
Intermarium: Israel between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea

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Neighbours¹

Sirens went off in Eilat on 31 October 2023. Soon after, aerial targets were intercepted off the coast of Israel's southernmost city. The Houthi regime, which controls much of Yemen, subsequently declared that it had attacked Israel in response to the war in Gaza. Since then, the Shiite movement whose slogan calls for 'death to Israel' has launched numerous missile and drone strikes against Eilat, while at the same time targeting civilian ships plying the Red Sea. On 20 July 2024, the Israeli air force retaliated by massively bombing Al-Hudaydah.

The odd conflict between Yemen and Israel exposes a forgotten geopolitical reality that connects these two seemingly unconnected countries. While direct military conflict between countries situated almost 2000 kilometres apart seems inconceivable, the missiles, drones and aircraft that traverse the Red Sea remind us that both countries adjoin a common body of water.

Sharing a sea is more than a geographical detail. After all, water connects more than land does; its surface facilitates movement and allows coastal inhabitants to exchange. Eilat shares not only a landscape with Al-Hudaydah, but also a long history of caravans and dhows that once crisscrossed the region. Today, only traces

¹ A longer version of this essay appeared in Hebrew in *Hazman Hazeh* magazine in March 2023 (<https://hazmanhazeh.org.il/red-sea>).

of these ancient connections remain; the histories of the Bedouin, Sudanese, Eritrean, Ethiopian and Yemeni communities in contemporary Israel evoke old migration routes that antedate the arbitrary borders of nation states.

Yet Israel is seldom associated with the Red Sea. Recently, the slogan ‘from the river to the sea’ – referring to the Jordan River and the Mediterranean – has brought other aquatic images into the public discourse. It is especially the Mediterranean that has become the cornerstone of Israel’s self-understanding. The Red Sea, by contrast, seems out of place. Its relative absence from the collective consciousness renders the conflict between Israel and Yemen almost bizarre.

Was the Red Sea always absent? Must it remain absent? A rough sketch of Israel’s historical relation to the Red Sea shows that the southern sea once briefly occupied the Israeli mind before it was eclipsed by other maritime visions. This brief history of emersion and suppression can afford new vistas for the contemporary Israeli imagination.

Strategic sea

On 10 March 1949, during the final stages of the First Arab-Israeli War, soldiers of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) raised an impromptu flag over the old British police station in Um al-Rashrash on the Gulf of Aqaba. The iconic photograph of the Ink Flag symbolises the conquest of the territory allocated to the Jewish state by the UN partition plan of 1947. As the forces reached the southernmost point of the newly declared State of Israel, they took control over some 10-kilometre strip of Red Sea coast. Um al-Rashrash would become the site for Israel’s only port city on the Red Sea: Eilat.

The Israeli leadership recognised the significance of these territorial gains. Located between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, Israel saw an opportunity to bridge East and West. Israeli leaders let their imagination run riot with ideas about digging a canal to connect both seas – visions that still occasionally resurface.² While this fantasy hasn’t materialised, access to the Red Sea was immediately perceived as a strategic asset. David Ben Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, spoke highly of the new route leading from Eilat to South and East Asia, where Israel could make new friends.

Yet Israel’s optimistic marine visions confronted a gloomy reality. Israel had to share the Red Sea with Egypt, its then-bitterest enemy, which was seeking regional hegemony. Egypt controlled

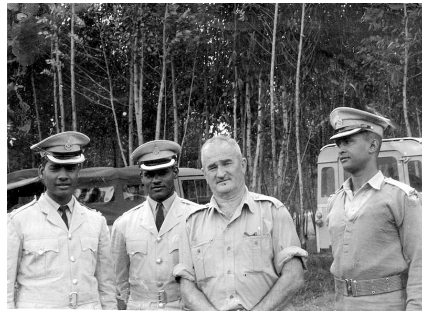
² See, for example, Mordechai Chaziza, ‘The Red-Med Railway: New Opportunities for China, Israel, and the Middle East’, *Begin-Sadat Center Perspectives* 385 (11 December 2016).



the Straits of Tiran and could close the coveted maritime route leading to Eilat at will. To counter that threat, Israel sought allies around the Red Sea. Besides the remnants of the declining colonial empires, like British Aden and French Djibouti, the Ethiopian Empire proved most valuable once it annexed Eritrea and obtained access to the Red Sea in 1951. Israel and Ethiopia shared not only similar legendary genealogies back to King David but also geopolitical interest of undermining Egyptian hegemony.

