while Aden and Mocha lie in government-held areas, and Mayyun Island sits inside the strait. On the African coast, Djibouti, Berbera, and Assab each perform different roles in trade, overland connectivity, and security and military presence.

In the near term, Mocha is unlikely to compete with these ports in scale or infrastructure. Its significance derives from a different function: providing a Yemeni node that connects the coast to the inland hinterland while remaining close enough to Bab al-Mandab to support trade, logistics, and surveillance. Mocha's strategic importance should therefore be measured by its ability to strengthen the government and anti-Houthi forces on the Yemeni side of the strait, rather than by direct comparison with Djibouti or Berbera.

Shifts in the Balance of Power in Bab al-Mandab

Recent developments show that the balance of power in Bab al-Mandab does not depend solely on who controls the territory closest to the strait. More important is the ability to convert available assets into direct influence over risk levels and shipping movements. The Houthis do not control Mocha or Mayyun, but they possess long-range offensive systems that have already been used in the Red Sea. Anti-Houthi forces, by contrast, hold a broader set of locations, ports, and partnerships, but these assets have not yet been integrated into a deterrence architecture capable of decisively narrowing the Houthis' threat margin.

The following table illustrates the difference between possessing geography and being able to employ it. It is not intended as a comprehensive comparison of the military power of the two sides; rather, it focuses on functions relevant to Bab al-Mandab. The comparison indicates a Houthi advantage in disruptive capacity, while opposing forces hold stronger geographic and logistical assets. The effectiveness of those assets remains dependent on the degree of integration among protection, surveillance, and support capabilities.

Variable	Houthis	Opposing Forces
Territorial control	Do not directly control Mocha, Mayyun, or Bab al-Mandab	Control Mocha and parts of the western coast and are positioned near Mayyun
Missiles and drones	Demonstrated operational capability extending beyond lines of territorial control	Defense and support capabilities exist, but the study does not assume comparable firepower parity
Maritime systems	Operational use of maritime threat systems as part of the Red Sea campaign	Coastal forces and maritime support from regional and international partners
Ports and logistics	Hodeida and Salif are within Houthi-controlled areas	Aden, Mocha, and other logistical assets with development potential
Surveillance and partnerships	Accumulated Iranian support and exchange of expertise and capabilities	Broader Saudi and Western partnerships in maritime security and surveillance
Strategic function	Demonstrated capacity to disrupt route and raise the cost of passage	Latent protection and support capacity that requires greater integration

Table 1. Elements of power in Bab al-Mandab: disruptive capacity versus protection capacity.

The comparison shows that direct control of the strait is no longer a prerequisite for influencing it. The Houthis have developed a practical capacity to threaten and disrupt activity beyond the territory they control. Opposing forces possess ports, islands, airports, and security partnerships, but have not yet integrated these assets into a coherent system of surveillance, protection, and deterrence. Mocha's value lies precisely here: it is a location that could help narrow the gap between possessing geography and making effective use of it, provided that its economic and logistical functions are linked to credible security capabilities.

This has produced two clear changes in the Bab al-Mandab equation. First, ports, airports, and islands near the strait have become interconnected components of a single security system, even when their primary functions are civilian or commercial. Second, competition is no longer confined to control of the passage itself; it now extends to shaping risk levels, protecting navigation, collecting intelligence, providing early warning, and accelerating response. This shift increases the value of locations close to the strait while simultaneously making them more exposed to attack.

