Abstract. Romanian Review of Political Sciences and International Relations included, in its Vol. XVI, No. 2, 2019, PART I of what intended to be an ampler research on what the author called MENA’S Military Tapestry. A PART II is following now, with the aim to getting closer to a holistic view on such a multidimensional and multi-layered theme. Essentially, through the prism (discussed in Introduction) of the modern status of the century-old Weberian concept, respectively “An effective military institution is necessary for a state to function. (A state is an entity that) (successfully) claims the monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within given territory”, we are reviewing MENA’s Military Tapestry’s Three Poles, namely the Arab one, the Iranian one and the Israeli one, and their corresponding military powers, all together making this region one of the most militarized in today’s world. The Post-Conclusion is an inventory of factors which accentuate the characteristic of the MENA’S Military Tapestry as “Work in Progress”.

Keywords: MENA, military power, military tapestry, three poles – the Arab, the Iranian and the Israeli one

PART II

Introduction: Calibrating the research in accordance with several hermeneutical considerations relevant to the subject-matter

Motto:
“The military possesses coercive resources that can suppress any challenge to authoritarian rule.”¹

There are several hermeneutical elements, even if separated in time by not less than a century, which could be invoked when trying to scale the amplitude of today’s

* PhD, Former Diplomat, last posting Ambassador of Romania to Egypt (2006-2012); gheorghe.dumitru@yahoo.com.
MENA’s military tapestry, and further going towards its more comprehensive and meaningful observation.

First, a century after Max Weber stated, in January 1919, that “An effective military institution is necessary for a state to function. (A state is an entity that) (successfully) claims the monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within given territory”, Mara E. Karlin, an American expert in military affairs, seemingly had to make an amendment: “… commanding a monopoly of violence is no longer a foundation of many existing states. There exist now an increasing number of fragile nation-states that have the trappings of statehood yet cannot create internal security. Such states must strengthen their sovereignty, which can be accomplished by training and equipping their military so that it can hold a monopoly of violence.” Indeed, more than one state from the MENA region could be identified as belonging to such “new brand” of statehood and some of them have already been appealing to the modern way of training and equipping their armies, namely foreign assistance. As for the major provider of such a military assistance for the region, that has been the U.S., even if not always with the anticipated success, as discussed in detail by Mara E. Karlin in her book.

Second, also one century after Max Weber, another American military expert, Sean McFate, a professor of strategy at the National Defense University and Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service, who served as a paratrooper in the (famous) US Army’s 82nd Airborne Division and as private contractor, considers necessary to draw the attention of those interested that, these days, “Today states are receding everywhere... As states retreat, the vacuum of authority has bred endless war and suffering. These wars are not fought conventionally. Terrorism, ethnic cleansing and other forms of violence by nonstate actors have eclipsed conventional interstate wars. The ability of the United Nations or the West to police the situations fades each year while nonstate actors grow more powerful.” Once again, one can say that it is the MENA region which epitomizes this new national security and geopolitical strategic landscape.

From here, we are going down “into the arena”, where these wonderful theoretical narratives will be faced, hopefully in a win-win confrontation, with the complex and hard realities of the MENA’s labyrinthine military landscape as an integrative part of a complicated ecosystem of national and outside actors plus proxy forces. Against the background of today’s MENA dysfunctional state structures, where “Some states are more akin to nonstate actors: the central governments in Libya, Syria, and Yemen lack control over large swathes of their territories and populations. Conversely, several nonstate actors operate as virtual states, including Hamas, the Houthis, the Kurds, and the Islamic State before it was toppled. And these nonstate actors often must contend with nonstate spoilers of their own: in Gaza, Hamas vies with jihadi groups that sometimes behave in ways that undermine its rule or contradict its goals. Even in more functional

---

states, it is not always clear where the ultimate policymaking authority lies. Shiite militias in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon, for example, engage in activities that their titular sovereigns don’t control, let alone condone.”

The phrase “Some states are more akin to nonstate actors” could be considered a true paradigm for explaining some of today’s MENA evolutions, with deep implications for its military landscape. Thus, one should notice that a more nuanced “nonstate concept” came into being there: in addition to the “traditional non-states”, respectively armed groups of various geneses and with diverse goals, there could exist as a “nonstate” what is left after a proper state had lost, at least partially, its initial monopoly on the means of coercion. And here again, the MENA region has been “innovative”: “Iraq and Syria are confronting the most fundamental question a country can face: can they be state? Even by the most minimalist definition, a state must include a government that is in control of most of its territory and wields a monopoly on the legal means of coercion. Even by such limited criteria, Syria and Iraq are not really states at this point, although they remain countries enjoying international recognition.” 4 Besides the issue of the territory which could be present under each of the governments in Damascus and Baghdad, what is of interest related to our subject-matter is that “neither government comes close to having anything approaching a monopoly over the legal means of coercion: instead, they compete for control with heavily armed domestic groups which claim their control of weapons is perfectly legal, even if they do not take orders from the government”.

On October 31, 2019, in a Washington Post article on the current situation in the region with a focus on Syria, following “The abrupt U.S. withdrawal from Syria helped upend the country’s political dynamics”, we notice the following conclusion, on a rather encouraging note: “As a nation, Syria is far from lost and its story is far from over. One chapter of the conflict may be ending, but a new one has just begun.”5 The fact that there is no word about… the state comes to confirm the above considerations. Also, it appears the syntagma nation, to double on country, as substitutes for the concept of state.

Of critical importance is also the intervention of outside powers in relation to the “two faces of the nonstate concept”: (i). For states remaining “just countries”, as Syria and Iraq, their governments have only been able to retain the limited degree of control they do have thanks to the intervention of other countries – the United States and Iran in Iraq, and the United States, Russia, Turkey and Iran in Syria; (ii). “Weak states cohabiting with powerful nonstate actors – in the “classical” sense – create ideal circumstances for external interference. It’s a two-way street – foreign states exploit armed groups to advance their interests, and armed groups turn to foreign states to promote their own causes – that is all too open to misinterpretation. Iran almost certainly helps the Houthis and Iraqi Shiite militias, but does it control them? The People’s Protection Units, a movement of Kurdish

---

5 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/10/31/there-is-more-left-syria-than-oil-sand/.
fighters in Syria, are affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party in Turkey, but
do they follow its command?”6 As Marina and David Ottaway say in their
outstanding book, at the intersection of these two situations one can find Lebanon,
which could be “a notable example of a de facto non-state in the Levant; the
country has all the trappings of a state, even the pretence of a democratic
process, but in reality the major communities control their own affairs, and even
their own territories... Hezbollah, the Shia Party of God, which rules over south
Beirut, much of the southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, is not only heavily
armed, but claims that its weapons are legal because they are weapons of the
resistance against Israel”.

In our view, the equation state – nonstate – country has a particular pattern
with regard to both the Palestinians’ and Kurds’ conundrum: due to History’s
vicissitudes, they have enjoyed neither a state, nor a country, instead they have
been living, for so many decades, in a situation perfectly described by the mantra:
“no state = non-state armed groups”. This could mirror the present situation in
“countries” like Syria and Iraq, with the caveat that in the Palestinian realm the
respective “non-state armed groups” are self-declared “liberation from occupation
organizations”, even if practically all are “stamped” by Washington as “terrorist
groups”.

Undoubtedly, in MENA one can witness the existence and functioning of
nations to which is almost fully applicable – given the present rapidly changing
dynamics and junctures – the Weberian definition of a state as an entity that
monopolizes the legitimate use of coercion, with the army as major tool.
Interestingly enough, the respective states do have also the necessary attributes
to be considered “military powers” in the region, and they will be further analysed
in this paper.

But problems could arise even here if we recall that Weber further argued
that states can be categorized as either bureaucratic (which usually has a written
set of laws and regulations and its characterized by the appointment of officials
based on merit, rather than kinship, or personal loyalty) or patrimonial (where
the ruler exercises power on the basis of traditional authority, usually kinship
networks or patron-client relations). Not only that; the present political and social
landscape in the MENA region seemingly induces a degree of ambivalence in the
classification of the region’s states in accordance with the dichotomist Weberian
criteria.

One can speak rather of “hybrid states”, some being “more bureaucratic”,
the epitome here being, for instance, Egypt, others being “more patrimonial”, with
the epitome Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates: “Still, in the oil-rich
Gulf states, decision-making processes are highly personalized, leaders replace

paywall_free_reading_unwanted_wars_newsletters&utm_content=20191002&utm_medium=promo_email&
utm_source=paywall_free_share&utm_term=newsletter-prerelease.
institutions, and ego-centred dynamics shape much of the political output.” As for the position of the military per se in such a “bifurcation”, (i). Egypt: in the vision of the actual president, a former military installed following a dual military & civilian coup, in 2013, “complete control by the military state over all institutions in the country is a sine qua non for building a New Egypt.” (ii). Saudi Arabia: “The Saudi military also goes to considerable lengths to ensure that its troops cannot mount a coup. The primary function of the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) is to protect the regime – to protect the royal family from the army, and to ensure its loyalty, SANG is recruited entirely from Najdi tribes loyal to the House of Sa’ud.”

As a sort of confirmation for Egypt being “more bureaucratic” in the Weberian sense, the Hofstede’s Power Distance Index, which ranks how hierarchical a country is, places Egypt among the most hierarchical states in the world. Strangely enough (or maybe not), we can notice close to Egypt the presence of the UAE and Saudi Arabia. In all cases, revealing that they share also the characteristic of being among the most hierarchical in the world does bring to the fore some practical implications, like their flexibility in solving problems, both large and small, is limited, as is their ability to innovate. With inherent consequences in the military arena, as the actual situation when the Saudi military has been concretely suffering from its own systemic ineffectiveness in the Yemeni war. Similarly, the impact could be negatively felt by the UAE themselves, despite their efforts to bring its power to bear in the fight war.

There is another consequential factor which complicates the analysis of the armed forces in the MENA region, and that is the technological innovation which has been unfolding for quite some time, practically a true “revolution in military affairs”: “the emergence of technologies so disruptive that they overtake existing military concepts and capabilities and necessitate a rethinking of how, with what, and by whom war is waged. Artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, ubiquitous sensors, advanced manufacturing, and quantum science will radically transform warfare.” In one form or another, the MENA’s armies have been under the incidence of such a consequential process for their functions and operations, including war planning and processing, as well as that “grey zone of conflict – below the threshold of outright war but above that of purely peacetime behaviour.”

8 Marina and David Ottaway, op. cit., pp. 141, 147.
The blurring of the distinction between military and civilian has had as a result the fact that more technology is becoming more accessible. In parallel, the falling cost of many technologies used in both defence and the civilian sector, is making them equally accessible to weak states and violent non-state actors. As such, it is feared that the technical bar to entry into this domain is now sufficiently low that it can be exploited for nefarious purposes by individuals or groups. Today, commentators note also with concern the ways in which technology is undermining the state’s monopoly on the use of force as the technical and fiscal barriers to weapons production fall. Precisely these kinds of fears have been expressed about the cyber domain. According to one Israeli general, “cyber power gives the little guys the kind of ability that used to be confined to superpowers”. MENA region is an example that “the tools of cyberwarfare and cyberattacks have brought with them the perspective of weaponizing cyberspace during actual wars…”

If details on many such operations remain classified, U.S. officials have admitted that the Pentagon used cyberattacks in the fight against the Islamic State (or ISIS). In 2016, Robert Work, then the U.S. deputy secretary of defence, admitted that the United States was dropping “cyberbombs” on ISIS (although he did not elaborate on what that entailed). In at least one instance, such attacks forced ISIS fighters to abandon a primary command post and flee toward other outposts, thereby revealing their location.

The growing tensions in the Persian Gulf have recently taken on a cyber dimension, with the United States using cyberattacks already in 2016 against ISIS targets, or up until October 2019 more or less classified US-Iran and Israel-Iran “mutual cyberattacks”.

As there is no more a secret, operating with equipment of the last technical generation would not automatically represent a safe-key to victory. A case in point from the immediate actuality of the region: “In Yemen, Saudi Arabia has been suffering from the classic asymmetric paradox of a technologically advanced armed force struggling to convert its material advantage into strategic benefits against a hardened quasi-guerrilla force operating in its own inhospitable territory.” Against this backdrop, it wouldn’t be difficult to conceive, as Sean McFate does, that “Future wars will be low tech. Cheap drones can be purchased off the internet and modified in someone’s garage. Rig them with primitive explosives, and voila! Your own kamikaze air force. Several hundred can be controlled at once, swarming a target, or guided by a GPS system like a Tomahawk missile. Modern enemies weaponize the mundane: commercial airlines, roadside bombs, suicide vests and trucks. Nations spend billions of dollars trying to defeat those crude weapons and fail. Low tech – so easy to obtain and so difficult to defeat will form the future’s weapons of choice”. A kind of returning to square one for militaries in MENA too, which are yet supposedly operating on the horizons of the second decade of the 20th century.

---

13 Michèle Flournoy and Michael Sulmeyer, op. cit.
15 Sean McFate, op. cit., pp. 46-47.
The Pole of the Arab Gulf/the Arabian Peninsula/Monarchies – Two Uncontested Military Powers

Motto:
‘Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have become (since 2011) particularly aggressive in their attempts not only to determine the fate of Yemen but also that of the Levant states and Egypt; they have indulged in direct military intervention or in political pressure and financial incentives to sway the outcome of local political struggles.”