In this geopolitical situation, the Red Sea became a locus of military, diplomatic and commercial activity. Throughout the first decades of its existence, Israel's energy was largely directed southwards. Even prosaic transactions, like shipping canned meat from Eritrea to Eilat, became charged with strategic meaning. An

Fig. 1
Micha Perry. *The Ink-Drawn National Flag*. 1949. Government Press Office,
https://www.flickr.com/photos/government_press_office/7621028734



incident involving a meat-laden ship sailing from Massawa to Israel in 1954 almost escalated into a full-scale war. Such a war indeed broke out in 1956, when Israel, together with France and the United Kingdom, attacked Egypt and temporarily captured the Sinai Peninsula. From an Israeli perspective, the main objective was to secure freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. This goal continued to dominate Israeli policy in the years leading up to the 1967 war.³

A Red Sea moment

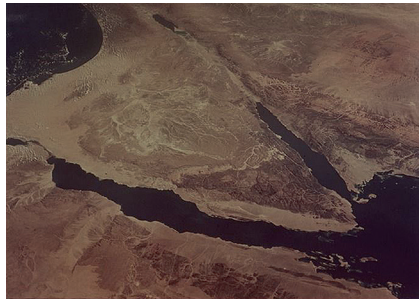
In centralised Israel, state interests trickled down to all spheres of life. Red Sea strategy was accompanied by growing curiosity about that mysterious space, which first had to be mapped and studied. During the brief occupation of the Sinai Peninsula in 1956–57, Israeli marine biologists explored wildlife around Sharm al-Shaikh, while a second expedition made it as far south as the Dahlak islands, off the Eritrean coast, in 1962.⁴ A delegation of zoologists and parasitologists travelled to Ethiopia in 1958, followed by two expeditions of geologists, geneticists and physicians. One member of an archaeological expedition to the island of Tiran summarised the relationship between knowledge and power: upon Israel's founding, the Red Sea straits 'suddenly acquired military importance'; the events of 1956 'afforded opportunities for field study in relative favourable conditions'.⁵

Beyond scientific knowledge, the military and diplomatic interest inspired literary and artistic engagement with the Red Sea too. Author Nathan Shaham was among the first to have sailed from Eilat to Massawa after the 1956 war, and his impressions from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia were narrated in the Hebrew travelogue *Journey to the Land of Cush*, which was colourfully illustrated by artist Shmuel Katz. The renowned Yiddish poet Avrom Sutzkever too travelled to Eilat and Sinai and was captivated by the landscapes. His poetry after 1949, praised by David Ben

Fig. 2
Nadav Mann. An Israeli military advisor (Shmuel Eitan, second from right) in Ethiopia. 1963. National Library of Israel, [https://www.nli.org.il/en/images/NNL_ARCHIVE_AL990049703970205171/NLI#\\$FL79244584](https://www.nli.org.il/en/images/NNL_ARCHIVE_AL990049703970205171/NLI#$FL79244584)

Fig. 3
Unknown. The Israel ship 'Queen of Sheba' en route from Eilat to Massawa, calling at Sharm al-Shaikh. 1956. Government Press Office, <https://gpophotoeng.gov.il/fotoweb/Grid.fwx?search=D329-097#Preview1>

- 3 Eitan Barak, 'Between Reality and Secrecy: Israel's Freedom of Navigation through the Straits of Tiran, 1956–1967', *The Middle East Journal* 61, no. 4 (2007).
- 4 Meirav Reuveny, 'The Heinz Steinitz Marine Biology Laboratory in Eilat: Science and Politics between Father and Son', in *Dubnow Institute Yearbook*, ed. Yfaat Weiss (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 486–88.
- 5 A.P. Schick, 'Tiran: the Straits, the Island, and its Terraces', *Israel Exploration Journal* 8, no. 2 (1958): 122.



