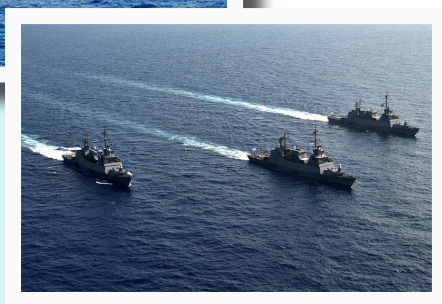
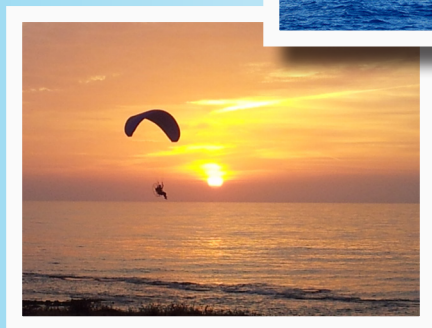
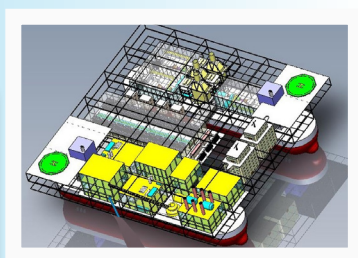


MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2016

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Chapter 3: Israel and the Eastern Mediterranean

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General

The shockwaves of the events of the Arab Spring, which began at the end of 2010, continue to affect the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean and the region's maritime environment. Especially prominent are the effects of the civil war in Syria. Although it lacks a significant maritime dimension, various consequences of the war in Syria have significantly affected the region's maritime environment, especially when it comes to the Russian maritime presence in the region, including use of sea-based weapons on the Syrian coast, and the beginnings of an American response to this. At the same time, the war in Syria and instability in Iraq continue to push waves of refugees into Turkey, who continue from there to Greece via the maritime border between the two countries. More broadly, the waves of refugees and migrants from the southern and Eastern Mediterranean, from Syria and Libya,¹ continue to undermine political stability in the European Union, and contributed to the U.K.'s decision to leave the EU. European attempts to create a coordinated response to the movement of refugees, especially the agreement with Turkey, have partially begun to bring about a certain decrease, but have not stopped the flow of refugees.

In Egypt, the el-Sisi regime, which came to power in the wake of the Arab Spring, has not yet succeeded in becoming economically stable, despite completing a significant maritime project (the expansion of the Suez canal), and discovering large gas deposits in the off-shore Zohr field.

In addition, governance has weakened in the Mediterranean region, although fears that the growth of ISIS in Libya and Sinai would affect Mediterranean sea lanes have not materialized at present.

The Israeli-Turkish agreement to improve relations between the two countries, which was approved by Israel and Turkey in July and August 2016 respectively, is also expected to affect the maritime environment. Meanwhile, basic trends that affect the maritime environment endure, including the continued naval buildup of the strongest countries in the region, namely Turkey, Israel and Egypt (and in a broader scope, Iran) and the worsening socio-economic situation in Gaza, which

¹ Many of the migrants through Libya come from Africa (and continue on to Europe) due to the weakness of the Libyan government.

contributes to the discussion within Israel on the construction of a Palestinian port in Gaza.² Israel and Lebanon have not yet resolved their dispute regarding the marking of the maritime border, but this has not deteriorated into a military confrontation. Changes to the global system are also expected to affect the Mediterranean, though not in the immediate term. One prominent challenge is that posed by China to the system of international maritime norms, in completely ignoring the decision of the International Court in The Hague regarding the conflict between China and the Philippines over sovereignty in the South China Sea.

The involvement of international forces

Russia and the United States – Governmental instability in some of the Arab countries, which began with the events of the Arab Spring at the end of 2010, continues to influence countries in the region and the regional maritime environment. The civil war in Syria that began in 2011 is still in full force, and Syria's territory is divided between government forces, ISIS forces, various Kurdish militias, and other rebel forces. Since fall 2015, Russian ground and air forces have been operating in Syria at the official invitation of the Assad regime. Russian intervention has helped the current regime reconquer various areas such as the cities of Palmyra and Aleppo. In addition to ground operations in Syria, the Russians have permanently stationed between 10 and 15 ships in the Eastern Mediterranean.³ Since May 2015, the Russian naval force has been organized as the Fifth Eskadra, named after the Soviet naval force that operated in this area during the Cold War⁴ and was formally disbanded in 1992.⁵ As in the days of the Cold War, the main objective of this force is apparently to make its presence felt and to signal to regional and global players (especially the U.S.) that Russia is a powerful player with capabilities that must be taken into consideration. Western officials expressed concerns about the buildup of Russian capabilities, and warned that it will create areas in some parts of the

2 On the other hand, there are those in the Palestinian Authority who oppose the establishment of a port, lest it strengthen Hamas.