In his exhaustive work dealing with “The Gulf Monarchies’ Armed Forces at the Crossroads”17, David B. Roberts, an academic with distinguished military credentials, underlines that, traditionally, the armed forces of the six Gulf monarchies had played an incidental role when it came to securing their states. The ultimate fighting power of the monarchies was relatively unimportant; rather, the monarchies’ security was derived from international relations that were sometimes founded on, and often sustained and fed by, ongoing military sales/procurement. But, for some monarchies at least, this is changing, albeit in a rather nuanced way because, when it comes to the role and use of the military, a picture emerges of diverging approaches among the six Gulf monarchies.

And it has been especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia which have been heavily investing in their military forces and have demonstrated their ambition to actually use them as tools of policy. The two countries are now deploying their own forces in hitherto unseen kinetic ways, as in Yemen, indicating that they genuinely seek their own fighting power.

As for the fundamental goal of the Arab Gulf Monarchies regarding their military spending and arms imports, that is nothing else but to develop a decisive overall edge in conventional weapons and military modernization over Iran.18 Particularly, “Iran and Saudi Arabia would always be facing each other across the Gulf, in competition for primacy”.19

Eventually, a new strategic and security posturing by the Arab Gulf Monarchies wouldn’t be successful outside some radical trends and changes which have taken place for a while in their societies, and in particular regarding their Armies20: (i). The traditional social pact no longer being able to ensure loyalty and cohesion in the area’s countries, it is militarization which appears to offer a top-down process focused on identity and shared values, in which military narratives and symbols can boost patriotic feelings and mobilize citizens around flags and leaders. In the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the military dimension has fostered a hyper-nationalist...

---

16 Marina and David Ottaway, op. cit., p. 5.
17 David B. Roberts, op. cit., pp. 6, 10-11.
19 Marina and David Ottaway, op. cit., p. 73.
trend. Gulf monarchies’ post-rentier strategies are increasingly relying on a military dimension to drive their national identity projects, practically a new element in these countries’ state formation processes. A dual/ambivalent impact should not be neglected: if, on the one hand, “the military factor helps strengthen and prepare the nation against external threats”, on the other, “rising nationalist feelings sustained by the militaristic drive is likely to enhance regional polarization,... and that could consolidate rivalries within the GCC, thus hampering the very shared Gulf (khaleeji) identity that the council had long nurtured”.21 (ii). Seen from the political and institutional perspective, there come to the fore several essential national/country specificities: in Saudi Arabia, militarization reflects increased concentration of power in the hands of the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has started a deep restructuring of military and security agencies in an effort to consolidate his rule; in Saudi Arabia’s 2018 budget, defence expenditures were higher than those for education; in the UAE, militarization means centralization to enhance the strategic primacy of Abu Dhabi over the other six emirates (especially Dubai) within the loose federation and to support the Emirates’ ambitious plans to project geopolitical power. (iii). Becoming aware of the new threats, the Arab Gulf countries have turned “to promote military reform at a strategic level, in capabilities and in civil-military relations... investing not only in expensive and sophisticated weapons, but also in local expertise, training, arms maintenance and indigenous defence industry. Such a behaviour fosters the creation of military-centred national strategies, with an impact on foreign policy postures (against the backdrop of) emphasizing the strategic role of the military.”22

Saudi Arabia – wake-up signals on the weaknesses of a “big-money” army

Motto:
“...The country is rich but weak. It owns massive amounts of modern military equipment but has almost no military might.”23
“The Saudi army is designed for keeping internal order, especially among Shiites in its Eastern provinces and Bahrain. The princes in Riyadh are far too paranoid about the possibility of a coup to build a regular army.”24

Military Power Ranking, in MENA – 4, in the world – 25; Military Personnel: Active – 230,000, Reserve – 0; Defense Budget (Billion $) – 70.0*; Aircraft
Strength – 848; Tanks – 1,062; Armored Vehicles – 11,000*; Rocket Projectors – 122; Naval Assets – 55 (including seven frigates but no aircraft carriers or destroyers). Military expenditures: 8.78% of GDP (2018) – country comparison to the world: 1. *The highest in MENA


Over the last fifty years, the Saudi state has invested more in its military force than most states in the world. Twice at least, it has engaged in what were at the time the world’s largest procurement programs, first starting in the 1980s and second, from the late-2010s.

In recent years, the Saudis have acquired some of America’s top-shelf weapons, from M1A2 Abrams tanks and M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicles to AH-64D Apache Longbow and UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters, and from the U.S.-made Patriot surface-to-air missiles and associated radars integrated into the air defence systems, to the aircraft F-15 Eagles, the undisputed king of the skies for three decades and still formidable, the Saudis even having their own model of the Eagle: the F-15SA (Saudi Advanced), which just started to be delivered in 2018, as Saudi Arabia will soon have Lockheed Martin’s highly advanced THAAD (terminal high altitude area defence) interceptors. In Saudi arsenal one could find also some of the most sought for European military equipment: Eurofighter Typhoons, France’s Shahine mobile anti-aircraft system, soon German-made Skyguard air defence cannons; virtually every vessel in the Royal Saudi Navy was built in American or European shipyards, specifically for Saudi Arabia. Its newest frigates, the Al Riyadh class, are modified versions of France’s La Fayette-class frigate.

The successive US administrations have, with remarkable consistency from President Roosevelt to Donald Trump, underpinned Saudi Arabia’s security as a keystone of their own strategic agenda. This has taken the form of selling arms in abundance to Saudi Arabia’s various security services, engaging in large-scale training programs, and building huge amounts of military infrastructure in the Kingdom to US specifications.

The Saudis share a frontier with a pro-Iran government in Iraq and has in the neighboured a pro-Iran government in Syria. Iranian influence in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, three nations so close geographically to the kingdom, has „spooked Saudi Arabia“, leading to a more aggressive policy from Crown Prince bin Salman (MBS). Thus, the Saudis have used their military to project power, especially in its proxy conflicts with Iran in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

---

26 For all countries in this research, the data on Military expenditures as % of GDP, on Country comparison to the world and on Military branches, as well as with regard to non-state armed groups present/operating on MENA’s countries territories are from https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ag.html.

But the proxy conflict in which Saudi Arabia has taken the most aggressive stance is Yemen, the country (still a “state”?) which is situated at the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula and shares a roughly 1,800km border with the Saudi kingdom. After almost five years of fighting, including an aerial bombing campaign and blockade against the Yemeni rebel group Houthi, the Saudi Arabia-led coalition are far from claiming victory. At enormous cost to the Yemeni people, which eventually have come to be faced with a “civil war within a civil war”, the Saudi-initiated war has bogged down Saudi Arabia into a quagmire. The opposition to the Houthis has split this year into quarrelling camps and the Saudis’ most important ally, Abu Dhabi, has all but abandoned the war effort.28

Equally warring for the Saudis should had that barely a month has gone by since 2016 without Yemen’s Houthis firing rockets or missiles into the kingdom.29

If this is the Arab Gulf country ambitioning to be considered a “regional power”, in consonance with its traditional position as the biggest oil exporter in the world and as the world’s third-largest military budget (the first in the region of MENA) and the world’s third-largest weapons importer, the analysts’ evaluations aren’t always congenial with Saudi Arabia as far as its military are concerned.

In his exhaustive work, already mentioned above, dedicated to the Arab Gulf militaries, David B. Roberts noticed that, “despite the large financial outlays, most assessments judge that Saudi forces lack fighting power; whenever Saudi forces have been called upon in recent years and decades, they have struggled to achieve set objectives, with instances (as the first Gulf War) when Saudi’s elite called for international help rather than trust in its own military forces”. Other evaluations bring to light that, “The Saudi military suffers from its own systemic ineffectiveness... the limitations of the Saudi military being well-known, despite its massive budget and arms purchases as it suffers from a lack of experience, a reliance on U.S. refuelling and resupplying, and from a human capital issue.”30

Eventually, “Rather than reducing border threats to Saudi Arabia, security problems have only increased. The Kingdom is now under regular attack from both Iraq and Yemen as drone and missile strikes of increasing sophistication and precision bombard its towns and critical national infrastructure. As regional tensions have spiked, the Kingdom’s lack of military response and increasing reliance on US troop deployments and support has made it look weak in the face of ever-escalating hostility from Tehran.”31


29 A position that was put in jeopardy, in June 2019, when the US managed to export, be it only temporarily, more oil than Saudi Arabia.


In particular, the attacks, on the night of 14 September, 2019, which involved low-flying cruise missiles in addition to armed drones (of still uncertain provenance, at the time of writing this paper) that struck Saudi critical oil infrastructure: the country’s second largest oil field at Khurais and the Saudi vital crude oil processing / stabilization centre at Abqaiq would prove difficult “to swallow”. “The strike was highly effective from a military perspective and no energy sector has been struck so effectively since the U.S. coalition’s precision bombing of Iraq in 1991.”

The event brought to light once more that “Saudi Arabia’s ambitions are limited by its military, which is considered an ineffective force even though the kingdom is one of the world’s largest spenders on defence; Saudi Arabia has some of the greatest military equipment money can buy, but its military is still not seen as a threat to its long-time rival Iran; Saudi Arabia’s military has not proved capable of effectively fighting back Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, its arsenal being designed for a large conventional war – not proxy fighting.”

In a sense, those unfortunate evolutions represent also an opportunity for the leaders in Riyadh to become fully aware about Saudi army’s shortcomings: (i). “Saudi Arabia’s military are too large, making it more susceptible to organizational and quality issues.” (ii). “Saudi ground forces as a whole are not trained well enough to where they would be able to perform successfully in large-scale operations, as such, hence a Saudi ground force in Yemen may cause more harm than good; understanding the potential harm of its ground forces, Riyadh would not deploy large contingents of them because their casualties would be severe, with tremendous collateral damage in Yemen, so that today it is Yemeni local militias and tribal groups which form the majority of the ground force battling the Houthis, and few if any Saudi soldiers assist them – save for a few special forces units.” (iii). “While military officials say it is impossible to completely protect fixed targets, such as oil fields, from all aerial attacks over a large area, the fact that Saudi Arabia has multiple and often competing entities responsible for air defence meant there was little or no coordination within the Saudi defence complex. That helped stymie any effort to mount an adequate defence.”

And the litany of critical views on the Saudi Military could continue indefinitely: “The kingdom’s forces have low readiness, low competence, and are largely inattentive”. “The Saudi military is notoriously disorganized and failure-prone...”

---


34 Ibid.


and they would almost certainly lose a straight fight with Iran, thus the continual efforts to bait the U.S. into fighting for them or bribe enough DC lobbyists to get U.S. leaders into starting it themselves.”

Instead, an inventory of opinions commiserating with the Saudis appears paltry, generally focused on the idea that “almost no state” could have fully thwarted such an unconventional attack: “The low-flying and relatively cheap drones and cruise missiles purported to have been used in Saudi's attack are a fairly new challenge that many nation states are not in fact prepared to counter. It also doesn’t help that massive oil plants are just easy targets. Saudi oil assets are vulnerable for the simple reason that when flying over them at night, they stick out against the desert background like a Christmas tree. This means that enemies don’t need high-tech GPS-guided drones, even though they might have them, but can also use relatively lower technology drones. If an attack is of a different threat than the system was designed for – that is a low-altitude cruise missile instead of a high-altitude ballistic missile – then the system will not intercept it.”

Such evolutions couldn’t but reverberate quite strongly and with feed-back in Washington. Speaking at the Pentagon, on Sept. 20, 2019, the U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper announced that, in order to “prevent further escalation, Saudi Arabia requested international support to help protect the kingdom’s critical infrastructure. The United Arab Emirates has also requested assistance. In response to the kingdom’s request, the U.S. president has approved (as a first step) the deployment of U.S. forces, which will be defensive in nature and primarily focused on air and missile defence; a moderate deployment, not thousands, would be sufficient, given the state of play now, but the situation will have to be continually assessed and there could be additional deployments as needed, based on the changing situation. The Administration will also work to accelerate the delivery of military equipment to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to enhance their ability to defend themselves (Note: essentially, capabilities to enhance the two countries’ air and missile defence).

On the same occasion, the Head of Pentagon reiterated the U.S. officials’ claims that Iran was behind the attack on Saudi Arabia's oil industry: “All indications are that Iran was responsible for the attack.” Esper did not say whether the attack originated on Iranian soil, however. Saudi officials have also stopped short of publicly making that assessment. Teheran has denied responsibility, and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif warned of “all-out war” if the United States or Saudi Arabia launched a retaliatory strike.

In this context, with regard to “the Iranian ability to launch swarms of drones at very great distances without any air defence detection of this incoming attack”, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph F. Dunford Jr.

---


underlined that “no single system is going to be able to defend against a threat like that, but a layered system of defensive capabilities would mitigate the risk of swarms of drones or other attacks that may come from Iran”.

On Sept. 26, 2019, the Department of Defense issued a statement on the concrete Deployment of U.S. Forces and Equipment to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for the time being: “One Patriot Battery, Four Sentinel RADARs, Approximately 200 support personnel. This deployment will augment the kingdom’s air and missile defence of critical military and civilian infrastructure. This deployment augments an already significant presence of U.S. forces in the region. It was also approved putting additional forces on Prepare to Deploy Orders (PTDO). While no decision has been made to deploy these additional forces, they will maintain a heightened state of readiness. These forces include: Two Patriot Batteries, One Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system (THAAD), It is important to note these steps are a demonstration of our commitment to regional partners, and the security and stability in the Middle East... The U.S. also look for partners in the region, and around the globe to contribute assets in an international effort to reinforce Saudi Arabia’s defence.”