Gurion,⁶ is permeated with images of wadis, coral reefs and – recurring in his desert poems – a great silence:

*In the Sinai Desert, on a cloud of granite
Sculpted by the Genesis-night,
Hewn of black flame facing the Red Sea,
I saw the Great Silence.⁷*

For a moment, then, the Red Sea – its shores, water, landscapes and surrounding cultures – captivated Israelis. They expressed their fascination in various ways, for example through popular music. The folk duo Hillel and Aviva, with their darbuka and homemade flutes, became known for their desert songs; the Arava (steppe) trio recorded country tunes about Hebrew cowboys; and Lior Yeini employed a cool bossa nova to portray the Red Sea reefs as an escape from city life. The song *To Eilat* (1970) presented the city as a ‘gate to the south’, oriented towards Djibouti, Mombasa and Kolkata. There, the European capitals of Paris and Rome are but a hazy mirage.

The fascination with the Red Sea intensified after the Six-Day War in 1967, when the IDF defeated the Egyptian army and conquered the Sinai Peninsula, this time with long-term plans. Having more than tripled its size, Israel had become a Red Sea power, ruling over the vast Sinai Desert, the Gulf of Aqaba and the Tiran Straits. While Sinai was not as subject to Messianic projections as was the occupied West Bank – supposedly the heartland of biblical Israel – the conquered desert was similarly envisaged to be populated by Jewish pioneers. As the new frontier aroused an old Zionist passion for colonisation, hundreds of Israeli idealists flocked to Sinai to make the desert bloom. Several Jewish settlements – Ofira (Sharm al-Shaikh), Di Zahav (Dahab) and Neviot (Nuweiba) – concentrated along the Red Sea coast to become centres of fishing and tourism.

6 Jowita Panczyk, ‘Is the War Over Yet?’, Shaul Marmari ed. *Mimeo: Blog der Doktorandinnen und Doktoranden am Dubnow-Institut*, Leibniz-Institut für jüdische Geschichte und Kultur – Simon Dubnow, 18 December 2013, <https://mimeo.dubnow.de/is-the-war-over-yet/>.

7 Avram Sutzkever, ‘The Great Silence’, in *A. Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Benjamin Harshav (Oakland: University of California Press, 1991), 343.

Fig. 4
Benno Rothenberg. A woman looking towards the Gulf of Eilat/Aqaba. undated. National Library of Israel, [https://www.nli.org.il/en/images/NNL_ARCHIVE_AL997009858550305171/NLI#\\$FL169950643](https://www.nli.org.il/en/images/NNL_ARCHIVE_AL997009858550305171/NLI#$FL169950643)

Fig. 5
Uncredited. The Sinai Peninsula, taken from the Gemini XI space shuttle. 1966. National Library of Israel, [https://www.nli.org.il/en/images/NNL_ARCHIVE_AL990035790120205171/NLI#\\$FL19169324](https://www.nli.org.il/en/images/NNL_ARCHIVE_AL990035790120205171/NLI#$FL19169324)



Fading space

During those years of occupation, a new Israeli identity began crystallising. In the spirit of the global 1960s and 1970s, the highly militarised territory, with its pristine beaches and solemn deserts, became fertile soil for ideas about nature, free love and recreational drug use. In that geopolitical hotspot, hippie culture merged with Zionist idealism, military duty, Oriental fantasy and biblical myth. Former settlers recall a feeling of idyllic freedom and liberation from modern life.⁸



The Neviot music festival that took place in Nuweiba in August 1978 marks the climax of Israel's Red Sea era. Thousands of partygoers travelled to the remote Red Sea settlement to participate in what has often been described as the Israeli Woodstock. Amid the occupied land, they slept under the starry skies, swam naked and danced to Hebrew covers of Stevie Wonder. Singer Mickey Gavielov recalled being 'thrown into a world where the experience was different from your familiar reality!'

