

MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2017/18

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Strategic Developments in the Eastern Mediterranean

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Background

The past year has been one of global changes that have had a significant effect on the Eastern Mediterranean.

It was a year in which a new US President came into office (1/2017), as well as a new President of France (5/2017). It was a year in which Europe reexamined the EU and its value, and is still doing so. It was a year of Islamic terror in Europe and the US. It also saw rising tension, both military and diplomatic, between the US and North Korea and continued fighting in Syria, which tilted in favor of the Syrian regime. It was a year in which Russia and Iran¹ achieved growing influence in what goes on in Syria and Iraq and in which China increased its influence in the South China Sea, the Persian Gulf and other locations and has also dramatically developed its military capabilities and its ability to project power from the sea.

The world that we knew has undergone major strategic shifts and changes that have direct and indirect effects on the Middle East and in particular the State of Israel and its maritime boundaries.

This survey touches on the global strategic changes and on the strategic changes in the maritime domain in the Mediterranean. On the global level, it will describe the main global strategic changes and processes that have had an effect on the Eastern Mediterranean, including developments in Southeast Asia and also in the US, Russia, China and Europe.

The survey will also include a description of the strategic changes in the Mediterranean, including those in Syria and the involvement there of Russia, Iran, Egypt, Turkey and others.

Strategic trends – the Eastern Mediterranean

The Eastern Mediterranean continued this year to be a focus of international attention and apparently this will continue in the coming year. In this region—and particularly in Syria and Lebanon—there are naval forces from a number of countries, including Russia, the US, France, Turkey and Italy, as well as from UNIFIL and NATO, whose objectives are to enforce international conventions and decisions (such as Security Council Resolution 1701), maintain a presence, intelligence gathering and projection of power.

1 Dumba Ami, Head of Intelligence: An unwanted escalation is possible in the North, from: www.israeldefense.co.il/he/node/30895 (8/2017). [Hebrew]

In this region, there remain unresolved disputes between states regarding the boundaries of the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), the use of energy resources and also fishing rights. The disputes that remain unresolved include the claim by Northern Cyprus (under Turkish sovereignty) to part of the economic waters around Cyprus, the claim of Turkey to part of Cyprus' EEZ and the claim of Lebanon that the agreement between Israel and Cyprus includes within it part of the territory belonging to Lebanon (demarcation of the maritime boundary between Israel and Lebanon). These disputes are likely to have an effect on the maritime domain and on future conflicts in the region.

The fighting in Syria continued with greater intensity and this year the Syrian regime, with assistance from Russia, Iran and Shiite forces, managed to tip the balance in its favor. The Russian and Iranian forces are providing the Assad regime with financial assistance and weapons and are even participating in the fighting.

There was no unusual activity of the Syrian navy reported in the media nor were there any reports that it had taken a significant part in the fighting (apart from the use of naval helicopters to lay mines against ISIS forces) and it is reasonable to assume that the Syrian navy was involved in ongoing security tasks along the Syrian coast. The Syrian navy's fighting ability is unclear but it is reasonable to assume that, in view of the Russian and Iranian involvement in Syria and its ports, its vessels and weaponry are in better condition than in the past.

In Syria, the Russian Black Sea fleet has increased its presence and strength. This presence is making it possible for Russia to project its power, to influence the course of events in Syria and to broadcast its involvement in the region. Within this context, Russia signed an agreement with Syria for the lease of a naval base within the Tartus port and the Hmeimim Air Base for a period of 49 years with an automatic 25-year extension.



Figure 1 – Firing of an Iranian Noor naval missile from a Syrian Tir-2 missile boat (made in Iran) as part of a Syrian naval maneuver (2016)²

2 From <http://spioenkop.blogspot.co.il/2016/08/photo-report-syrian-arab-navy.html>

Russia began work on the port and its expansion with the intention of stationing about 10 vessels there.³ According to the agreement, the defense of the base from the sea and from the air is Russia's responsibility while Syria is responsible for defense on land.

The central role of the Black Sea fleet in the fighting in Syria has been to maintain a presence by means of naval patrols and responsibility for the Russian supply of weapon systems and weaponry to Syria. In addition, the Russian navy carried out an attack on high-quality land targets in Syria by means of cruise missiles fired from submarines and surface vessels in the Mediterranean, the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea.