3 Tamer El Ghobashi, "U.S. Carrier's Moves Send Message to Russia", *Wall Street Journal*, 8 June, 2016, See: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-carriers-moves-send-message-to-russia-1465419667> (Accessed August 14, 2016).

4 Gordon McCormick, *The Soviet Presence in the Mediterranean*, Rand Paper, 1987, see: <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2008/P7388.pdf> (accessed August 14, 2016).

5 The Voice of Russia, "Russia returns to the Mediterranean: Fifth Soviet Navy Squadron is Back?", 26 February, 2013. See: http://sputniknews.com/voiceofrussia/2013_02_26/Russia-returns-to-the-Mediterranean-Fifth-Soviet-Navy-Squadron-is-back/ (accessed 14 August, 2016).

Eastern Mediterranean in which the Russians will be able to prevent activities by other militaries (anti-access/area denial).⁶ The stationing of these vessels is part of the broader trend of increased Russian maritime presence in the Mediterranean (as well as in the Black Sea), which includes increasing the number of port calls in countries such as Spain, Greece and Malta, as well as a docking agreement with Cyprus that was signed in 2015.⁷

The stationing of these forces aids the Russian war effort in Syria and also enables Moscow to demonstrate its military capabilities. For example, in December 2015, a Russian submarine, Rostov-on-Don, for the first time fired cruise missiles at targets in the Raqqa Governorate.⁸ The Americans responded with a similar signal when, at short notice, they sent two aircraft carrier groups (USS Harry S. Truman and USS Dwight D. Eisenhower) to a tour of the Eastern Mediterranean in June 2016. Anonymous officials at the American Department of Defense explicitly stated that this action was intended to demonstrate American capabilities to the Russians.⁹ The tension between the Russian and American navies in the region increased when, in April and June 2016, they traded mutual accusations over dangerously close maneuvers by aircraft and vessels of the two navies;¹⁰ the commander of the Sixth Fleet, Admiral Foggo, accused the Russian vessels of "unsafe and unprofessional" behavior.¹¹ In August 2016, cruise missiles were again fired from Russian vessels towards targets in Syria, in a move that was seen as a demonstration of Russian power in the area in response to the American moves.¹²

6 <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Top-NATO-general-Russia-building-anti-access-bubble-over-Syria-419393>

7 Olga Razumovskaya, "Cyprus Signs Deal to Let Russian Navy Ships Stop at its Ports", *Wall Street Journal*, 25 February 2015. See: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/putin-highlights-closer-russia-cyprus-ties-1424882012> (Accessed August 14, 2016).

8 Nicholas de Larrinaga, "Russian Submarine Fires Cruise Missiles into Syria," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 10 December 2015. See: <http://www.janes.com/article/56544/russian-submarine-fires-cruise-missiles-into-syria> (accessed 14 August, 2016).

9 Tamer El Ghobashi, "U.S. Carrier's Moves Send Message to Russia", *Wall Street Journal*, 8 June, 2016, See: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-carriers-moves-send-message-to-russia-1465419667> (Accessed August 14, 2016).

10 Dmitry Solovyov and Idrees Ali, "Russia, United States Blame each other for Maritime Incident", 28 June, 2016. See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-usa-navy-idUSKCN0ZE1Q8> (Accessed 23 August, 2016).

11 <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/the-us-navy-russia-heading-towards-crisis-the-mediterranean-16834>

12 Andrew E. Kramer and Anne Bernard, "Russia Asserts Its Military Might in Syria", *the New York Times*, 19 August, 2016. See: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/20/world/middleeast/russia-syria-mediterranean-missiles.html?_r=0 (accessed August 21, 2016).

The Russians responded to the presence of the American aircraft carriers by sending the Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Syrian coast in October 2016.¹³ According to the Russian statement, the official purpose was operations against ISIS, but the background to the decision is evidently the confrontation with the United States over maritime dominance in the region. Israel made significant efforts to create channels of communication with the Russian forces operating in the region, in order not to get caught up in an unnecessary confrontation with them. While according to the media, the efforts focused on Russian air operations, similar efforts are presumably being made with regard to maritime operations, in order to avoid mishaps. The massive Russian presence, inter alia as part of an axis that includes Syria and Hezbollah, which are hostile to Israel, creates limitations on Israel's freedom of action in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially with respect to exposure to advanced detection systems that the Russians have brought to the area, and limitations on commando operations and the movement of underwater vessels.