Fig. 6
Moshe Marlin Levin. Ofira. 1975.
National Library of Israel, [https://www.nli.org.il/en/images/NNL_ARCHIVE_AL997008872695805171/NLI#\\$FL151612284](https://www.nli.org.il/en/images/NNL_ARCHIVE_AL997008872695805171/NLI#$FL151612284)

Fig. 7
Boris Karmi. An Israeli plays the guitar in Nuweiba. 1975.
National Library of Israel, [https://www.nli.org.il/en/images/NNL_ARCHIVE_AL997009324688405171/NLI#\\$FL159538630](https://www.nli.org.il/en/images/NNL_ARCHIVE_AL997009324688405171/NLI#$FL159538630)

8 For recent recollections, see Osher Assulin and Yoav Gross. *Sinai*. Israel: Kan11, 2022.

9 Rachel Neiman, 'Looking back on the 1978 "Woodstock of Israel"', Nicky Blackburn ed. *Israel21c*, 9 October 2017, <https://www.israel21c.org/looking-back-on-the-1978-woodstock-of-israel>.

That experience was short-lived. While thousands were dancing in Nuweiba, negotiations between Israel and Egypt were underway. In September, the Camp David Accords were signed, paving the way for Israeli-Egyptian peace. The agreement prescribed that Israel withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula. As Ofira, Neviot and Di Zahav were evacuated, it shrank back to its 10-kilometre strip of Red Sea coast in Eilat. As the leadership was determined not to dwell on the past, Israel's 15 years in Sinai have largely vanished from the collective memory. The memories of the coral reefs and the barren mountains have faded, kept alive today only by a handful former inhabitants of the evacuated settlements.¹⁰

Once the peace treaty with Egypt ensured safe shipping to and from Eilat, there was no longer any need for Israel to operate militarily or diplomatically in the Red Sea. That Israel's newfound ally in the region disappeared when Ethiopia sank into a long civil war only diminished the region's appeal. Without rivals or friends, the Red Sea lost its geopolitical and cultural meaning. As Israeli ships safely plied its waters, the sea became a conduit that moves goods so smoothly that they leave no impression. From a strategic arena, it became a non-issue or 'non-space' – a transitory zone without any meaning.¹¹

At the same time, Israel turned its gaze elsewhere. In 1978, the year of the Neviot festival, an essay collection by Jacqueline Kahanoff suggested a new direction. Kahanoff, an Egyptian-born Israeli essayist, had previously published a collection of translated African stories, following the Red Sea orientation of the time. Her 1978 book *From East the Sun* turned away from Africa and the Red Sea towards the Levant. Together with the journal *Apirion* that has appeared since 1982, the publication marks growing Israeli interest in the Mediterranean.

Mediterraneanism and Erythreanism

Israel has a long history with the Mediterranean. While Zionism turned most of its energy and eros to the land, 'conquering the sea' played an important secondary role. In Zionist thought, the conquered water was always the Mediterranean, along whose coastline large Jewish settlements developed. Ultimately, the Mediterranean served as the setting for the Zionist drama of Aliyah, of Jewish migration to the Land of Israel. Fantastic Zionist plans to storm Palestine from the south, from the Red Sea, were overshadowed by the heroic narrative of crossing the Mediterranean.

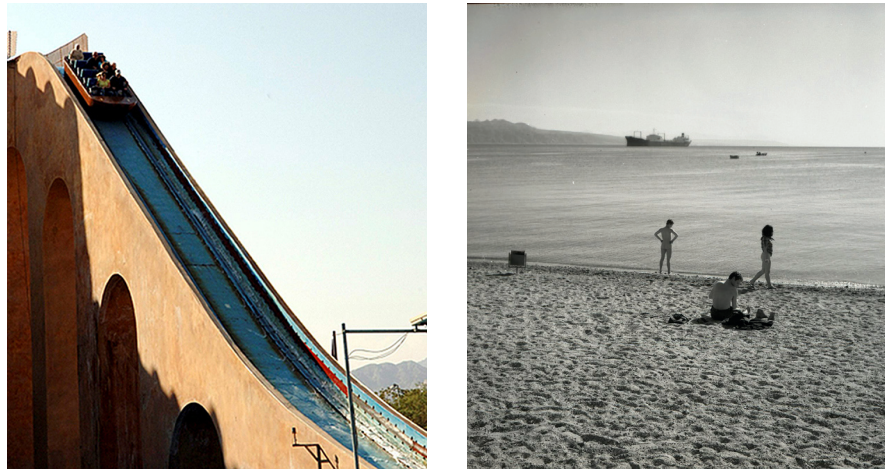
The Mediterranean has featured prominently in Zionist thought, affording Jews ways of belonging to the region while evading



Fig. 8
Sa'ar Ya'acov. The closed gates of the Neviot holiday village shortly before its evacuation. 1982. Israeli Government Press Office, <https://gpophotoeng.gov.il/fotoweb/Grid.fwx?search=D320-064#Preview1>

¹⁰ For examples, see the testimonies on <http://myofira.com/en>.