In this context, it is worth mentioning the presence of the Russian aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean and off the coast of Syria in particular from November 2016 until late January 2017. The aircraft carrier, which was escorted by a large taskforce (and possibly a submarine), launched attack aircraft from its deck to carry out attacks in Syria. Despite the fact that two aircraft that took off from it crashed and their retrieval from the sea involved several technical mishaps (a large amount of black smoke was observed from the ship's funnels), the presence of the aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean and particularly off the shores of Syria had a major impact from the viewpoint of Russia's ability to project power and its desire to be a major player in the Mediterranean theater.



Figure 2 – The Russian aircraft carrier "Admiral Kuznetsov" on its way to the Mediterranean.⁴

Iran has been involved in the civil war since late 2011 and during the past year has been a significant and influential player in the fighting in Syria. Iran is operating side by

3 Sputnik, Russia to Expand Capabilities of Naval Base in Syrian Tartus (20/1/2017).

4 From <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0.7340.L-4868028.00.html>

side with the Syrian regime in order to stabilize it and restore its control of Syria. Iran is seeking to carve out a place for itself in Syria as part of its grand strategy to become a regional superpower with control and presence in the theater and to expand the Shiite axis from Iran by way of Iraq and Lebanon, as well as achieving territorial continuity from the Persian Gulf by way of Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean.

The involvement of Iran in Syria and its assistance to the Syrian regime are manifested in a number of elements, the main one being economic assistance and the supply of weapons and ammunition to the fighting forces. Iran has also deployed military forces that include the Revolutionary Guard, Hezbollah fighting forces and Shiite militia forces from Iraq, all of which are fighting alongside Syrian forces.

Iran is making use of sea routes in order to supply weaponry (including naval weaponry and vessels) and its senior officials have recently declared that it is their intention to establish a permanent base in Syria. In this context, it should be mentioned that in recent years Iranian military vessels have arrived in Syria as a port of call.

The expanded involvement of Iran in Syria in the maritime domain may be a signal of its part in the maintenance of the Syrian navy's fighting ability and Iranian assistance in the execution of its missions, the supply of new weaponry and platforms (such as miniature submarines) and the implementation and adoption of asymmetric naval tactics in Syria and Lebanon. The involvement of Iran in Syria will also allow it to develop the Hezbollah's naval power with respect to the buildup and supply of naval weaponry, including unmanned vessels (like those supplied by Iran to the Houthi rebels),⁵ and in addition it will enable the Hezbollah's naval force to accumulate operational experience and higher levels of operational capability.

The proximity of Iran to the State of Israel will allow it to operate in the theater (by means of its own forces and by means of the Hezbollah's naval force); to carry out commando operations and gathering of intelligence in times of both peace and war (for example, by landing fighters from commercial ships or other vessels on the shores of Israel); and to create the ability to project power from the sea (and at relatively short ranges) onto the State of Israel. Moreover, Iran (or Hezbollah's naval force) will be able to operate miniature submarines in the theater which will have the ability to gather intelligence off the shores of Israel and carry out special missions. During actual military conflict, the submarines will be able to assist in imposing a naval blockade on Israel's ports.

5 In late January 2017, during a routine patrol in the Gulf of Aden, a Saudi naval vessel was damaged in an attack carried out by the Houthi organization by means of an unmanned suicide vessel. The suicide vessel was apparently controlled from a distance. The Americans believe that the vessel was provided to the rebel forces by Iran. Cavas Christopher, *New Houthi Weapon Emerges: A Drone Boat* (19/2/17), retrieved from: <https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/index/2017/02/19/new-houthi-weapon-emerges-a-drone-boat>, accessed 9/2017.

As Iran's foothold in Syria becomes more established and as Iran gains confidence, we can apparently expect to see an increase in the number of arrivals of Iranian naval vessels in Syria and increased presence of the Iranian navy in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Egyptian navy is the largest in the Middle East and it operates in two theaters: the Mediterranean (the Northern Command) and the Red Sea (the Southern Command). Its missions are to protect Egypt's essential maritime interests, including the defense of shipping and trade routes; the protection of Egypt's essential infrastructure in the Mediterranean and in the Red Sea (oil and gas rigs); to protect the Suez Canal; and to maintain fighting ability in the above-water and the underwater domains against its rivals. The responsibility for protecting its ports against terror and prevention of smuggling is in the hands of the Coast Guard.⁶

In recent years, the Egyptians have come to view the Red Sea as a strategic zone that is essential to its national security, with emphasis on the Bab el Mandeb strait, which is the main route of entry into the Suez Canal, and the oil rigs found there.⁷ The Egyptian navy has in recent years been operating joint task forces (air force, navy and marines) and also in collaboration with the Saudi navy, with the goal of guarding maritime strategic assets and the shipping lanes in the Bab el Mandeb strait against the Houthi rebels.

