

MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2017/18

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Foreign Fleets, the Great Powers and Countries in the Region

US Policy in the Eastern Mediterranean

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At the time of the previous Israeli Maritime Strategic Evaluation (end of 2016),¹ it was already known that a new US administration would be taking over at the beginning of 2017 and it was thought that this would perhaps herald a change in US foreign policy, including its policy in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The joint report published by Haifa University and the Hudson Institute in the autumn of 2016 also recommended that the new administration examine several issues related to US policy in the Eastern Mediterranean.²

It appears that the new Trump administration has not yet manage to formulate a formal doctrine for US foreign policy and this is evident in its policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. This can be seen in, among other things, the activity of the US fleet in the region. American responses appear to have been ad hoc and American policy is driven by events and reactive, rather than being the result of a clear strategy.

In Trump's speech on December 18th 2017, in which he presented the new national security policy of "America First", he did not relate to this issue and preferred to give an overall view of American policy. In this context, the President presented four principles on which national security policy is based: First, the priority given to protecting the nation's citizens (including the building of a US-Mexico wall and the termination of US visa lotteries); second, the promotion of US economic security in order to maintain growth on the basis of fair trade; third, the promotion of peace by means of power, including the modernization and reconstruction of the military and the initiation of a missile defense plan, as well as the creation of alliances with countries that share values with the US; and fourth, increasing US influence in the world by means of collaboration with countries that share US goals.

President Trump did not relate to the situation in the Middle East in his speech, but in an earlier briefing it was mentioned that the US administration is changing its approach to Israel's role in the region. It was stated that the threats from extreme Jihadist terror organizations and from Iran had led to the understanding that Israel is not the source of problems in the region and that the countries in the region have common interests with Israel in dealing with common threats. With respect to Russia and China, the President stated that they are trying to undermine US status in the world and promised that his policy would maintain relations with them only as long as US interests are not harmed. The speech did not therefore herald any change in the strategy of the US navy in the

1 The Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israel 2016.

2 Report of the Commission on the Eastern Mediterranean sponsored by University of Haifa and the Hudson Institute, September 2016.

Eastern Mediterranean and recent events in East Asia also indicate that the main priority of the US remains in that region.

Accordingly, it can generally be concluded that the policy of previous US President Barak Obama—which was declared in 2011 under the title “Pivot to Asia” and which represented a major change in course for US foreign policy—remains in place. This implies a major shift in resources—diplomatic, military, economic, etc.—in the direction of Asia, at the expense of other theaters, primarily Europe and the Middle East. The visit by a number of American ships to Israel’s ports, including the visit of the George H.W. Bush aircraft carrier to the Port of Haifa, does not represent a change in the existing situation.

From the perspective of maritime presence, the situation in East Asia and primarily the dispute over the Exclusive Economic Zones in the South China Sea, as well as the tension in the Korean Peninsula, are tying down much of the American navy, including at least two battle groups which include two to three aircraft carriers. In addition, there are other areas of tension in Taiwan and the Persian Gulf.

The diminished geo-economic importance of the Middle East from the US perspective is primarily the result of its reduced dependence on Middle East oil and the increased energy diversification of the American economy. The implication in the maritime domain in the Eastern Mediterranean has been the reduction of US naval presence and the fact there is no aircraft carrier permanently deployed in the region. The new US Secretary of the Navy, Richard V. Spencer, visited the USS Mount Whitney (LCC 20), the flagship of the US Sixth Fleet, in November 2017 while it was anchored at Napoli in Italy. He did not mention any change in American policy, not with respect to the order of battle of the Sixth Fleet nor with respect to its activity in the Eastern Mediterranean.³

Towards the end of 2017, the Mount Whitney operated in the Eastern Mediterranean, including in the Souda Bay in Greece together with the San Antonio-class USS San Diego (LPD 22), which is an amphibious transport dock. On the latter’s deck is a rapid-response force of Marines which is able to operate in situations of military crisis or humanitarian disasters.⁴ Nonetheless, it is important to mention that in addition to the Mount Whitney there were only four other ships under the command of the Sixth Fleet at the end of 2017 (USS Ross, USS Carney, USS Donald Cook and USS Porter).⁵