Two weeks later, on October 11, 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense issued the following Statement on Deployment of Additional U.S. Forces and Equipment to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: “At the request of U.S. Central Command, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper authorized the deployment of additional U.S. forces and the following equipment to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Two Fighter Squadrons, One Air Expeditionary Wing (AEW), Two Patriot Batteries, One Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system (THAAD). Secretary Esper informed Saudi Crown Prince and Minister of Defense Muhammad bin Salman this morning of the additional troop deployment to assure and enhance the defence of Saudi Arabia. Taken together with other deployments this constitutes an additional 3,000 forces that have been extended or authorized within the last month. Since May, the Department of Defense has increased the number of forces by approximately 14,000 to the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility (U.S. Central Command, which oversees operations in the Middle East), as an investment into regional security. As we have stated, the United States does not seek conflict with the Iranian regime, but we will retain a robust military capability in the region that is ready to respond to any crisis and will defend U.S. forces and interest in the region.”

Against the backdrop of reiterating that “The evidence recovered so far proves that Iran is responsible for these attacks (on the Saudi oil installations, on Sept. 14, 2019)”, the new American troops deployment to Saudi Arabia appeared to be a move having a dual purpose: (i) to “send the message to the Iranians, do not strike another sovereign state, do not threaten American forces”; (ii) to give an example of “dynamic force employment”, a term the Pentagon has recently introduced for short-notice deployments around the world, either in response to crises or to flex the military’s muscles in training.40

One can say that this was the kind of action just expected by the community of analysts and academics from both the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, namely “calibrating a response that would be appropriate but not drag the US and the Middle East into a war that few want.” 41

Will all these measures, at the national and international level, help give a reasonable answer to the question-dilemma: “With the best-equipped armed forces in the Gulf region, Saudi Arabia is a major player in Middle Eastern affairs. But just how strong is its military?” 42 Maybe one way to hasten a concrete answer would be a direct Saudi Arabia-Iran confrontation, and not through proxies, be it limited in scale, as a Saudi counter-reaction to the Sept. 14, 2019, attacks against its oil sites. Stratfor Worldview tried to figure out such a scenario: “In terms of the Saudi ability to conduct any potential military strike on Iran as a response to the devastating attack on its oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais, the primary and most effective means at Riyadh’s disposal is its air force. Saudi Arabia has invested heavily in its air force over the years, acquiring large numbers of sophisticated and modern warplanes from the United States and Europe. To minimize the risk to their aircraft, the Saudis would likely seek to conduct any strikes on Iran with air-launched cruise missiles such as the Storm Shadows from their Tornado fighters. The Storm Shadows have a range of more than 1,000 kilometres (625 miles), meaning the Saudi air force could launch them from well beyond the reach of Iranian air defences.” 43

Of course, one cannot underestimate the probability of “Iranian counterstrikes”, in retaliation, with more devastating effects for the Saudi vital energy infrastructure. In the evaluation of the same Stratfor analysis, it is expected that Saudi Arabia would “seek U.S. reinforcements like additional air defences, as well as intelligence that both better tracks incoming threats and, potentially, provides tactical information for a Saudi strike. And as a last resort, Riyadh would also ask for a guarantee that Washington would step in if the kingdom’s retaliatory strike ignites a hotter conflagration in the Middle East. In such a situation, the United States would find itself back fighting fires in the Middle East, just as it’s trying to pass such duties off to others.”

All this could remain a mere analysts’ scenario especially if President Trump’s final decision would be not to strike Iran. That could have “prompted Saudi Arabia to seek its own solution to the conflict” but, at the time of writing, what some press reports have indicated remains to be firmly confirmed, if such a “Saudi solution” would really include a dialogue with Iran, in the form of at least indirect talks “about de-escalation.” 44 The opening, if confirmed and put into

practice, would have a dual motivation for the Saudis, first, economic; for the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), the war has been threatening his larger plans to transform the Saudi economy – Vision 2030 (seemingly the attack of September 14 against vital Saudi oil installations appeared to target a strategic priority for MBS, namely the IPO of the national oil company, Aramco) and, second, as a matter of national security and with direct connection with the state of the national Army: “having failed so miserably to subdue one of the poorest countries in the world, Saudi Arabia may be having second thoughts about confronting a country with considerable economic and military power – Iran”.

Meantime, it should be expected that the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in spite of the enormous challenges he is faced with, will continue and even intensify to transition the Saudi Arabia’s military forces into a regionally capable force, so that using force could become a means to pursue a foreign policy goal on an unprecedented scale, including genuinely deploying Saudi forces after the UAE has, to some degree, shown the way. Such a drive, fulfilled by an energetic leader, would imply: (i). reforms in the army procurement system and programs, increasingly demanding Saudi defence suppliers to engage as much as possible in domestic production of weaponry; (ii). look into solving the unresolved issue on the future of the Saudi National Guard (SANG, the fourth Saudi force which is still expanding, and is critical in the broader development of capability, having a burgeoning air component and the world’s largest light armoured vehicle fleet); (iii). finishing the program underway of naval enhancement, costing at least $15 billion; (iv). solving the shortcomings in the air force (again in Yemen, if seemingly the Saudi air force led the way with its own craft, still according to the New York Times, Saudi pilots were not skilled enough to fly low enough to accurately deliver their payloads, in contrast to Emirati pilots). All this with the open question if the US will remain “a critical partner” for the Saudis, as well as for the other Arab Gulf countries.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE): the “Little Sparta” of the Arab Gulf

Motto:
“Granted the UAE is armed with the best weaponry and the most sophisticated technology that money can buy, but how can a country with an indigenous population of little more than a million people – roughly 90 percent of the total population of 9 million consists of expats and migrant workers – have such an emphatic military boot print?”

Military Power Ranking, in MENA – 9, in the world – 62; Military Personnel: Active – 64,000, Reserve – 0; Defense Budget (Billion $) – 14.4; Aircraft Strength – 541; Tanks – 510; Armored Vehicles – 5,936; Rocket Projectors – 72; Naval Assets – 75; Military expenditures: 5.7% of GDP (2016) – country comparison to the world: 3.


In a short period, the UAE has transformed itself from a buyer of security to a supplier of it, making its armed forces the most potent Arab Gulf military. The analysts have been pinpointing some relevant causalities: “A unique and fervently-held Emirati world-view underpinned by a sensitive threat perception threshold: the deep concerns about two issues, respectively a wide-ranging threat from Iran and the profound dangers posed by internationalized political Islam, all that on the background of a burgeoning fear that the war-weary US may not actively want to intervene to assuage security in the Gulf, (in other words) the Emiratis need the capacity to intervene essentially because no one else is willing to do so in its stead; in an era where America’s commitment to Gulf security is tepid at best, the UAE is saddling up and filling the gap.”

Consequently, the foreign policy of the United Arab Emirates offers a curious case study for scholars of international relations: a small state with a tiny population and historically little presence on the world stage, but with outsized – and seemingly ever-expanding – ambitions. Over the past decade, while consolidating its status as a regional financial centre and international business hub, the UAE has quietly become a rising military power in the Middle East. Since the watershed of the Arab Spring, the UAE has pursued an increasingly assertive and interventionist foreign policy, the effects of which are most evident in the Red Sea basin and Horn of Africa. Here, the UAE has sought to become a major political actor; maintaining a formidable military presence, handing out lavish economic aid and taking on the role of kingmaker and peace broker.

Today, the UAE operates ports in four of the seven countries bordering the Red Sea (Egypt, Somalia, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia), and military bases in Yemen, Eritrea and Somaliland. The UAE’s security policies will continue to have a huge impact on developments in nearly all the region’s hot spots, including Yemen, Libya, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Its success in effecting a rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, who had been engaged in hot and cold war for two decades, is the latest proof of that Emirati influence. A new regional order is on the rise and the UAE is a major agent of this, its armed forces being the instrument of choice in the country’s foreign policy tool-kit.

U.S. military presence in the UAE: Shared regional concerns such as terror

groups, Iran, and the Islamic State provide ample opportunities for the U.S. and the Emirates to work together in the military area. The robust presence of American forces in the sheikdom – about 5,000 U.S. personnel and advanced aircraft like the F-22 operate from the United Arab Emirates – bolsters the relationship. Al Dhafra airbase, about 20 miles (30km) south of Abu Dhabi has been used very heavily by the Americans in carrying out bombing raids, and the Emirates Air Force has racked up a significant number of strikes. France opened the Abu Dhabi Base in May 2009.

In 2008, the UAE already bought MIM-104 Patriot missiles and related radar support services for the Patriot systems. There had been work concurrently on the Hawk systems, the Patriots predecessor, also in use by the UAE. The UAE was the first country to acquire the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense System (THAAD) (initial contract worth $1.96 billion with Lockheed Martin Corp to supply two Thaad anti-missile batteries). Other examples of important military equipment in the possession of the UAEAF: US F-16 multirole fighter aircraft, French Mirage 2000 multirole air fighters and British Hawk aircraft, French helicopters. For the ground forces: LeClerc Tanks and BMP-3 Armoured Vehicles. The country is now looking to purchase the F-35 fighter plane.

Despite the rapid growth of its own defence industry, the UAE’s reliance on the US military and technology is unlikely to waver anytime soon. The UAE accounts for 7.4 percent of total US arms sales and, after Saudi Arabia, is the second-largest buyer of American defence technologies and weapons. Some of the recent contracts awarded to US firms: $2 billion deal with Raytheon for Patriot system rocket launchers, $109 million deal for Lockheed Martin radars. The US Department of Defense also announced a joint US-UAE hospital to be built in the Emirates, modelled off the Landstuhl military hospital in Germany, to serve wounded American and Emirati servicemen and women.

Similarly to Algeria and Egypt, the UAE was mentioned as a potential export customer for the advanced Su-57 fighter, indicating a Russian willingness to cooperate on military and technical affairs. Russia has been attempting to align the UAE’s armament procurement towards it more recently, offering it access to the Russian GLONASS GPS-equivalent satellite network. With regards to armour, the UAE fields both Russian BMP-3 tracked infantry fighting vehicles and Ukrainian BTR-3 wheeled armoured personnel carriers.

Emirati troops are likely gaining experience with armed unmanned aerial vehicles using Chinese-made drones. Further north in the Mediterranean area, the Emirati air force conducts joint exercises with Israel despite official non-recognition between the two governments.

In parallel, as part of its military drive, the UAE has carefully developed its own domestic defence industry to provide supplies and ammunition and conduct repairs – all in-house. The aim, insiders say, is to reduce the reliance of UAE Armed Forces on Western suppliers and to have a ready inventory of munitions, spare parts, vehicles, and vessels should the country be involved in a sudden and protracted military engagement. In 2014, the Emirates Defense Industries Company (EDIC) was established and subsequent reforms undertaken to bolster local
military industries, the joint ventures between international defence companies and local firms being also encouraged. Research and development is carried out outside the UAE with Emirati funds, and the technology and know-how are then transferred into the UAE for production on Emirati soil. There are now more than 170 Emirati defence companies producing firearms, guided missiles, drones, all-terrain vehicles, aircraft, and naval vessels – some of which are already used in battle. Already the UAE is an arms supplier to near and far states (for instance, Kuwait and Russia). Drones produced in the Emiratis are now used by the Egyptian military in their anti-terrorist operations in the Sinai Peninsula. Exports are likely to ramp up in the near term, and a key part of the procurement process for the UAE, as for Saudi Arabia, will focus on both technology transfer as much as on traditional offset contracting.

The 2019 International Defence Exhibition arms show in Abu Dhabi showcased domestically constructed armoured vehicles and light attack aircraft, as well as the announcement of $5.4 billion worth of government purchases. Emirati Government defence development funds, awards and investments in local firms and prizes for academic advancements related to the military are all part of the plan to boost defence-industrial capacity.

In 2014, the UAE introduced a mandatory military conscription for adult males of 12 months to expand its reserve force. In July 2018, compulsory military service for Emirati men holding a high school diploma or its equivalent was extended from 12 to 16 months, while those who do not have a high school qualification continue to serve for two years. Some commentators argue that military conscription is a tool to build nationalism and reduce the influence of Islamist groups amongst citizens from the northern emirates which are more populated than Abu Dhabi, yet financially dependent on the capital. In this sense, conscription is very much used as both a nation-building and manpower-boosting tool. Though outsourcing attracts advisors such as the former head of Australia’s special forces and an uncertain number of contracted soldiers and specialists, the quintessential ‘citizen-soldier’ is a prerequisite for leadership of the institution.51

Most Emirati officers are graduates of the United Kingdom’s Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, with others having attended the United States Military Academy at West Point, the Royal Military College, Duntroon, and St Cyr, the military academy of France.

Since its official inception in 1971, the Emirati army has been deployed in a myriad of military and humanitarian missions abroad: in Somalia in 1993; Kosovo; during the 1990-1991 Gulf War, several hundred UAE troops were part of the GCC Peninsula Shield force that advanced into Kuwait City; UAE Military field engineers arrived in Lebanon in September 2007 for clearing areas of south Lebanon from mines and cluster bombs; in March 2011, the UAE agreed to join the enforcement of the no-fly-zone over Libya by sending six F-16 and six Mirage 2000 multi-role fighter aircraft; thereafter, the Emiratis have been supporting

General Khalifa Haftar in Libya; ground troops deployment in Afghanistan started in 2007, the Emiratis pilots being, alongside their Australian counterparts, the only non-NATO nation allowed to fly close air support for US troops there; the 2011 intervention in Bahrain alongside Saudi Arabia, airstrikes and counter-insurgency operations in North Africa; helping the US launch its first airstrikes against ISIL targets in Syria, in 2014, UAE Air Force engaged also in bombing missions against Daesh militants, besides the US, „Emirati fighters have conducted more missions against the Islamic State since the air war began than any other member of the multinational coalition“. In the same wake, the fact that the Emirati air force has been instrumental in supporting the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State, where Emirati sorties were second only to the U.S., in addition to years of cooperation in Afghanistan, provided the foundation for what former U.S. Central Command leader Anthony Zinni called, „the strongest relationship that the United States has in the Arab world today.“ Lately, the United Arab Emirates played a large role in the ousting of Sudan’s Omar al-Bashir. It trained 14,000 Sudanese troops which later joined the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.