In the Mediterranean theater, the Egyptian navy is threatened by missile attacks from ISIS forces located in Sinai (such as the attack carried out using Coronet anti-tank missiles against an Egyptian patrol ship in July 2015).

The Egyptian navy, which is carrying out Egyptian strategy, has during the past year established a new and expanded headquarters for the Southern Command at the Safaga naval base and is building up its forces, including an expansion of the naval commando force and the deployment of submarines, helicopter ships and other types of vessels.⁸ This year, the Egyptian navy carried out intensive operations in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, as well as joint naval maneuvers with various nations (such as the US, France, Greece, Germany and others).

With respect to the buildup of force, the Egyptian navy has this year assimilated new vessels acquired in recent years. These include a Mistral helicopter ship with the ability to carry up to 50 attack helicopters of various types (apparently Ka-52 Russian attack helicopters will be stationed on its deck), as well as armored vehicles and soldiers.

6 Eleibe Ahmed (2016), The Suez Canal and the Egyptian Navy, *Canadian Naval Review*, 11(3), 27–29.

7 Egypt Expands Navy with Formation of Southern Navy Fleet Command (1/2017), retrieved from: <http://www.worldtribune.com/egypt-expands-navy-with-formation-of-southern-fleet-command>, accessed 1/2017.

8 Shaul Shay (1/2017), Egyptian Navy in the Red Sea, retrieved from: http://www.herzliyaconference.org/_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/ShaulShay16_1_17.pdf, accessed 1/2017.

In addition, construction has begun of French Gowind missile ships, one in France and the other in Egypt (with the construction of another two is the works). The first ship is expected to come into service towards the end of 2017. The Egyptian navy is also completing the absorption of US-made Ambassador missile ships and it will be absorbing an additional advanced French-made Fremm corvette. As part of the acquisition contracts with France, the Egyptian navy will also receive advanced Exocet missiles and Aster aerial defense missiles.

In the underwater domain, Egypt received a second U-209 submarine, which was acquired as part of a contract to purchase four submarines from Germany. Egypt has begun the construction of infrastructure for operation and maintenance of the submarines at Alexandria. According to the contract, Egypt purchased additional American Harpoon submarine-launched missiles and the advanced German SeaHake torpedo. The Egyptian navy has also upgraded their submarine detection capabilities by means of the US-made Lfats sonar systems which are installed on Chinese Heinan submarine hunters.

During the coming year, the Egyptian navy is expected to continue its buildup of strength with the delivery of new advanced vessels and new weapon systems and the construction of operational, training and maintenance infrastructure for them. The absorption of these weapons—with emphasis on submarines and helicopter ships—represents a quantum leap for the Egyptian navy and it apparently will update and upgrade its operational doctrine based on the capabilities of the systems and the vessels, the operational tasks that it faces and the operational experience that it has accumulated and continues to accumulate, primarily in the Red Sea.



Figure 3 – French-made Egyptian navy Mistral helicopter ship⁹

9 <https://foxtotalpha.jalopnik.com/why-is-egypt-buying-two-orphaned-mistral-class-aircraft-1732595299/>

In the Gaza Strip, Hamas continues to build up its maritime force through development of a naval commando unit, which is based on the ability to attack with divers and fast-moving boats. It should be remembered that during the Protective Edge operation five fighters managed to land on Zikim beach; they were identified and killed by IDF forces. In late 2016, it was discovered that Hamas had even established a military base for naval commandos in the port of Gaza. The buildup of the commando force is continuing with the acquisition of weapons, fast-moving boats and intensive training with Iranian assistance. There are no indications in the media that the Hamas or other groups in Gaza possess anti-ship missiles, but the possibility cannot be ruled out.