3 CNA-CNA-C6F Public Affairs, SECNAV Visits USS Mount Whitney, US Naval Forces Europe/Africa/Sixth Fleet, November 21, 2017, <http://www.c6f.navy.mil/news/secnav-visits-uss-mount-whitney>

4 Justin Schoenberger, USS San Diego Arrives In Souda Bay, Greece, November 28, 2017, <http://www.public.navy.mil/surfor/lpd22/Pages/USS-San-Diego-Arrives-In-Souda-Bay-Greece-.aspx>

5 U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa / U.S. 6th Fleet, Our Ships, <http://www.c6f.navy.mil/organization/ships>



Figure 1 – The USS Mount Whitney (LCC 20) – the command vessel of the US Sixth Fleet (Source: Sixth Fleet Site)

The Fifth Fleet, whose base of command is in Manama in Bahrain, continued in 2017 to carry out its mission to protect shipping in the region, while at the same time being forced to deal with complex challenges in the area of the Strait of Hormuz (the provocative activity of Iran's Revolutionary Guard naval forces) and the Bab el Mandeb Strait (an increase in naval incidents related to the fighting against the Houthis in Yemen) and also participated in the attack on ISIS land targets in Syria and northern Iraq.

In view of the aforementioned, it appears that no change is to be expected in the deployment of American forces in our region and in particular naval forces. The US navy is facing challenges in a number of theaters east of here: the crisis on the Korean peninsula; the ongoing tension and friction in the area of the Persian Gulf with the Revolutionary Guard navy; the dispute in the South China Sea over China's territorial demands; and in the area of Taiwan.

Nonetheless, there were a number of events and major statements in the Israeli context:

1. In May 2017, there was an attack on targets in Syria using cruise missiles fired from two American destroyers, the USS Porter and the USS Ross, in reaction to the use of chemical weapons by Assad's army in the city of Idlib.
2. Iran: A number of militant declarations by Trump that there is a need to modify, rather than cancel, the agreement, alongside the visit of the American President to the Middle East (in May 2017) in order to strengthen the Sunni axis (led by Saudi Arabia) against Iran, did not lead to a change in Iranian policy. The provocations by Revolutionary Guard ships on the US navy in the Persian Gulf continues.

3. In the summer of 2017, the USS George H.W. Bush aircraft carrier visited the port of Haifa (17 years since the last similar visit), but this did not signal a change in the deployment of the Sixth Fleet, which remained thin.
4. In December 2017, Trump declared that the US is recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. This is primarily a declarative move since it describes the existing situation and does not involve the transfer of the US Embassy to Jerusalem in the immediate term. However, the declaration led to a wave of reactions and unrest in the Arab and Moslem world, whose outcome is difficult to predict.

The wide dispersal of the US navy and its sparse presence in the area of Europe and the Mediterranean have apparently led to a revised approach to maritime power. In accordance with the aforementioned third principle in President Trump's speech (modernization of the military and its rebuilding), the US administration is interested in increasing the defense budget, including the budget of the navy. This includes increasing the number of vessels to 350 (in contrast to 277 today and 302 according to the long-term master plan of the Navy for coming years). The budget implication is an addition of more than \$4 billion to the naval budget beyond the addition that was already planned and this is even before the yet-to-be estimated budget that will be required for the armaments, maintenance and manpower needed for these new vessels. If this plan is indeed implemented, then it appears that the intention is to deploy these ships primarily in the Atlantic and Mediterranean theaters:

"[...] a key potential reason for increasing the planned size of the Navy ... would be to re-establish a larger U.S. Navy forward-deployed presence in the European theatre, and particularly the Mediterranean⁶."

However, in parallel to the demand to build up maritime force that can provide solutions in additional theaters, there may be political problems in passing the necessary budget, in addition to technical issues, such as the ability of existing shipyards to build the additional ships and submarines without compromising the quality of these vessels and their safety.

It can be predicted that major naval platforms (ships and submarines) in addition to those already appearing in the 30-year plan for the build-up of the navy will enter service only at the beginning of the next decade and therefore it can be expected that the deployment of the US navy will not be changing in a significant way in coming years.

The Haifa Research Center for Maritime Strategy will present an analysis of American policy in our region and primarily its maritime implications in the strategic evaluation for the coming year (2018–2019).

6 Navy Force Structure: A Bigger Fleet? Background and Issues for Congress <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/R44635.pdf>