All this – the Emiratis as “an epicentre for defence technology” and the fact that the country retains military bases in Eritrea and Somaliland, keeps an active role in Libya, and will likely continue to contain Iran’s ballistic missiles and reinforce the stability of pro-Abu Dhabi governments in the Arab world – generates “a palpable sense of national pride when Emiratis citizens talk of their armed forces and their achievements in such a short time span. With the armed forces now numbering 60,000 personnel, most Emirati families have a close relative who has served or is serving in the military. The idea that the tiny Emirates can go toe-to-toe with the proxies of Iran and take out ISIS targets creates a sense of national unity and fills in their Spartan narrative. With many Emiratis gaining military experience, the defence sector and military planning have become an attractive destination for Emiratis – “Defense is the future.”

As a result of their active and effective military role, during almost two decades, despite their small numbers of active personnel, the UAE have come to be commonly nicknamed “the Little Sparta” of the Arab Gulf, a generous label applied to them first by the U.S. Marines General (ret.) and former U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis, who, based on his own experience in dealing with the UAE military had also expressed “A mutual respect, an admiration for what the Emiratis have done and what they can do (militarily). They’re not just willing to fight – they’re great warriors.”

Meanwhile, it appears that the metaphorical formulation – the Gulf’s “Little Sparta” – is not functioning in solitude but intimately linked to a multi-layered

---


ensemble of qualifications: “The Emirati armed forces are the most active among Gulf militaries”; “Today, Emirati forces are considered pound-for-pound the most potent Arab Gulf military”; “Several areas of the Emirati military are widely judged to be particularly impressive by their Gulf peers, by the international forces who work with them, and by the wider diplomatic communities aware of these matters: leading the way is the UAE Air Force, Emirati pilots being near-universally perceived as being the best in the region”; “The wider international community of scholars and analysts was shocked at the scale of Emirati initial success in Yemen, particularly having in view that never before have Gulf forces deployed in this kind of dangerous, expeditionary, and kinetic manner”; “The UAE now possesses arguably the Arab world’s most tested and most experienced armed force in its Presidential Guard. This will remain the tip of the Emirati spear, backed up by a NATO-level capable fast-jet fleet that has even added (and tested in Yemen) drone capabilities to its repertoire in recent years”. “The UAE runs the Gulf’s most advanced local defence equipment manufacturing industries”; “The state sees itself as at the forefront of the Gulf’s security architecture”.

It is the existence of such an enviable “Emirati multi-branded military” that are nourishing the Emirati military aspirations, which only appear to be growing.

Seemingly despite the commentators’ warnings on the danger of Emiratis’ overstretch when one compares the UAE actual and intended military activities to their primary resource constraint: the country’s small population. Apparently, the Emirati leaders, be they from Dubai or Abu Dhabi, are not likely to heed those warnings as “there is little reason to expect Emirati ambitions to dim in the near future. The base infrastructure that the Emiratis are installing around the Horn of Africa (notably in Eritrea) and Yemen to support their campaign is extensive and will endure”.

As for the threatening “Sword of Damocles” represented by the insufficiency of indigenous human resources and capacities for the need of Emirati military, there could be an extrapolation of an already tried way: non-Emirati contract support, in non-combat roles but also “out-sourcing the fighting” and actual mercenaries, people from neighbouring or afar states to be sent in addition the UAE’s own troops for some of the “missions” abroad, as happened when fighting the main Yemeni rebel organization – the Houthi. According to some information, the Emirati troops which have been deployed to Yemen and played a key role there, on the one hand outsourced much of the fighting to their local anti-Houthi allies, limiting their own casualties and, on the other hand, many of “the Emirati combatants” were in fact mercenaries from countries like Sudan, or hundreds of Latin American mercenaries, members of “a hired gun army” funded to fight in Yemen.

And, that as part of a more complex overall picture: “UAE’s futuristic cities and booming economy were built on foreign know-how and labour funded by

55 Bruce Riedel, op. cit.
and its military is no different”.\textsuperscript{57} And this could go up to having as the commanding general for the Joint Aviation Command of the UAE a former lieutenant colonel in the \textit{US Army}. An \textit{Australian} heads the UAE’s Presidential Guard, which is among the elite fighting forces in the Arab world today, a military division that includes both conventional and special-ops units, which were active in Yemen. Other Western officers wear the UAE’s uniform and hold rank as well, but they appear to be confined to training roles.

Giving a concrete dimension to the adage “\textit{Don’t just buy the best equipment, buy talent too}”, from commanders to mercenaries and trainers, foreigners have been central to the rise of the UAE’s military. In a very pragmatic sense, specific to a least a part of the Emirati leadership, the foreign military expertise has been “bought” as “the central enabling factor for Emirati military capability, … (with the hope that) using, integrating and learning from foreigners would lead to a more effective military outcome.” Just one relevant example: an Emirati company called Knowledge Point employs a large number of former American officers tasked with training and advising Emirati forces.

Becca Wasser, a policy analyst at the Rand Corporation who specializes in US defence and foreign policies in the Middle East points to the fact that the Emirati forces have benefited from training alongside US and French forces, as well as their deployments to Afghanistan. And the UAE’s military depends on foreigners it contracts to keep it up and running: “Security cooperation activities are bolstered by a high degree of contract support throughout the Emirati Armed Forces, particularly in logistics and maintenance. These contractors include former US and other military personnel, and often take on the lion’s share of the unglamorous work that helps keep the military afloat.”\textsuperscript{58}

In Sept. 2019, the United Arab Emirates joined four other members of the \textit{International Maritime Security Construct} – the United Kingdom, Australia, Bahrain and the United States, an intentional maritime security coalition to “deter threats to maritime navigation and global trade” in the Arabian Gulf and its surrounding waterways. The alliance was set up to protect the interests of its members and their merchant ships when passing through maritime corridors, namely the Strait of Hormuz, Bab Al Mandab, the Sea of Oman and the Arabian Gulf. As such, the Emiratis demonstrate that they share in practical terms the American credo/ watchword: “If the Iranians come after U.S. citizens, U.S. assets or U.S. military, we reserve the right to respond with a military action. They need to know that, it needs to be very clear. (More generally), There is a military role in defending freedom of navigation. The question will be to what extent the international community is behind that effort.”\textsuperscript{59} As a sort of “question” is also


\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.

raised in relation to the UAE’s engagement in the Horn of Africa: that may have won the Emiratis new friends, but it also produced enemies and significant negative public sentiment. The fact that the UAE would be extracting more from its relationships than it is providing and that the UAE’s growing military presence and self-interested policy goals will bring new instability to a fragile region, are just a couple of perceptions/impressions leading to real interrogation on the results which are now commonly held amid many in the Horn. Partners in the Horn worry also that the UAE’s military relationships could draw the region into conflicts.60

The Military Pole of the Patchy Levant and North Africa and its One Military Power

The Arab Pole in the MENA’s Military Tapestry encompasses the official military institutions and other armed/non-state armed groups in a number of 16 Arab countries, plus the respective domain regarding the Palestinians.

An aspect that we dealt with in PART I, is related to the fact that, most of the present Arab national armies continue to exhibit, in various degree, a lack of effectiveness, at least in relations to the vast arsenal of modern equipment and weaponry they possess. An inventory of the concrete aspects, with the determinant causation, of this unfavourable report cost-benefit in the case of Arab militaries could be found in the seminal book Armies of sand: the past, present, and future of Arab military effectiveness (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), authored by Kenneth M. Pollack. At least two further elements can be added now. The first is related to the three Arab – Israel wars, which in a sense had epitomized the weaknesses of the Arab armies. Thus, a new study reveals “a more fundamental issue at the core of the outcome of those wars: the Arab states did not and do not, even today, properly understand the stakes; these were essentially wars of choice for the Arab armies, even if they didn’t always fire the first shot. For Israelis in their own minds they were and always will be wars of survival. They have no other choice but to defend where they are because they have no alternative. Their military leaders believe that when it comes to fighting wars, lack of choice is Israel’s biggest advantage.”61

The second element, regards the idea born two decades ago on “a military alliance of Middle Eastern states”, up to an “Arab NATO” bloc of sorts together, in the American vision, an idea which has remained just a point on the agendas of various level meetings. A reasonable explanation: “It’s not their capability, it’s the manpower issue. Where are you going to get troops?”, in the conditions that Egypt, the largest standing army in the region, is still adamantly outside “the

concept”, and that the Gulf nations will perennially be faced with manpower shortages for an alliance and scrutiny. But maybe even more critical is the reality that, in most of the Arab-majority countries there exist unbalanced civil-military relations. The supremacy of the armed institutions over all other state institutions has engendered a political environment in which state repression became the most important method for attaining and remaining in political power. Such a context in which state-sanctioned violence is legitimated in various forms (including official religious institutions and hyper-nationalist propaganda) is less likely to lead to democratization or sustained stability. On the other hand, most armed non-state actors in the region’s post-conflict environments will refuse to disband and demobilize if there is no mutual trust or weak institutional arrangements to balance relations with the official security and military sectors. This is especially the case when these official sectors have been traditionally above oversight, accountability and law. On the other hand, a combination of arms and religion/sects or arms and chauvinistic nationalism in most of the Arab-majority world has proved to be the most effective means to gain and remain in political power. Votes, constitutions, good governance and socio-economic achievements are secondary means and, in many Arab-majority countries, relegated to being cosmetic matters. Armed non-state actors can certainly endure and expand in a regional context where bullets keep proving that they are much more effective than ballots.

Egypt: The Main Military Power in the Area – vast horizons for a “national” military tapestry

Military Power, Ranking, in MENA – 1*, in the world – 12; Military Personnel: Active – 440,000, Reserve – 480,000; Defense Budget (Billion $) – 4.4; Aircraft Strength – 1092*; Tanks – 2,160; Armored Vehicles – 5,735; Rocket Projectors – 1,100; Naval Assets – 319; Military expenditures: 1.25% of GDP (2018 – ) country comparison to the world: 99.

*The highest in MENA

With due consideration for specific political and military institutional dimension for each of MENA’s countries, one can say that it is Egypt which could epitomize par excellence the long-term process of the “profound militarization of the Arab world”: “In Egypt’s postcolonial history, the army saved the “nation” and served as its faithful guardian three times... in 1952, in 2011 and in 2013... But saving the nation was inseparable from militarizing it. Each time, the saviours assumed full power over the state and amassed immense economic privilege.”

According to Zeinab Abul-Magd, "the Egyptian military managed to weather many fundamental transformations in the country, including socialism, neoliberalism, and recently mass uprisings, and successfully adapted to change to amass power and expand its profitable business enterprises. In order to reach such hegemonic status, the "adaptable officers" switched alliances between various socioeconomic groups and deployed a nationalistic rhetoric". More recently, and in a more positive note, today’s country’s president (ex-general) Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi insists that "the military's actions saved democracy for Egypt."

In a commendable book on the Egyptian army placed in the specific Egyptian historical context, which included several revolutionary processes, the last one at the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, Amy Austin Holmes tried to demonstrate that "the Egyptian military has been one of the four pillars of regime support, that can either prop up or press upon whoever is in power". The other three pillars, in Ms. Holmes’ opinion, being "the business elite, the United States, and the multi-headed opposition".

To this sui generis paradigm, other experts would oppose a one-word one: in Egypt, the military are "the regime's pillar". A controversy which wouldn’t in any way diminish Ms. Holmes’ efforts to go deeper into the general historical context doubled by the very peculiar Egyptian context, political, social, economic, and geostrategic terms, as a way of better understanding the very essence of the Egyptian army – for 70 years, all heads of state were military men, with the exception of just one year (2013).

First, the historical context in which the Egyptian military grew to become the strongest in the Arab world: (i). "The armed forces under Nasser played a crucial role in the anticolonial struggle against the British and they have maintained a dominant position in the political scene ever since” (the beginning of the 1950s). (ii). "The growth of a powerful Egyptian military was at least in part a legacy of the colonial period. After centuries of foreign domination, the military could claim to safeguard Egypt's independence. However, the end of the colonial period did not mean the end of foreign intervention, as the Suez Crisis in 1956 demonstrated. The fear of being reoccupied by a foreign power continued even after Egypt acquired sovereignty; that was not based on unfounded fears but on the actual experience of British, French and Israeli aggression".

Second, what is peculiar to the Egyptian army is that its strength lies on a multi-layered foundation: the sheer number of men it can recruit; essentially, the Egyptian military has the ability to conscript the male population for armed service and to mobilize the entire population for other services in the name of...
Egyptian nationalism; the yearly infusions of American military aid, which allow it to purchase state-of-the-art weaponry, such as F-16 fighters and M1A1 tanks; the Egyptian military has been allowed to develop its own businesses, giving it a stream of revenue independent of the state budget and this means that the Egyptian armed forces could have a considerable amount of political, economic, and social power independent of the executive; if this independent power has been most often referred to as an autonomy from the state, at the same time, however, the military is also tied to the state; it is tied to the regime, as one of its main purposes was to safeguard it against internal threats; in theory, State Security (Amn ed-Dawla), Central Security (al-Amn al-Markazy), and the Intelligence services (Mukhabarat) were responsible for internal security, but in practice the army could also play this role; perhaps ironically, it is first and foremost through the institution of the armed forces, which presents itself as a guarantor against foreign domination, that the United States has obtained more leverage over Egypt than any other external factor; "as the primary patron of the Egyptian military since the Camp David Accords, the U.S. ensures a steady flow of $1.3 billion annually in aid (plus $300 million aid for economic and social sectors), trains Egyptian officers, and has designated Egypt as a major non-NATO ally... through sustained military and economic aid, the U.S. has contributed implicitly to the longevity of the Egyptian regime since Camp David Accords were signed in 1978 and the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty was concluded in 1979".