Chinese involvement in the region

In April 2016, the Chinese shipping company COSCO acquired the Port of Piraeus, after leasing and operating it since 2009. The Chinese plan is to turn Piraeus into the busiest port in the Mediterranean.¹⁴ Chinese entities are considering to compete in a similar tender for the privatization of the Port of Thessaloniki. The acquisition of the Port of Piraeus signifies the deepening of Chinese involvement in the region, as part of the completion of the new Maritime Silk Road ("One Belt, One Road"), which expresses the Chinese view that the Mediterranean is an important corridor on the path to European markets. Chinese penetration of the region is also being felt in Israel, with the expansion of Israeli ports, the boring of the Carmel Tunnels, and the construction of the train line to Eilat by Chinese companies. As of today, there is a gap between Chinese economic interests and the actual presence of the Chinese fleet in the Mediterranean basin. Because of the region's instability, it appears that protecting Chinese economic interests will require the increasing presence of the Chinese navy in the Mediterranean basin.¹⁵ The first evidence of this is the announcement of a new Chinese navy base in

13 <http://tass.ru/en/defense/886110>

14 Glass, David, "Piraeus Aims For Mediterranean Port Top Spot" *Seatrade* (February 16, 2014). See: <http://www.seatrade-maritime.com/news/asia/piraeus-aims-for-mediterranean-port-top-spot.html> (Accessed August 22, 2016).

15 Sellier, Elodie, "China's Mediterranean Odyssey," *The Diplomat* (April 19, 2016). See: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/04/chinas-mediterranean-odyssey> (accessed August 23, 2016).

Djibouti at the horn of Africa, which was reported in May 2016, in a step that will enable the Chinese to ensure the movement of its vessels in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and Suez Canal, and make it easier to move maritime military platforms to the Mediterranean.¹⁶ Additional evidence of China's increasing interest in the region is the well-publicized visit of a Chinese admiral to Syria in August 2016, with the purpose of strengthening connections with the Assad regime and expressing support for it against the backdrop of the ongoing civil war in Syria.¹⁷

Refugees

The Eastern Mediterranean continues to serve as one of the two sea routes for Middle Eastern refugees to Southern Europe, alongside the route that passes through the central Mediterranean, between Libya and Italy.

Between January and mid-August 2016, 266,524 refugees reached the countries of Southern Europe. 162,273 of them came from Turkey and Egypt to Greece. Another 101,775 came from Libya and Egypt to Italy. Around 40% of the refugees fled the wars in Iraq and Syria. In the first three months of 2016, the number of refugees surpassed that of the previous year, but starting in April 2016 the trend reversed and it appears that in 2016 the number of refugees will be fewer than the million refugees who crossed the Mediterranean in 2015. This is apparently due to the refugee agreement signed in March 2016 between Turkey and the European Union. In addition, 3,151 of the migrants crossing the Eastern Mediterranean were listed as missing or dead between January and August 2016.¹⁸ NATO has also gotten involved in the issue, and in February 2016 began operating sea vessels and aircraft in the Aegean Sea in an attempt to stop the flow of refugees,¹⁹ despite the clear dissatisfaction of some NATO members, including Turkey.²⁰

The movement of refugees by sea towards EU countries has significant implications for all of the players involved, and also indirectly for Israel. The increasing dependence on Turkish regulation on the issue of migration has improved Turkey's bargaining power vis-à-vis the EU, and in March 2016 led to the agreement

16 <http://thediplomat.com/2016/04/why-chinas-djibouti-presence-matters/>

17 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/08/18/china-steps-up-military-cooperation-with-assad-as-top-admiral-vi/>

18 See: <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php> (accessed August 21, 2016).

19 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/11/nato-tasks-naval-patrol-with-combatting-people-smuggling-in-the-mediterranean>

20 http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/17/world/europe/shifting-attention-to-mediterranean-nato-fights-internal-dissent.html?_r=0

according to which Turkey will stop the flow of refugees to Europe and will agree to refugees being returned to its territory in return for significant sums of money that the European Union will transfer to Turkey, and a tolerant policy towards the Turkish regime's conduct. The agreement with Turkey was reached after a series of attempts, which turned out to be ineffective, to consolidate and implement a coordinated European plan (by FRONTEX²¹) in order to prevent migration by sea. These failures led to serious economic and political crises in the initial destination countries, Greece and Italy.