¹¹ Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995).



the hostility of the Arab and Muslim Middle East. For Israelis who feel trapped in their imagined outpost of Western civilisation, the Mediterranean provides an alternative self-image that is neither entirely Western nor Eastern.¹² Instead, the Mediterranean space emerges as a zone of cosmopolitan, fluid, syncretic identities between East and West. By adopting that kind of Mediterraneanism, the implied argument goes, Israel could forge greater harmony with its neighbours and among its internal divisions.

Mediterranean identity contains more than lofty ideas.¹³ It suffuses Israeli culture, where Greek music, Turkish mezze and a ‘Mediterranean temper’ are unanimously prized. Feeling thoroughly Mediterranean, Israelis forget or suppress any connection to the Red Sea. That Africa is next door, that Massawa is closer to Eilat than Palermo to Tel Aviv, is ‘cognitively, culturally and politically repressed and denied’.¹⁴ And while the beaches of Eilat are still a popular tourist destination, they are drained of cultural meaning; grandiose attractions like waterparks and skating rinks dominate the landscape. Tellingly, even Eilat’s Queen of Sheba hotel, whose namesake’s kingdom flanked the Red Sea, invites its guests to ‘explore the culinary delights of the Mediterranean’.¹⁵

Israeli consciousness appears to have completely shifted away from the Red Sea and towards the Mediterranean. When the geopolitical reality required, however, Israel turned to the Red Sea with military, political, commercial, scientific and cultural enthusiasm. The connections it formed in that space

Fig. 9
Moshe Milner. Water slide in Eilat. 2005. Israeli Government Press Office, <https://gpophotoeng.gov.il/fotoweb/Grid.fwx?search=D927-032#Preview1>

Fig. 10
Boris Karmi. Nude swimming in Eilat. 1967. National Library of Israel, [https://www.nli.org.il/en/images/NNL_ARCHIVE_AL997009325145805171/NLI#\\$FL159554099](https://www.nli.org.il/en/images/NNL_ARCHIVE_AL997009325145805171/NLI#$FL159554099)

¹² Yaacov Shavit, ‘The Mediterranean World and “Mediterraneanism”: The Origins, Meaning, and Application of a Geo-Cultural Notion in Israel’, *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 3, no. 2 (1988): 112.

¹³ Alexandra Nocke, *The Place of the Mediterranean in Modern Israeli Identity* (Boston Brill, 2009); David Ohana, *Israel and Its Mediterranean Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹⁴ Eitan Bar-Yosef, *A Villa in the Jungle: Africa in Israeli Culture* (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute Press and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2013); Haim Yacobi, *Israel and Africa: A Genealogy of Moral Geography* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁵ Quoted from http://www.dinearound.eu/en/189/195/132/eilat/hilton_eilat_queen_of_sheba.

only dissolved when the geopolitical circumstances changed. Israel's history with the Red Sea is thus one of dis:connection, of globalisation and deglobalisation.¹⁶

But some connections remain. The Negev Bedouin, the Sudanese and Eritrean refugees, the Ethiopian and Yemeni Jewish communities, and the aging hippies of Ofira and Neviot all share affinities to the south. In Eilat, the colloquial designation for flipflops as 'Djiboutis' still recalls past ties overseas. The Red Sea need not resurface only in relation to drone and missile strikes; Israel might strike a better balance between Mediterraneanism and Erythreanism.¹⁷

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16 Roland Wenzlhuemer et al., 'Forum Global Dis:connections', *Journal of Modern European History* 21, no. 1 (2023) <https://doi.org/10.1177/16118944221148939>.

17 This point has also been made by Ofri Ilany, 'Israelis Need to Stop Turning Their Backs on the Red Sea', *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), 13 May 2016, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2016-05-13/ty-article/0000017f-f571-d044-adff-f7f933f70000>.