Another synopsis (10 points) elaborated by experts\(^68\) which come to complementing, if complicating in a sense, the drive toward a near holistic portrait of the Egyptian military: 1. The Military has been the backbone of Egyptian political power in modern Egypt. 2. The Free Officers revolution and subsequent presidency of Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser created foundations for a modern authoritarian state in which the military is the ruling power in Egyptian politics – albeit not the governing power (thus Egypt is not a military dictatorship). 3. All post-independence Presidents, except for Muhammad Morsi for just one year, 2013, have been prominent military officers. 4. For decades, the military has protected Egyptian regimes and enforced authoritarian conditions that have disempowered the political opposition, regardless of whether it is secular or Islamist. In reality, the military has benefited from rising Islamist activism since the 1970s, as it has granted them legitimacy to impose restrictions on a broad spectrum of opposition groups. 5. Egyptian military leaders have been strong supporters of economic neoliberalism, which has enriched military families and ensured close ties between the military and pro-regime businesses. 6. The military has also promoted intensified control over civil society, has evolved an extensive internal security apparatus, and supports “anti-terrorism” laws that have granted broad powers to regulate opposition to the regime. The military has supported a political system that promotes governance by the political-military elite: Egypt’s Emergency Laws and current protest “regulation” laws provide a glimpse of

\(^{68}\) https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/faq/egyptian-military.
The extensive control that the military possesses in government and legislation. 7. The military is devotedly nationalist and adheres to the Nasserist legacy. 8. The Egyptian military has been strongly supported by Egypt’s American ally, through its military aid annually, including American-manufactured weapons and equipment. The United States has favoured regime stability in Egypt and values a regional ally that maintains peace with Israel; but both the United States and Israel are viewed with suspicion and sometimes hostility by many Egyptians. 9. Despite these factors, the Egyptian military is popular among the wider Egyptian public. Unlike the police and other state security forces, which were reviled during the Mubarak presidency, the Egyptian military is regarded as a military “of the people.” Mandatory military service ensures that most families have personal ties to the military and view its branches as being made up of Egyptian sons and brothers. Arab Spring protestors welcomed the incursion of the military, viewing it as a counterforce to the state security forces that violently attacked demonstrations. Practically, the upheaval of 2011 initiated another phase in the militarisation of Egypt.69 While the police were considered to be corrupt servants of the discredited regime, the armed forces were celebrated as guardians of stability. 10. The military has remained powerful since the Arab Spring in 2011. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, a committee of military leaders that convenes in times of crisis, led the unpopular transition government following Mubarak’s removal, and the military steered the popular coup that unseated post-Arab Spring president Muhammad Morsi, during the summer of 2013. The post-Morsi transitional government was led by Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the Commander in Chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces and a Morsi appointee (announcing his candidature for the presidency in 2014, Sisi still wore his army uniform, only subsequently did he retire from the military to run as a... civilian).

In a snap referendum held in late April 2019, 88.83% of voters approved a package of constitutional amendments. Aside from extending the term of the president-former general, new articles adopted and included in the constitution will further enshrine the military’s role in all aspects of civil and political affairs. The revised Article 200, for instance, asserts the military as the “guardian and protector” of the “the constitution and democracy and the fundamental make-up of the country and its civil nature, the gains of the people and the rights and freedoms of individuals”. Likewise, while under international law the jurisdiction of military courts must be limited to trying military personnel only, the revised Article 204 now enables military court trials for civilians even when they have not committed a direct offense against military buildings or army personnel, as the Constitution of 2014 previously stated.70

Against this backdrop, it is noteworthy to underline again that after ousting Morsi from the presidential office, al-Sisi has surrounded himself with former military men, just as Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak have done in the past. For

instance, he has appointed 19 generals as provincial governors on top of the existing six, who had been appointed immediately after the coup in August 2013. Twenty-seven of Egypt’s current provinces are now exclusively governed by military or police generals. Egypt observers and analysts state that such a policy has brought back Mubarak’s trademark tactics, to use the governorship position to cultivate the loyalty of top officers while extending the grip of his police state. Also, similarly with his predecessors, the current Egyptian President has forged a hierarchical structure in which military officers occupy and control the presidential establishment. All this with the risk of resurrecting the autocratic status quo, contrary to the Egyptian masses’ hopes nurtured by the Arab Spring of 2011.

Undoubtedly, each of the above-mentioned features of the Egyptian military picture can be further nuanced, a justified enterprise by the very scale and substantive nature of what is today’s one of the strongest armies in MENA and the world. For Robert Springborg and F.C. “Pink” Williams, two experts in security and military affairs, “the Egyptians Army Forces (EAF) have been a slumbering giant since the late 1970s, but appear to be awakening”71, a process driven by a mix of internal and external factors: intensified domestic and regional security threats; pressure from Washington to redirect and improve the military’s performance; additional external support for the Egyptian military, provided especially by Russia and France.

It is not by hazard that the first factor mentioned here is related to the deterioration of Egypt’s security: the 2011 uprising stimulated the rise of violent extremism, initially in the Sinai Peninsula and subsequently elsewhere in Egypt, including the capital Cairo and the western frontier with Libya. This new challenge required the Egyptian military to substantially upgrade both its counterterror and border control capacities, the latter also implied by concerns over the Sudanese border, resulting from deteriorating bilateral relations and conflicting claims over the Hala’ib Triangle area, in the most south-eastern corner of the Egyptian territory. The Comprehensive Operation Sinai 2018 was launched, an intensified and of ample magnitude counterterror campaign in the Sinai, with participation of the army and its special forces, the navy and air force. Specifically, during all this time, until the moment of writing, the Egyptian Armed Forces have been announcing that, on both the Northeast and the Western strategic directions of the area, they killed dozens and dozens of “terrorists”, destroyed hundreds of shelters and various vehicles belonging to the same “terrorists”, and seized many tons of hashish and millions of drug tablets. In parallel, the Egyptian authorities implemented development projects in the region, with the direct involvement of the military, which concomitantly had to defuse hundreds of explosive devices and seize different weapons (automatic rifles, guns, Rocket-propelled grenades/RPGs).

Meanwhile, almost weekly, more Egyptian military personnel have continued to be the target of the “militants”, some being “martyred” (killed), suggesting the operation’s shortcomings despite assistance from French satellite imagery

71 Robert Springborg, F. C. “Pink” Williams, op. cit.
and Israeli airstrikes. Equally relevant is the reality that, “Sinai, in particular, has been a staging ground for militants operating in Egypt for decades. It is also believed to be home to the Islamic State’s Egyptian branch, which has been primarily targeting civilians and security forces.” It is against this backdrop that a landmark $15 billion natural-gas deal, signed in 2018, which was supposed to begin flowing gas from Israel to Egypt, across the North Sinai, was faced with concerns about security threats from the very armed militants spread along the trajectory of the pipeline. Egypt was supposed to begin importing Israeli gas in March 2019, providing an international outlet for Israel’s burgeoning fossil-fuel business. The accord was also meant to mark a thaw in decades of cool relations between the two neighbours. A previous Israel-Egypt gas deal collapsed in 2012 because North Sinai militants forced the closure of the natural gas pipeline.

A package of other securities challenges – the increased human smuggling across the Mediterranean and the need to protect newly discovered gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean and further to the South-East, in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden – makes in particular the need for heightened maritime surveillance. Hence, the importance of upgrading Egypt’s relatively weak naval capacities, needed also in the face of growing regional competition. Against this backdrop, the Egyptian military acquired the Alexandria shipyard from the public sector in 2003, and since 2014, has invested $280 million in upgrading it. This has enhanced the navy’s maintenance capacities, which previously had been heavily dependent upon U.S. contractors. A 2015 acquisition from France enabled the Egyptian navy to station a Mistral-class carrier, able to hold sixteen helicopters, in the Mediterranean off the Sinai and another one in the Red Sea. In addition, three French corvettes were to be built in the Alexandria shipyard, the first having been launched in September 2018. Shortly after signing the deal with France, Egypt announced the purchase of fifty Russian KA-52 Alligator attack helicopters, originally intended by Moscow for the Mistral-class carriers then blocked by the Western arms embargo. Simultaneous with the purchases from France and Russia was an acquisition from Germany of four new submarines, equipped with weapons systems using both torpedoes and missiles, as well as the latest navigation and communication systems, which can ensure the safety and security of the country’s coasts and regional and national waters.

Eventually, Egypt has been able to proceed to the formation of the Southern Fleet Command, aiming to secure Egypt’s Eastern coastline and ensure the safe navigation of maritime traffic through the Strait of Bab al-Mandeb and the Suez Canal. According to Global Firepower, Egypt currently has the sixth strongest navy in the world. A highly commendable evolution given the growing competition and tension in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa regions. Of course, before anything else Egypt should be determined to safeguard traffic to the Suez Canal.

its economic lifeline. The recently discovered Zohr gas field, within Egypt’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Mediterranean Sea, the largest to ever be found in the area and believed to contain as much as 30 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, provides another rationale for strengthening the country’s naval capabilities.

To Egypt’s south, its navy’s increased projection into the Red Sea coincides with Ethiopia’s challenge to Egypt’s hydro-hegemony over the Nile Basin. Tensions between the two countries have risen over the use of Nile River water and Ethiopia’s decision to build Africa’s biggest hydroelectric dam on the river. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) will be able to undermine the hydro-political status quo that for decades gave Egypt a disproportionate weight in regional politics. Treaties made in 1929 and 1959 give Egypt a right to most of the Nile’s water, and the country relies almost totally on the river for irrigation and drinking water. Developments in the Nile Basin have catapulted water security to the top of Cairo’s foreign policy agenda in the past decade. Analysts have noted that Egypt’s new Rafale fighter would put the Renaissance Dam within striking range, although surface-to-air missiles near the GERD will make an actual strike risky. Negotiations have remained deadlocked, but the rhetoric of a military option has been toned down.

The upgrading in the various sectors of the Egyptian military wouldn’t have been possible without the fact that Egypt has always hedged its bets regarding foreign suppliers and has been willing to accept the logistical complications and higher expense that come with operating and maintaining multiple weapons systems. Since the President (general) Sisi’s regime took power, Egypt has placed major weapons orders with France, Russia, and Germany. According to the SIPRI 2018 Yearbook, France now ranks as Egypt’s main source of weapons, followed by Russia and with the US in the third place. “The fact is the Egyptian-US armaments programme no longer meets Egypt’s needs following regional upheavals and the collapse of neighbouring Arab states. Washington’s suspension of Apache helicopter and spare parts contracts during the period immediately following the 30 June 2013 Revolution made it clear that Egypt must have alternative options and Cairo is keen to remain apart from the jockeying for position among international powers.”

Of course, the United States would continue to feed the Egyptian needs regarding essential army needs. Once again, beginning September 2019, the US State Department has decided to release the annual $1.3 billion in military aid to Egypt, despite some of the Washington institutions’ permanent observations on the situation of the human rights in Egypt. In a memo sent to Congress, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo waived human rights conditions that apply to hundreds of millions of dollars in US aid, calling Egypt “important to the national security interests of the United States, a country which provides access to the Suez Canal, overflight rights, fighting terror in the Sinai desert as well as along its borders with Libya and Sudan”.

74 Ahmed Eleiba, In pursuit of security, Al-Ahram Weekly, Issue 1437 (4-10 April 2019).
Notably, the Egyptian head of state pushes for a long overdue transformation of the half-a-million-strong Egyptian Armed Forces (EAF) from a Soviet-style military – organized and equipped to fight a major land battle against Israel – into a more mobile and diversified military, a complex process involving overhauls of Egypt’s military doctrine, its weapons procurement, and its interoperability with allied forces. In this context one can understand Egypt’s recent military spending binge – the country has seen the purchase of helicopter carriers, warships, submarines and other military vehicles worth billions of US dollars. The fact that such an evolution would also reflect the present regime’s ambition to return Egypt to its former position as a regional leader, is not a mere speculation. The Egyptian independent political analyst Nael Shama considers that President Sisi is aiming to convey that military strength is required in the present and future for Egypt’s interests, hence the great deal of emphasis placed on increasing Egypt’s military might, despite the economic problems that Egypt is going through: “Egypt’s foreign influence has been very limited, particularly in terms of its foreign financial influence, but it is now striving to exert its military influence abroad. The government may be expanding its naval might as Egypt has traditionally held sway over the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, and has long considered the Red Sea to be its backyard, of sorts.”\footnote{https://madamasr.com/en/2017/04/20/news/u/egypt-receives-2nd-german-military-submarine/} In other words, “at the most basic level, Egypt’s recent military build-up must be seen as a means of balancing its economic weakness with military prowess, and of avoiding dependence on the largesse of wealthy Arab states, notably Saudi Arabia. But the current accumulation of military force is not only about countering the hegemony of the Gulf states and securing Egypt’s strategic independence, but also about Egypt’s military capability at home and abroad, as a way to fill the vacuum in the region”.\footnote{https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/rationale-egypt-s-military-spending-spree/}

The Egyptian forces are increasing their participation in multinational exercises. There is also some notable progress regarding EAF force deployments and joint operations. In the first instance, the air force and the military’s special forces have intermittently operated in Libya since the fall of strongman Muammar Qaddafi and have conducted major exercises along the border. Joint air operations with the UAE have been conducted over Eastern Libya since at least 2014. The Egyptian navy has engaged in joint operations with Saudi, Emirati, and American naval forces off the Yemeni coast in the Red Sea.