As part of its modernization program, the Turkish navy is continuing with the buildup of its naval force as the long arm of Turkey and the buildup of a blue water navy. The Turkish navy operates 16 frigates, 9 corvettes, 18 missile ships, 12 submarines, 15 patrol ships, 33 amphibious ships and other vessels. Turkey is seeking to achieve independent production infrastructure for vessels and weaponry, including missiles, communication systems, control and monitoring systems, etc.



Figure 4 – A Milgem vessel in the Turkish navy¹⁰

Conclusion

The world is in the midst of far-reaching global changes, including the rise of new superpowers, globalization and growing world trade, expansion of maritime economic

¹⁰ <http://navalanalyses.blogspot.co.il/2017/09/turkish-navy-modernization-and.html>

zones, tension, crisis and military conflict between states, etc. These global changes will have major effects on the maritime domain in its broadest sense.

China and India, in addition to the US, which remains the strongest naval power, have become regional superpowers and perhaps even global ones. The buildup of naval force by China and India is manifested in the growth of their navies, the large number of their vessels and their advanced weaponry. These two superpowers are also expanding their deterrence by developing the ability to launch nuclear missiles from submarines.

The US in the Trump era is trying to restore its strength and prestige as a superpower with significant naval power and the current administration is again investing a huge budget in the navy and its weaponry, which is becoming increasingly outdated (a prime example is the Harpoon sea-to-sea missile developed in the 1990s which is expected to be going out of service).

The Russian navy (with emphasis on the Black Sea fleet) is restoring its capabilities, is increasing its number of vessels and is adopting a new operational doctrine. It is posing operational challenges to the navies of the US and NATO in the Black Sea and in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Baltic Sea and the North Pacific. Russia is fully exploiting geopolitical opportunities (such as those in Syria and Iraq) in order to deploy naval and aerial forces and thus is also creating a situation in which the US navy is pushed out of the region (even if that is only a perception).

As in previous years and even more so this year, relations became closer between the Russian and Chinese navies, which are holding joint naval maneuvers. The maritime axis which the two have started to build and which constitutes a counter-weight to the American coalition with countries in the region is taking shape. In this context, it is worth mentioning the increasingly close relations of Russia and China—each independently—with Egypt.

There are signs of success in the fighting against maritime piracy in the Indian Ocean, although this effort still requires the investment of huge resources. In spite of the nuclear agreement between the superpowers and Iran, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard navy continues to operate provocatively in and around the Strait of Hormuz and is embarrassing Western navies in the region, primarily the US navy.

In our region, the Syrian regime has regained control under Russian and Iranian patronage. Russia is reinforcing its stronghold in Syria and is establishing a major military base at Tartus, where numerous vessels are assisting the Syrian regime and the Russian forces in Syria by transporting weapons, supplying ammunition and carrying out other tasks, including defense and the projection of power from sea to quality inland targets.

Iran is also strengthening its presence in Syria and in coordination with Russian and Syrian forces is taking part in the fighting on the side of the Assad regime. This includes supplying weapons, financial assistance and participation in the fighting itself by Revolutionary Guard forces, Hezbollah fighters and other Shiite coalition forces. Iran, like Russia, aspires to establish a home port in Syria that will give it access to the Mediterranean and will serve as a base for its activity. The activity of Russia and Iran in this region enables the Syrian navy and Hezbollah's naval force to maintain a high level of fighting ability, while being equipped with advanced Iranian and Russian weapons and maintaining operational readiness.

In this context, it should be mentioned that Iranian involvement is liable to facilitate the introduction of advanced missiles, unmanned naval vessels for intelligence gathering and attack and even miniature submarines.

Egypt is in the midst of a buildup of force that began several years ago and which includes the absorption of new and advanced weapons and new naval vessels with emphasis on French-made corvettes, two French helicopter ships (which carry advanced Russian helicopters) and the reinforcement of its underwater forces in the form of advanced American sonar systems and four German submarines. These capabilities enable the Egyptians to project power at distant locations and to confront the challenges it faces in Yemen, Sudan, Libya and Iran.

Turkey is also in the midst of a major buildup of force (with emphasis on the ability to independently develop weapons, aircraft and naval vessels) and the creation of a large navy with the ability to operate for long periods in blue water and the ability to project power on a broad scale.

As is characteristic of the Middle East, it is difficult to predict what tomorrow will bring, but an analysis of the processes leaves no doubt that the region is experiencing an arms race to build up significant naval forces, with littoral operational capability, air defense from the sea and also the ability to operate in blue water and in the underwater domain.