Regional and International Implications

The impact of targeting Mocha extends to regional interests linked to the Red Sea. For Saudi Arabia, Bab al-Mandab becomes more important as the risks of passage through the Strait of Hormuz increase, because Red Sea ports and the East–West pipeline provide alternative routes for energy exports. An expanding Houthi threat in the southern Red Sea puts pressure on this strategic margin and increases the need to secure the passage. [\[1\]](#)

Iran benefits from Houthi capabilities by extending regional pressure toward the Red Sea without requiring a direct Iranian presence in every theater. Such benefit does not require every Houthi decision to originate from direct instructions from Tehran. The practical result is an extension of the pressure space from Hormuz to Bab al-Mandab, giving Iran and its allies greater capacity to affect energy and trade routes. [\[8\]](#)

The United States and European states focus on freedom of navigation and the stability of trade and energy routes, sustaining maritime deployments and surveillance and protection operations. Egypt follows developments through the lens of the Suez Canal, because prolonged disruption in the southern Red Sea affects shipping flows, canal revenues, and the canal's strategic importance. On the African shore, the interests of Djibouti, Eritrea, and Berbera intersect with those of international and regional powers that use ports and logistical and military facilities across the area.

The elevated threat around Mocha ties the city more closely to the regional maritime security equation. As reliance on the western coast for support and surveillance increases, or as attacks on vessels and sea lanes continue, the need to integrate Mocha into arrangements for protecting Bab al-Mandab and the southern Red Sea will also grow.

Future Scenarios

The trajectories ahead will depend on the duration and scope of Houthi escalation, and on whether it remains limited to stand-off firepower or develops into a broader confrontation along the western coast and in Bab al-Mandab. Four principal scenarios can be identified over the near to medium term:

Scenario One: Containment of the Escalation and a Return to Limited De-escalation

Attacks on Mocha and the coast decline after a short round of escalation in parallel with lower tensions in the Red Sea. This would allow development of the port and airport to continue, with protective measures remaining largely precautionary. The probability of this scenario is assessed as medium in the near term.

Scenario Two: Continued Limited and Intermittent Escalation

Missile and drone attacks continue against Mocha and other coastal locations, accompanied by maritime threats, without developing into a large-scale ground war. This scenario allows the Houthis to keep the coast under pressure and raise the cost of operations and development, while pushing government forces and their partners to expand fortifications, surveillance, and defenses. Given the current pattern of attacks, this is the most likely scenario.

Scenario Three: The Western Coast Returns to the Center of Military Operations

Ports, airports, and command centers are repeatedly targeted alongside ground movements or attempts to alter front lines. Mocha's military function would then increase, while the distinction between its economic development plans and the requirements of confrontation would narrow. The probability of this scenario is low to medium, but it would impose the highest cost on the western coast.

Scenario Four: Expansion of the Maritime and Regional Confrontation

Targeting expands to commercial vessels, energy infrastructure, and maritime routes, prompting broader regional and international protection, surveillance, and intervention operations in Bab al-Mandab and the southern Red Sea. In this case, Mocha, nearby islands, and adjacent ports would gain greater importance as support and surveillance nodes. The probability of this scenario is low to medium and would rise if attacks on shipping and energy infrastructure persist.

Assessment

Mocha remains smaller and less influential than major regional ports, but its location no longer permits it to be treated as a limited local harbor. The presence of the port and airport, the city's proximity to Bab al-Mandab, and its potential connection to Taiz give it strategic value that can grow. Translating that value into actual influence will depend on integrating logistical infrastructure with transport, protection, and surveillance networks.

The immediate military motive remains the clearest explanation for Houthi attacks, particularly given the group's stated targeting of military positions and weapons depots. Yet repeated attacks also produce a broader effect: keeping Mocha under pressure, raising the cost of operating and developing it, and preventing the emergence of a stable coastal zone that the government and anti-Houthi forces could use for support, surveillance, and the protection of navigation.

The paper assesses that Mocha is likely to remain a target as long as escalation in the Red Sea continues and its facilities acquire expanding military and logistical functions. The city's ability to emerge as an influential hub in Bab al-Mandab will be determined not by geography alone, but by the level of protection, connectivity, and institutional readiness. If the port and airport are completed and linked to the inland hinterland and to maritime defense and surveillance systems, Mocha's value in the balance of power on the western coast and in Bab al-Mandab will increase. If these elements remain fragmented and weakly protected, the city's potential importance will continue to exceed its actual capacity for influence.

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