It is worthwhile mentioning the Egyptian-Israeli security cooperation after the ousting of President Morsi in 2013. Mutual trust has now reached such a level that the Netanyahu government approved the deployment of thousands of Egyptian troops near the joint border (in “contravention” to the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty) to defeat the Islamist insurgency in Sinai. Notably, the UAE allows Egypt to use surveillance drones, made by the Abu Dhabi-based Adcom, in the Sinai Peninsula.

Establishing full control over the peninsula is a shared Egyptian-Israeli-Saudi interest, considering not only security aspects – fighting jihadist groups and
controlling Hamas — but also planned regional mega-projects. It stabilizes the Sinai functions as a confidence building measure between the three states and facilitates further cooperation. All these do not mean that the Islamic State affiliate in Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula won’t continue to pose a threat, particularly since the group’s ideology has inspired so-called lone-wolf attacks with little if any connection to its leadership. Consequentially, as President Sisi stated at the beginning of October 2019, if the Comprehensive Operation Sinai was due to last for three months, “however, imposing full control upon Sinai is a long-term process that requires further cooperation from the side of Sinai dwellers.”

Meanwhile, in what has been a unique mark for the EAF, the Egyptian military is continuing its “traditional” involvement in the country’s economy.

In an indicator of the size of the military’s involvement in the economy, the Armed Forces spokesperson stated, in September 2019, that the military is currently administering 2300 projects nationwide that directly employ 5 million civilians. Taking into account that the total labour force in Egypt is around 26 million workers, then the military directly employs 19.2% of the labour force. This makes the military the second largest employer in the country, after the public sector that employs 5.6 million. Although the military institution maintains strict confidentiality on information, data and figures related to its economic activity, yet experts have estimated the proportion of the army’s economy at about 50% of the State economy, while others said it was between 45% and 60%.

In this context, experts questioned the statements repeated by Egypt’s President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, that the size of the army’s economy is no more than 1.5 percent of the country’s economy (a Minister of industry and commerce under former President Hosni Mubarak said in an interview with The New York Times that the army controlled 10 percent of the Egyptian economy).

Besides being now in charge of executing some of Egypt’s mega projects, as those related to the erection of the new capital-city of Egypt, the country’s Armed Forces continue to be active in road and housing construction, military and consumer-goods production, tourism, resort and historical-monuments management, and real-estate projects. In this context, the Egyptian Armed forces were granted “distinguished tax concessions as well as other commercial and social privileges.” Egypt military’s companies, hotels and military social clubs are known for being exempted from state newly-imposed Value Added Taxes (VAT), real estate taxes and import customs. Consequence: all those facilities “had incurred American and Western investors billions of US dollars in losses.” From the internal perspective, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned, in September 2017, that “Egypt private sector’s development and job creation may be hampered by the economic involvement of the defence ministry.”

---

78 https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/2/75759%E2%80%99%27We-are-a-capable-army%E2%80%99-Egypt-s-president-on-threats.
Notably, there exists an expanded institutional framework dealing with the Egyptian army’s participation to the economy. Military commercial ventures fall under one of three main bodies at the central governmental level: the Ministry of Military Production, the Ministry of Defence, and the Egyptian government-owned Arab Organization for Industrialization, plus three other major structures at the national level: The National Service Projects Organization, The National Organization for Military Production and The Armed Forces Engineering Authority.

As an overall analysts’ conclusion: the Egyptian military economy has gone beyond the military needs to include all kinds of products and services. Hence a more general public feeling – even not completely founded – that the Egyptian armed forces dominate almost all economic sectors and service sectors. As a particular case: ‘The Egyptian army is making a fortune in Sinai’81.

As for the present state of domestic weapons manufacturing in Egypt – nicknamed “Military Inc.” – analysts are noticing that, “Much of the momentum that Egypt built up in the second half of the 20th century in its drive towards military self-sufficiency has since been lost. Despite its status as the longest-standing arms manufacturer of the Arab states, Egypt maintains low rates of indigenous manufacturing and has plateaued as a ‘third-tier’ arms producer. With low-tech production capabilities and limited demands for technology transfers, Egypt’s economic motivations to maintain its industrial base outweigh its strategic ambitions. Egypt fulfils its strategic needs primarily through diversifying its sources of arms imports. Its factories therefore exist to support its arms imports rather than to ensure independence from foreign suppliers. Egyptian military factories produce equipment under licence, assemble equipment based on imported kits, or produce equipment with little or no military relevance.’82 One of the most long-standing licensed production cases in Egypt is seen in the case of locally assembling the M1A1 Abrams main battle tank (MBT), as part of a US military assistance deal.

As for the three-tier activities in the Egyptian so-called military industry, it means that only a part is properly dedicated to military items per se, others are potentially dual-use items or just non-military items. Products of each of the three tiers have been exported, so that, for instance, Egyptian small arms and light weapons (SALW) can make their way into conflict zones (many Egyptian SALW are derived from Soviet equipment, for example the Egyptian self-propelled anti-aircraft guns (SPAAG) converted from Soviet howitzers and guns, also the 122mm Saqr multiple rocket launchers (MRL).83

Finally, we are just witnessing the intersecting, on the one hand, between the old historic mark of Egypt as the country of Pharaohs and Pharaonic projects, with, on the other hand, Egypt’s re-emerging military might, as the new headquarters of the Ministry of Defense has been projected and is under construction in the

82 Florence Gaub and Zoe Stanley-Lockman, pp. 31-38.
83 Ibid.
new administrative capital of the country (itself under construction, some 35 km East of the present capital, Cairo): “Referred to as the “Octagon” because it is made up of the eight outer “nested” octagon-shaped buildings, with two more at its hub, and what looks like the ability to add another two within that hub in the future. The hub and spoke designs have been implemented with plenty of additional land for other installations and facilities to be added inside its second and third outer rungs, as well. The layout is also designed to organize and reflect the central command apparatus, with the outer octagons housing each of the country’s four service branches – the Egyptian Army, Egyptian Navy, Egyptian Air Force, and Egyptian Air Defense Forces. So, it’s something of a grand manifestation of the Egyptian Ministry of Defence’s organizational chart as much as it is an architectural statement. Regardless, from space, the project looks like an alien base out of a science fiction movie.”


state, would be directly faced with reverberations of people’s feelings: “Egyptians know corruption is rampant. They see multibillion-dollar, white elephant projects – a new capital in the desert outside Cairo, an unnecessary expansion of the Suez Canal – as they struggle even more to survive. It’s a state of affairs that makes even the mightiest, most confident ruler vulnerable to an explosion of popular discontent.”

The Two Non-Arab Military Powers Integrative to MENA’s Military Tapestry – Israel and Iran, Deeply Opposed to One Another, as well as to the Arab Pole

Motto:
“The region’s two real remaining military powers are Israel and Iran.”

Project Syndicate, Oct 21, 2019

Israel – A Distinctive Military Pole in the MENA region. A Synopsis Centered on the One Quality Presently Epitomizing Israel Defence Forces (IDF): “Hyper-force”

Motto:
“Ben-Gurion constructed what amounts to a militarized society and a civilianized army, under a military elite that remains wary of putting down the sword. …In a country where every tier of society is connected to the army, it is not clear where the army ends, and the government begins. …Israel stands as a modern Sparta in a region of weak states. Its leaders live on the knife’s edge – still – between striking a historic and humanistic bargain with the Muslims or fighting them in another round of war.”

“In the stormy seas of the Middle East, we have proven that we protect Israel as an island of stability and safety.”

Benjamin Netanyahu, Israeli PM

“Israel is a country in a perpetual state of existential war. Israel has spent the last decade preparing for its next ground war.”

The National Interest, October 24, 2019

“Israel is a strong country and its strategic position is better than ever. Nevertheless, Israel still faces significant security challenges. Israel must always be ready for war. This is the ultimate test for Israeli society, too.”

The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS), Oct. 2019

Military Power Ranking, in MENA – 3, in the world – 16; Military Personnel: Active – 170,000, Reserve – 445,000; Defense Budget (Billion $) – 19.6*; Aircraft Strength – 595; Tanks – 2,760; Armored Vehicles – 6,541; Rocket


The primary role/position that “the words” and “the narratives”/texts have been playing in Jewish history and civilization, and implicitly for today’s State of Israel, is well known. A necessary lecture in this regard is the inspirational book JEWS AND WORDS (Yale University Press, 2012), where the two authors, Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger, say that “It is in the Word – Spoken or Written, Recited or Cited – that one can find the true key of the Jewish continuity.” Against this backdrop, we have strived to seek an adequate “wording” capable to meaningfully reflect the actual state of the Israeli Military and the specificity it has been bringing to the overall MENA’S MILITARY TAPESTRY. And such a wording could be: ISRAEL – THE ONE RIGHTFULLY/LEGITIMATELY CHEST-THUMPING MILITARY POWER IN THE MENA REGION.

Of course, academic and strictly military texts are using wordings engulfed in technicalities proper to the domain in case. It is the respective narrative that would reveal “the One Quality Epitomizing the Present State of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF)” and that is that “The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are the most powerful and technologically advanced military in the Middle East… (Today’s) IDF strategy recognizes the changing character of war (and) includes elements of shadow war, something it calls the Campaign between Wars. Israel is leaving the conventional war behind and is stepping into the future, joining Russia and China.”

In a slightly different wording, but substantively identical qualification: “The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are widely respected as a cutting-edge military machine. The IDF is equipped with extremely lethal cyberwar capacity, eyes-on-the-world intel, star-wars level missile defence systems, a justly famous air force, and a small but superbly trained cadre of special forces troops.”

Notably, the experts from the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS), with uncontested military credentials, felt the need to introduce anyway a caveat: “Nevertheless, Israel still faces significant security challenges. Primary among the growing challenges are the hegemonic ambitions of Iran – which is seeking nuclear weapons, alongside attendant threats to Israel’s civilian home front from the Iranian regime and its proxies. In addition, for the foreseeable future, Israel faces a violent and intractable conflict with the Palestinians. Therefore, Israel must always be ready for war. This is the ultimate test for Israeli society, too.”


91 Zev Chafets, Israel’s Military Is World-Class. But Is It Ready? Two conflicting verdicts on Israel’s military are stirring old anxieties, Bloomberg, September 24, 2018.

Stronger caveats, even if keeping a balanced approach, are expressed by other analysts: “Israel is still the dominant local power, but if it picks a fight with Iran or Hezbollah those drones and cruises will be headed its way. Israel relies on its “Iron Dome” anti-missile system, but while Iron Dome may do a pretty good job against the primitive missiles used by Hamas, mobile cruises and drones are another matter. While Israel could inflict enormous damage on any of its foes, the price tag could be considerably higher than in the past.”

Reaching a top position with the military power, in the region and the world at large, represents for Israel not at all a simple matter of “national pride, dignity and honour”. For “a nation having more History than Geography”, a factor invoked in many instances, including by the two above-mentioned Israeli authors, strong armed forces are the means to compensate the lack of “enough Geography”. With neither tactical nor strategic geographical depth, Israel’s home front has become its battlefront, pushing the geographical constraints beyond the red lines of endangering vital interests, up to daily survival, of the tried Jewish people.

Presently, Israel’s perception as a “mini superpower”/ hyper-power, is complemented by “10 Reasons No Nation Wants to Go to War with Israel”94, five of them related to Land Power, and the other five related to Air Power.

Thus, the Israeli Land Power has “five Israeli army weapons of war that no one in the Middle East would certainly want to tangle with in a fight”: (i). Merkava Main Battle Tanks, which were some of the first armoured vehicles equipped with active protection systems against guided missiles. (ii). Spike Missile System: is Israel’s one-design-fits-all anti-tank guided missile system, being mounted on everything from ground vehicles to Seraph (Apache) helicopters, naval vessels, and drones. (iii). Namer Armored Personnel Carrier (being built from older tank model Merkava Mk.I tank with the turret and main gun removed, and an enormous amount of armour applied to the front glacis, sides and side skirts). (iv). Tavor Assault Rifle (Israel’s second generation of indigenous rifle, can accept standard NATO 30 round magazines). (v). “Smasher” Multiple Rocket Launcher System (Israel has 48 “Smasher” systems. Currently Israel is limited to rockets with a 40 kilometre range, but new 150 kilometre range rockets are in the pipeline. Such rockets will give Israeli artillery, positioned in Haifa, the ability to strike Damascus).

The Israeli Air Force (IAF) has an estimated 648 aircraft of all types, manned and serviced by 35,000 active duty personnel. An additional 24,500 reservists can be called up during wartime. At total mobilization, the IAF enjoys a comfortable ratio of 91 personnel for every one aircraft, far above the Egyptian Air Force’s 30 to one ratio and the Royal Saudi Air Force’s 38 to one. Types of aircraft: (i). F-15A/C Baz (“Falcon”) (progressively upgraded to the F-15C standard to provide air superiority for Israel. Baz fighters, would undoubtedly fly top cover for any Israeli air strikes against Iran). (ii). F-15I Ra’am (“Thunder”) (could have air to air weaponry, which includes short-range Python missiles and

medium-range AMRAAM missiles, and air to ground weaponry including laser guided bombs, Joint Directed Attack Munitions, and Popeye missiles). (iii) Israel’s F-16 force is the largest outside of the U.S. Air Force, including 99-100 of the F-16I Sufa (Storm) and 243 older F-16 A/B/C fighters (in any Israeli attack on Iran, the F-16I fighters will likely fulfil two roles: first knocking out Iran’s air defences, and then supplementing the F-15I in striking targets on the ground). (iv) AH-64 Seraph (“Winged Serpent”): the Israeli Army is equipped with 42 AH-64A Apache attack helicopters, the upgrades including new electronic warfare, anti-missile protection systems, battle management and communications systems). (v) Jericho III Intercontinental Ballistic Missile: is the third missile to serve as Israel’s land-based nuclear deterrent and is believed to have a range between 4,800 and 6,000 kilometres, capable of carrying a 1,000 kilogram warhead payload. A range of 4,800 kilometres would enable it to strike from Morocco to eastern India, while an 6,500 kilometre range would enable it to target as far as Western China.

