

MIDDLE EAST MARITIME SECURITY: THE APPEAL OF DUQM

by
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Amidst the Houthi attacks near the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, eyes are turning once again towards the waters of the Middle East. The U.S. has for decades led an international coalition committed to keeping regional waters safe. That order is being questioned due to the Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in regional waters. To continue adequate support for regional maritime security, the U.S. should invest in ways to revitalize their maritime leadership role, including exploring the logistical role that the port of Duqm in Oman can serve. Doing so would acknowledge the changing dynamics of regional maritime challenges, signal the region's ongoing importance to the U.S., and help reinforce maritime security efforts against future challenges.

Why Duqm?

Duqm is an underdiscussed maritime development story within the Arabian Peninsula. Key to Oman's national development aims, Duqm is positioned near the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab-al-Mandeb. Duqm's [port](#), recently expanded and modernized, can support a variety of non-commercial naval services, including resupply and limited maintenance. The upgraded port was facilitated in part by [funds](#) from China through its Belt and Road initiative and for that reason, Duqm has been interpreted by some as a vector for Chinese regional political interests.

As of January 2024, the port has a variety of berths able to support naval vessels and the capacity to facilitate maintenance and repair requirements, including a dry dock. At 73 sq. miles in size, the port is attached to a much larger special economic zone (SEZ) where a variety of industrial projects are planned. Despite the larger aims that Oman has for the port and the attached SEZ, Duqm remains a comparatively isolated location compared to [neighboring ports](#) around the Gulf region.

Outside the Gulf, attention towards Duqm has come in the form of speculation regarding China's investment in the connected SEZ. The possibility of who could invest in Duqm ignores the logistical role that the port could serve for regional maritime security efforts, including those for the U.S. Any fears over China's influence in Oman are offset by the continuing necessity of the U.S.-led regional security architecture.

Why Oman?

Duqm's location is why it has appeal for both regional and [non-regional](#) naval forces. Within the Gulf Cooperation Council, Oman has taken the role of regional [convener](#) and supported a variety of Track I and Track II diplomatic efforts designed to facilitate conversation and ease tensions throughout the region. Oman's southern governorates are amidst an area that is key for global trade, essential for regional stability, and in proximity to several maritime security threats. The waters of this region are crowded with traffic, with legitimate fishing and commercial vessels sharing the waters with ships engaged in [illicit activity](#). In short, Duqm is in a maritime area where the [stakes](#) are high. As such, a friendly port within a stable country in the center of this area cannot be overlooked.

Fears over Chinese investment in Duqm are overestimated and [misinterpreted](#). The Omani economy needs Duqm to succeed so willing investors will be welcome. China [possesses](#) the ability and scale of investment to warrant a role in the port. Yet, the Omani regime strikes a balance among regional and non-regional powers to keep regional security challenges from falling firmly on their front door. For instance, Oman has a history of bilateral cooperation with the United Kingdom, a relationship that is represented in Duqm with the [expansion](#) of a British joint operations center located at the port. Oman aims to have its neighborhood become more stable, not less.

Security Requirements

Recent events indicate that the problem in the southern waters around the Arabian Peninsula is

unlikely to [diminish](#) soon. Globally, these waters matter as much as Gulf of Aden itself and despite ample evidence, regional powers and invested non-regional powers like the U.S., have been slow to restructure policy to reflect this reality.

Maritime security in the region is still principally led by the U.S., through U.S. Naval Forces Central Command ([NAVCENT](#)) and Combined Maritime Forces ([CMF](#)). Both based in Bahrain, NAVCENT and CMF are positioned to address maritime challenges within the Gulf. The emergence of Somali piracy in the late 2000s led to a massive cooperative security effort that culminated in the European Union's [Operation Atalanta](#), a new task force within CMF, and the [Djibouti Code of Conduct](#). Despite the lessons learned from the piracy crisis, the commitment that led to the new maritime architecture diminished over time as other regional security challenges took prominence. The current threat posed by the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea speaks to the need to make these waters and their security a priority for all stakeholders going forward.

The U.S. and its partners had already made some progress before the current Houthi threat by setting up CMF's [Task Force 153](#), which is explicitly focused on securing the waters of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The Houthi attacks signal that more is needed. Operation [Prosperity Guardian](#), coupled with other security-related and political efforts, should in turn be utilized to assist regional littorals in furthering maritime security cooperation. The [Jeddah Amendment](#) to the Djibouti Code of Conduct must become a priority for member-states. Other regional maritime efforts, including the EU's Operation Atalanta and CMF, should make tackling maritime illegality, whether it be criminal smuggling, forms of trafficking, or state-facilitated asymmetry, a unified priority as countering maritime crime will burden actors that have contributed to the current attacks in the Red Sea.

Duqm, the U.S., and a Signal

In the long-term, the Houthi attacks provide an opening for the U.S. to firmly establish a narrative

that signals to the wider Middle East and North Africa that this region remains vital to U.S. interests. This can facilitate new conversations about essential efforts like [domain awareness](#), and help turn the page from the lingering effects of the Global War on Terror.

For the U.S. itself, disruptions to Red Sea transit remind the interagency of this region's importance to Washington and how regional engagement should further evolve. Such an evolution must include using U.S. influence to empower regional institutions, like the Jeddah Amendment, deepen operational ties among partner and ally naval forces, and integrate new actors into efforts for maritime security, namely commercial shipping interests, domain-relevant technological actors, and maritime advocacy NGOs. Furthermore, the U.S. should understand that diversification of operational options and capable partners will become more important in the years to come. Hence, Duqm is an opportunity that cannot be ignored amidst the current crisis. Duqm requires dependable customers to succeed as an economic venture and the United States can certainly fill that role.

In fact, the U.S. already is a [customer](#) at Duqm. Washington and Muscat agreed to use Duqm for various operational resupply and maintenance requirements for the U.S. Navy. They could build upon what already [exists](#). Regardless of China's role in the Duqm SEZ, the largest state actor currently holding a security [footprint](#) in the port is one of the United States' closest allies, the United Kingdom. With those baselines already in place, a host of options to deepen political and economic investment in Duqm are available. Not only could it become a more substantial logistics hub for the U.S. Navy, but it could become a viable location for various forms of training, [exercises](#), and maritime domain-relevant security experiments. The diplomatic agreements on the use of the port already exist and the necessity of the region's maritime security are apparent.

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