The above-reviewed 10 item-list appeared intended to demonstrate why Israel has been enjoying a qualitative military edge over the rest of the Middle East, respectively why time and again during its short existence, Israel has proven that it has the most powerful military in the Middle East, at the intersection of superior training and organization of its military and personnel with the most effective army equipment.

Now comes a 5 item-List which reflects another critical dimension of the military situation in the region: “Nowhere is the gap between Israel and its neighbours larger than in the air”, even more, “Pilot to pilot, airframe to airframe, the Israeli air force is the best in the world”. The usefulness of this new List, even if slightly overlapping with the second part of the previous List, is increased as it is reflecting in more detail the exact situation, including the fact that “Israel’s air dominance goes beyond the Air Force, and also includes its air and missile defence systems as well as its missile capabilities.”

The five weapons of war which help Israel dominate the skies are: (i). F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. In December 2017, Israel became the first country in the region to have a fifth-generation fighter jet. What sets the F-35 apart from other aircraft used by the Israeli Air Force is that it can perform the functions of many different types of planes and act as a force multiplier for other weapon systems. IAF sources called the Joint Strike Fighter a “super intelligence collector.” The intelligence it collects while flying undetected can also be transmitted to other Israeli forces on the ground and in the air, enhancing these systems’ lethality. By 2028, Israel will operate fifty F-35s. (ii). The F-15 has often served as the IAF’s workhorse since Israel first purchased the plane in the 1970s. The F-15 was initially designed as an air-superiority system, but Israel has masterfully transformed it into a do-it-all plane. Thus, while still effective in air-to-air combat, Israel has consistently used it to strike ground targets, as with recent attacks in Syria. (iii).
The F-16: Although Israel doesn’t officially acknowledge it, the Jewish state is the only country in the region that boasts nuclear weapons. This alone gives it a major advantage over its neighbours. Jerusalem also has a nuclear triad – meaning it can deliver nuclear weapons from the ground, air or sea. That’s where the F-16 comes in, as that plane is widely believed to serve as the main component of the air leg of Israel’s nuclear arsenal. Israel has purchased more than two hundred F-16s, and many of these perform conventional missions. (iv). Jericho-II: while the F-16 serves as the air leg of Israel’s nuclear triad, its ground-based capability is centred around Jericho-II missiles. Based on the Shavit space launch rocket, the Jericho-II has an estimated range of about 1,500 kilometres, although some analysts claim it can actually fly about twice that far. Regardless of its range, the Jericho-II is believed to be fairly accurate. (v). Iron Dome: Israel has consistently operated on the premise that the best defence is a good offense. Still, in recent decades it has been beefing up its air and missile defence systems, particularly to deal with threats posed by nonstate actors like Hezbollah and Hamas. The best example of this is the much-vaunted Iron Dome missile-defence system. First introduced in 2011, the Iron Dome is Israel’s last line of defence in intercepting rockets, missiles and mortars close to the ground. It has claimed considerable success in Israel’s conflicts with Hamas in 2012 and 2014. According to Raytheon, which helps make one of its interceptors, Iron Dome is the “world’s most used missile defence system, intercepting more than 1,500 targets with a greater than 90 percent success rate since being fielded in 2011.” In fact, it has been so successful that the United States is now purchasing its own version. Although the U.S. homeland doesn’t face the same kind of missile threats as Israel, the Iron Dome system is mobile, and would be forward deployed with U.S. troops around the world.

In comparison with the above evaluations, we have to say that the much-cherished Israeli Iron Dome’s presence in the MENA’s Military Tapestry looks a little bit more “nuanced”. Hence a commentary entitled Israel’s Iron Dome ‘Shield’ is Impressive, But Not Impenetrable. Hamas made sure of that. In May 2019, Hamas launched seven hundred rockets into Israel on one day alone. In its turn, Hezbollah is building precision missiles able to level Israel’s vital infrastructures and civilian targets. Given the statistical errors of Israel’s missile interception systems – the Arrow (long-range), David’s Sling (medium-range) and Iron Dome (short-range) – the results will be distressful. Hopefully, the arguments brought to light by commentators will easily and productively be digested by the Israeli specialists, knowing that a significative element belonging to the word-based Jewish civilization is the acceptance of contradiction, of contradictory debates, or, as expressed by the tandem Amos Oz – Fania Oz-Salzberger: “The Israelite and Jewish habit is to debate everything and to quarrel with everybody: with himself, with the friends, with the foes, and, sometime, with God”.  

---

97 Amos Oz, Fania Oz-Salzberger, op. cit., p. 228.
Recent geopolitical shifts, not less those connected with the vacillations in the US Administration’s positions regarding the American troops’ further presence/withdrawal from some of the critical points in MENA region, seemingly have been forcing Israel to change its plans, rethink its concepts and prepare for scenarios that were shelved long ago. One of them is the possibility of fighting a war on more than one front in the very near future. As announced by local press, on Oct. 10, Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, IDF’s then chief of staff, met with Israeli Finance Minister to discuss the army’s call for a significant increase in its budget so that it can prepare for an “all-out war scenario” with Hezbollah, the Syrian regime, Iran, Gaza (with Islamic Jihad dragging Hamas into the fighting) and maybe even a few others.

Against this backdrop, it appears that, if Israel is the most protected country in the world when it comes to steep dive missiles, the problem is with Iran’s cruise missiles that, so far, no system can effectively shoot them down. While Israel does have Patriot missile batteries that can defend against cruise missiles, they don’t seem to be enough. Israel’s advanced military industries have recently been ordered to increase their efforts to find a better solution, but that will take time.

Indeed, the Israeli weapons manufacturing industry has come to constitute the backbone of the country’s Military. This is also the foundation of important cooperation activities with Western partners, as well the source of substantive Israeli exports. In recent years, U.S.-Israeli cooperation has already helped achieve major advances in areas such as missile defence and anti-tunnel technologies. The United States is now adopting many Israeli systems to help protect U.S. forces in the field, including Iron Dome batteries for shooting down short-range rockets and Trophy armour protection for defeating anti-tank missiles. In August 2019, Israeli and U.S. missile defence agencies just completed, together with their leading defence industries, a successful test of the new Arrow 3 interceptor. While the Israeli Air Force declared the system operational almost a year ago, these tests now serve as a clear indication to enemies – notably Iran – that Israel’s multi-layer missile defence system has the country covered.

A particular case came recently with the big volume of Chinese investments in Israel, which are drawing attention not necessarily by their scale but by their very targeting: the gamut of cutting-edge technologies, from big data and artificial intelligence to cybersecurity, robotics, autonomous vehicles, and beyond. Enough to disturb the American Administration. At the core of the U.S. concerns being the enormous priority that China has placed on acquiring advanced technologies which could very well catalyse its military modernization and economic expansion at the expense of the United States. Israel’s leaders are aware of the problem and the dangers it could pose to the U.S. – Israel strategic partnership if left unattended. As a first step, they’ve already privately assured Washington that Huawei will have no role in building Israel’s 5G telecommunications infrastructure – a top U.S. priority.

---

In April 2019, three months into his term, the new Israeli army chief laid out the framework of a multi-year program known as “Readiness and Change,” for improving the Israeli military, focused on continuing and strengthening two existing trends within the military: greater distribution of technology, including greater use of artificial intelligence throughout the military and better cooperation between its various branches and units, including merging combat units. Based on that framework, in October 2019, Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Aviv Kohavi unveiled his multi-year plan to make the military deadlier, faster, better trained and more capable of defending the Jewish state against the threats facing it today: “In the Northern and Southern arenas the situation is tense and precarious and poised to deteriorate into a conflict despite the fact that our enemies are not interested in war. Considering this, the IDF has been in an accelerated process of preparation” for a continuing threatening strategic and tactical regional military landscape, including especially:

– The tensions with the Hamas-run Gaza Strip continue to pose a threat to Israel, with rounds of violent conflict breaking out several times over the last year. Close to 2,000 rockets were fired from the blockaded coastal enclave towards Israel by Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas in the last year alone, killing five Israeli civilians, the highest number of civilian casualties since Operation Protective Edge in 2014. Ongoing violence in the West Bank by Palestinians has also killed several civilians and IDF soldiers.

– But, the “central strategic challenge of the State of Israel lies in the northern arena” where Iran continues to consolidate its forces in Syria and work with Hezbollah on its precision missile project. “In both cases, Syria and Lebanon, this is an Iranian-led effort, using the territory of countries with very limited governments”. For years, Iran has been trying to establish a 1,200 km.-length land bridge from Tehran to the Mediterranean. This summer, a new border crossing opened between Syria and Iraq, making it easier for Iran to expedite the transfer of weapons from Tehran to groups like Hezbollah in Syria or Lebanon. All this has been a major concern for Israel, which since 2013 has been carrying out a “war-between-wars” campaign aimed at preventing Iran from reaching its goal. Israeli officials have warned that Iran is also attempting to entrench itself in Iraq, a mainly Shia country, as it did in Syria, where it has established and consolidated a parallel security structure. Israel’s hinted, in August 2019, at Israel’s role in several strikes in the country saying that “Iran has no immunity, anywhere.”

– In the opinion of the Israeli Head of the IDF, for many years Hezbollah has taken the State of Lebanon hostage and established its own army there. It is Hezbollah that “actually determines the security policy” of Beirut. While preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear bomb remains Israel’s top priority, thwarting Hezbollah’s precision missile project has become the second top objective.

Besides those two goals, for Israel there is also a third priority, that of preventing Iranian entrenchment in various Middle Eastern countries. Due to developments
and situational assessments, it was decided that the precision missile project would be given high priority because of the immediate danger it poses to Israel. Israelis cannot afford to be surrounded by thousands of precision missiles that could land and harm the State of Israel.”

Eventually, “Israel’s three targets have one address – Iran, Iran’s Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani being the address for two of them”. With Israel facing multiple arenas and enemies at the same time, the IDF has released its new multi-year plan which will focus on improving the military’s defensive and offensive capabilities.

The plan – dubbed Momentum, or Tenufa in Hebrew – will see huge investments in developing the IDF’s arsenals, including increasing its collection of mid-sized drones, obtaining large numbers of precision-guided missiles from the United States and purchasing additional air defence batteries. The military will also focus its training exercises more heavily toward urban combat, as it believes that its soldiers are more likely to fight in cities and towns than in the open fields where many drills are currently held. The plan will formally go into effect on January 1, 2020. The IDF’s guiding principle in developing the Momentum Plan was that a future war must be won as quickly as possible, requiring the military to have at ready a concrete list of targets, the weapons needed to hit them and the ability to do so rapidly. That view comes from the fact that the IDF’s primary foe in the region – the Iran-backed Lebanese terror group Hezbollah – maintains a massive arsenal of some 130,000 rockets and missiles that it would be able to use to attack Israeli strategic sites and population centres. In any future war, the IDF believes it would have to quickly defeat Hezbollah to cut down on the amount of time that the terrorist militia would have to attack Israel.

The army chief intends also to purchase additional Hermes-450 drones, a mid-sized model that according to foreign reports can be used for both intelligence-gathering and attack operations. The IDF will also obtain precision-guided missiles from the United States as part of the $3.8 billion a year Washington provides to Israel each year under the Memorandum of Understanding signed by former US president Barack Obama in 2016. These precision-guidedammunitions are key elements in allowing the IDF to effectively destroy an enemy’s weapons caches with less collateral damage. In addition to the offensive equipment, the military plans to invest in air defence systems to better protect the country’s key infrastructure and population centres. This is meant to include a new deployment strategy for existing air defences and establishing an eighth full-time Iron Dome system. (The military has additional batteries that are staffed in cases of emergency or heightened tensions.)

Iran as a Military Power in the MENA Region: A Synopsis centred on the One Quality Epitomizing the Present State and Operations of the Iranian Armed Forces (IAF) – Asymmetry

Motto:
“The Iranians have excelled at the art of asymmetric warfare. They work very hard to make sure that they don’t render Iran vulnerable to retaliation”.101

“Iran has a long history of testing its strength. But they never climb too high up the escalation ladder. At a certain point, when the world says enough, they come back down.”102

Military Power Ranking, in MENA – 2, in the world – 14; Military Personnel: Active – 523,000*, Reserve – 350,000; Defense Budget (Billion $) – 6.3; Aircraft Strength – 509; Tanks – 1,634; Armored Vehicles – 2,345; Rocket Projectors – 1,900*; Naval Assets – 398*; military expenditures: 5% of GDP (2017), country comparison to the world – 6.

*The highest positions in MENA
Military branches: Islamic Republic of Iran Regular Forces (Artesh): Ground Forces, Navy, Air Force (RIAF), Khatemolanbia Air Defense Headquarters; Ground Forces, Navy, Aerospace Force, Basij Paramilitary Forces (Popular Mobilization Army); Law Enforcement Forces (2019); Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Engelab-e Eslami, IRGC): protect Iran’s Islamic Revolution; spread Shia influence; internal security, including border control, law enforcement, and suppressing domestic opposition; controls country’s missiles and rockets: influence Iran’s politics and economy; Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Qods Force (IRGC-QF) – special operations: protect Iran’s Islamic Revolution; spread Shia influence; conduct clandestine overseas operations, often supporting other terrorist organizations (including Sunni groups like the Taliban when their goals align) with significant funding, logistics, training, or weaponry to commit terror attacks, either directly or through proxies; recruit, train, and equip foreign Islamic revolutionary groups throughout the Middle East.

Apparently, asymmetry is the name of the game regarding the profile, basic strategy and field operations of today’s Iranian Military. For an in-depth understanding of the Iranian Military from this particular perspective, one should put the asymmetry paradigm into the larger context corresponding to the case of Iran, with several landmarks along that journey:

History&Civilization: “Iran combined its challenge to modernity with the millennial tradition of a statecraft of exceptional subtlety. Of all the countries in the region, Iran has perhaps the most coherent sense on nation-hood and the

most elaborated tradition of national-interest-based statecraft. Among the states in the Middle East, Iran has perhaps the most coherent experience of national greatness and the longest and subtlest strategic tradition. It has preserved its essential culture for three thousand years... by the skilled manipulation of surrounding elements.”  

Geography: “Iran straddles the rich energy fields of both the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, as it also straddles the Middle East proper and Central Asia. No Arab country can make that claim. Because it is in the possession of the key geography of the Middle East – in terms of location, population, and energy resources, Iran is, therefore, fundamental to global geopolitics.”

Demography: the 80 plus million population allow Iran to have a total military personnel of more than half a million people (close to one million, adding the reserves to the active personnel).

Geopolitics: “On the external front, Iran still suffers from “strategic loneliness,” dating back to the Islamist takeover in 1979, and which is both externally and self-imposed. On one hand, Iran’s post-revolutionary foreign policy has alienated many of its neighbours, fearful of its “export of the revolution” doctrine, while its independent character has placed it at odds with the United States – a superpower largely intolerant of independent actors in strategically vital world regions. On the other hand, its isolation is self-imposed, given the Islamic Republic’s uncompromising revolutionary rhetoric directed against “the West” and some neighbouring states.” Such enmity has been routinely evoked in an effort to consolidate power domestically and the concrete situation has sustained a massive conventional military asymmetry to the detriment of Iran, which has been deprived of purchasing Western high-tech weaponry as a result of U.S.-led sanctions.

Surrounded by adversarial countries with U.S. military bases, as well as Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council’s huge arsenals, the Islamic Republic has relied on means of deterrence that include asymmetric warfare, a regional network of mostly non-state actors, and its ballistic missile program. A former CIA field officer, quoted in Henry Kissinger’s book, sees Iran as a “a superpower within the Middle East by virtue of a three-pronged strategy of proxy warfare, asymmetrical weapons and an appeal to the downtrodden, particularly legions of young and frustrated males.”

Ultimately, “the asymmetric warfare”/“asymmetrical weapons” appear to constitute the basic and lasting common-denominator for today’s regional and global dealings by Iran. And in a geopolitical space circumscribed by President

---

106 Ibid.
107 Henry Kissinger, op. cit., p. 281.
Trump’s “maximum pressure” strategy and the European Union call for “maximum restraint”, one can contemplate now an extremely complicated assemblage of the Iranian Army, strategy, doctrine and operations, as an integrative component of the overall MENA Military Tapestry.

Here is just a sketchy “portrait”\(^{108}\): Iran’s military forces total roughly 545,000 active personnel and 350,000 reserve personnel, including about 125,000 men within the IRGC, according to the Strauss Centre at the University of Austin, Texas. But while its total force strength is quite large, its quality is limited by an inability to purchase Western technology and severe economic sanctions. An examination of Iran’s conventional military forces reveals also a focus on access denial and power projection, with less emphasis on forces for ground warfare.

On the other hand, a review of key Iranian force elements shows Iran is making important progress in ballistic and cruise missiles, land-based air defences, weapons for the asymmetric naval-missile air forces it deploys to threaten maritime traffic in the Gulf region and supporting its other asymmetric forces and capabilities. Iran has focused on acquisition of missiles – surface-to-surface, surface-to-sea, sea-to-sea, surface-to-air and air-to-surface missiles. It also has concentrated on developing unmanned aerial vehicles, small- and mid-sized naval vessels, cyber capabilities, and nuclear capabilities. Weapons displayed in frequent Iranian military parades are all in the realm of access denial and force projection.

Instead, Iran’s weapons for classic military manoeuvring – manned aircraft, tanks and artillery – are increasingly outdated. There are no indications of efforts to modernize them, so that, in the end, for Iran, many weapons remain obsolete, obsolescent, or of relatively low quality. Many date back to the Shah or were worn during the fighting in the Iraq-Iraq War. Non-operational rates are often high, and sustainability in combat, low. Iran’s problems are made worse by a lack of easy or any access to upgrades for its systems, modern munitions, sensors, battle management, and IS&R equipment and sub-systems. These have a critical cumulative effect.

Another significant trend in Iran’s military build-up is the emphasis on domestic production. Almost all new weapons are of indigenous development or licensed production. The single exception to this rule has been the acquisition of Russian-made modern air defence systems; and even in this field, in line with the policy of indigenous production capability, Iran is working to develop air defence systems with similar capabilities in its own defence industry. Iran is also developing tanks and combat aircraft, but these projects do not seem to have priority. There are reasons to believe that Iran deliberately exaggerates its achievements in the development of weapons systems that are usually the prerogative of great powers.

As for Iran’s national security doctrine, it accords priority to securing the Islamic regime, to deterring foreign invasions, and to enhancing Iran’s capacity to influence other countries further afield. Nothing suggests plans for directly

invading other countries, and the threat of invasion by Iran’s neighbours is not considered to be serious.

Iran’s regional influence is to be secured through force projection and through the creation, arming and training of local militias in target countries (such as Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen). Iran’s conventional build up can be slowed down and disrupted (but not reversed) by economic, diplomatic and covert means. Expectedly, the American sanctions are bound to have an impact on Iran’s ability to produce its own weapons or acquire them.

As for a direct US-Iran military confrontation, “If the Iranians come after U.S. citizens, U.S. assets or U.S. military, we reserve the right to respond with a military action. They need to know that, it needs to be very clear.”109 Anyway, a military confrontation with the Islamic Republic, first with the US, would likely be complicated and unpredictable due the pursuit of asymmetrical warfare, the pillars of this strategy including naval forces, ballistic missiles and cyber capabilities, including the objective reality that Iran has so far been able to turn the asymmetry of absolute power into a tactical advantage. Also, any military confrontation with Iran is certain to further destabilize the Middle East and spill over into South Asia as well.

An alternative approach would suggest building consensus on the strategic and economic areas of mutual interest between the United States and Iran and support efforts to reconstruct the security architecture in the Middle East in a manner that would promote confidence building and cooperation among the regional players.110

Until then, the United States and Iran face off in the Persian Gulf and their asymmetric conflict risk spiralling out of control, with the dangerous horizon: if Iran was prevented from selling its oil, “no oil will be exported from the Persian Gulf.” More, when the US and Iran have played all their cards in the current game, a more dangerous one is likely to begin. That doesn’t necessarily have to mean open kinetic warfare. But third parties like Saudi Arabia and Israel could launch their own asymmetric attacks, and the US itself could turn to asymmetric warfare. All these actors have played this game before, though not on a grand scale.111 Iran has allies and proxies it could mobilize at the first sign of an escalation. They’re present in Iraq, which shares an almost 500-mile border with Saudi Arabia, and in border areas Yemen shares with the kingdom. If the groups escalate their activities in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia would be hemmed in from all sides by factions with weapons similar to the ones used in Abqaiq. This doesn’t mean that Iranian forces would be completed left outside the direct confrontation. Iranian coastal defences would likely render the entire Persian

---

Gulf off limits to U.S. Navy warships. Iran’s advanced surface-to-air missile defences would be a significant threat to U.S. pilots. And Iran’s arsenal of ballistic missiles and cruise missiles would put U.S military installations across the U.S. Central Command region at risk. The cost in U.S. casualties could be high. Iran has developed a wide range of missiles, from the Shahab 1 ballistic missile, with a range of 300 kilometres, to the Soumar cruise missile with a reported range of 2,500 kilometres that could strike targets anywhere in the Gulf, Israel, Egypt, Afghanistan, parts of southern and eastern Europe and elsewhere.

By the middle of 2019, a group of experts have elaborated a comprehensive scenario of the US-Iran military confrontation which could be found on MilitaryTimes site under the title “What war with Iran could look like”.

Post-Conclusions: Major Factors
Accentuating MENA Military Tapestry’s Particular Feature as a “Work in Progress”

Getting closer to the end of our journey, we would like to stress that MENA’s Military Tapestry cannot be seen and better understood but as “a work in progress” and that due, on the one hand, to permanent and inherent changes in its major landmarks and their structural components, state and non-state; and, on the other hand, because the Tapestry, as an ensemble, is under a host of factors, no less permanent and with a tangible impact. They function as dynamic sources which are inducing a multitude of nuances and changes worth observing, given their bearing on the overall military portrayal of the region.

1. The Dynamics of the military footprint of the quartet of outside powers with essential interests and tangible presence in MENA: the US, the Russian Federation, China and Turkey

1.1. The United States: the “traditional American military presence in MENA” – Quo Vadis?

1.2. The Russian Federation – Rapidly Recovering the Status of Regional Military Power in the Middle East

1.3. China – Militarily Entering the MENA Region at its own Pace

1.4. Turkey, the Neighbour State Acting These Days Militarily in the Levant’s Area, seemingly with Reactivated Reflexes of the Supposedly Defunct Ottoman Empire – Impervious to Consequences, Encroachment on International Law Norms Included

2. A Triad of other Factors Accentuating the MENA Military Tapestry’s Characteristic as a “Work in Progress”

2.1. The uninterrupted progress in the Military technology, with a special notice for the ever more operated drones (UAVs) from the national/ official Armies to the non-state armed groups

2.2. A Delayed “Arab Spring” and the impact on the Military – the present cases of Algeria and Lebanon

2.3. A particular angle in comprehensively contemplating the MENA Military Tapestry – observing the coming in and movements of Jihadist swarms of “Black Swans”.

SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abdul-Magd, Zeinab, Egypt’s Adaptable Officers: Power, Business, and Discontent, ISPI Analysis No. 265 – July 2014, in AA. VV., The Armed Forces in the Muslim World, ISPI Studies, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI);


Ardemagni, Eleonora, Armies ergo Nations: Projection and Conscription in the Arab Gulf States, The Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), 07 December 2017;


Brimelow, Ben, Saudi Arabia has the best military equipment money can buy – but it's still not a threat to Iran, “Business Insider”, Dec. 16, 2017;


Chafets, Zev, Israel’s Military Is World-Class. But Is It Ready? Two conflicting verdicts on Israel’s military are stirring old anxieties, Bloomberg, September 24, 2018;

Chandrasekaran, Rajiv, In the UAE, the United States has a quiet, potent ally nicknamed ‘Little Sparta’, “The Washington Post”, November 8, 2014;


Cooper, R., Trump might embroil American troops in a disastrous war to help a murderer, “TheWeek”, Sept. 19, 2019;

Cordesman Anthony H., with the Assistance of Nicholas Harrington Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy, The Arab Gulf States and Iran: Military Spending, Modernization, and the Shifting Military Balance, Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 12, 2018;
Eleiba, Ahmed, *In pursuit of security*, Al-Ahram Weekly, Issue 1437 (4-10 April 2019);
Holmes, Amy Austin, *Coup and Revolutions: Mass Mobilization, the Egyptian Military, and the United States from Mubarak to Sisi*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2019;
Keck, Zachary, *5 Weapons That Make It Clear Israel Dominates the Sky. Any Damascus or Tehran should worry*, “National Interest”, April 14, 2018;
Law, Bill, *The Gulf’s ‘Little Sparta’ has big military ambitions*, “Middle East Eye”, 20 April 2017;
Mandour, Maged, *Egypt: when the rivers run dry. Mohamed Ali’s videos exposed the corruption of the Egyptian regime, but the economic data tell an even darker story*, openDemocracy, 25 September 2019;
Mizokami, Kyle, *10 Reasons No Nation Wants to Go to War with Israel*, “The National Interest”, February 10, 2018;
Morgan, Wesley, *Pentagon sends new wave of troops to Saudi Arabia even as Trump calls for ending wars*, “Politico”, 10/11/2019;
Oz, Amos, Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Evreii si cuvintele*, Humanitas Fiction, Bucharest, 2015;
Perthes, Volker, *The US and Iran Are Playing a Dangerous Game*, Project Syndicate, Oct. 1, 2019;
Riedel, Bruce, *Saudi Arabia and the civil war within Yemen’s civil war*, The Brookings Institution, August 15, 2019;
Rogoway, Tyler, *Egypt’s New Ministry of Defense „Octagon” Complex Looks Like An Alien Base From Space. The sprawling and highly exotic installation is part of a new, fledgling administrative capital, “The Drive”,* Sept. 10, 2019;
Salama, Ingy, *The role of Egypt’s armed forces. A military empire*, Qantara de (a Project run by Deutsche Welle), 13.02.2018;
*Saudi Arabia Considers the Consequences of a Strike on Iran*, Stratfor Worldview, September 30, 2019;
Shama, Nael, *Commentary: Ambitious UAE flexes military muscle*, Reuters, August 27, 2018;
Vaez, Ali, ICC Project Director for Iran, in *Foreign Policy*, Sept. 16, 2019;