A significant decrease in the number of refugees entering Europe through Greece in 2016 from the previous year is an indication of the effectiveness of EU-Turkey agreement,²² and even led Germany's leader Merkel to propose working towards similar agreements with the gateway migration countries in North Africa.²³ At the same time, the flow of refugees from Libya to Italy is constantly increasing, and reports state that some 10,000 migrants reached Italy by sea during four days in June 2016 alone,²⁴ in addition to a widespread rescue operation by Italian navy forces of some 6,500 migrants from African countries via Libya to the Italian coast, in a single night at the end of August 2016.²⁵

It is important to note the demographic differences between the migrant populations. The refugees arriving in the EU via the Turkey-Greece route are mainly refugees from Syria made up of entire families, including women and children, while the migrants coming from Libya to Italy are mainly migrants from sub-Saharan Africa characterized by demographic homogeneity, mainly young men.

The refugees already in Europe, and those continuing to arrive, add to the EU's instability. The difficulty of controlling the population movement and ensuring basic living conditions for the refugees makes Europe more vulnerable to terrorist attacks and increases the popularity of right-wing movements that oppose immigration, open borders and the continued existence of the European Union as

21 FRONTEX is the European agency of border and coast guards.

22 BBC News, 'Migrant cCisis: EU-Turkey Deal is 'Working''. April 24, 2016. See: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36121083> (accessed August 23, 2016).

23 Joe Watts, "Angela Merkel Calls for 'one in, one out' Immigration Deals with North Africa to Stem Refugee Crisis", *The Independent*, August 23, 2016. See: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/angela-merkel-refugees-north-africa-immigration-crisis-turkey-deal-a7205206.html> (accessed August 23, 2016).

24 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3662601/10-000-migrants-cross-North-Africa-Italy-just-FOUR-DAYS-revealed-6-ordered-return-home-year-actually-went-back.html>

25 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37216881>

a political framework.²⁶ The refugee issue and sovereign control of borders were major issues in the British decision in June 2016 to leave the European Union.²⁷

Regional powers

Turkey: Turkey's actions in the region in the second half of 2016 were characterized by striving to reduce hostility with other players in the region, including the refugee agreement with Europe, reconciliation agreements with Israel, and a reconciliation agreement with Russia, which included a visit by Turkish President Erdogan to Russia. The Turkish agreement with Israel included Israeli consent to Turkey providing goods to the Gaza Strip through the Port of Ashdod, which would lead to considerable Turkish civilian ship traffic in the area. However, Israel refused Turkey's demand to lift the blockade of Gaza. The failed coup against the Erdogan regime in July 2016 led to broad actions against internal challenges to the regime, and these are expected to lead to a relative decrease in Turkey's involvement in the region in the short term, apart from the considerable Russian-Turkish cooperation on the fighting in Syria.

In June 2016, President Erdogan announced that starting in 2021, after completing the construction of a 27,000-ton amphibious assault ship with the ability to carry F15 warplanes with vertical takeoff capability, which is currently being carried out at Turkish shipyards, Turkey will be capable of independently constructing full-size aircraft carriers.²⁸ Simultaneously, the Turkish defense industries are strengthening ties with the Pakistani fleet as part of two large-scale projects. In August 2016 a large 15,600-ton refueling ship was launched, after being built with Turkish planning and supervision. In June, the Turkish industries received a project to upgrade Pakistani Agosta B90 attack submarines. Finally, in April 2016, Turkey opened a permanent base in Qatar, which includes sea, air and ground systems. This strengthens the strategic alliance with the oil emirate, and provides Turkey with quick response capability in the Persian Gulf and the Horn of Africa.²⁹

Egypt: Alongside the economic and political challenges facing the el-Sisi regime in Egypt, the Egyptian navy is continuing its buildup and maintaining open channels

26 http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/05/22/world/europe/europe-right-wing-austria-hungary.html?_r=0 (accessed August 23 2016).

27 <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/projects/brexit>

28 <https://www.rt.com/news/347350-turkey-aircraft-carrier-erdogan/>; <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/turkish-navy-aims-high-for-2033-become-global-force.html>

29 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-qatar-turkey-military-idUSKCN0XP2IT>

with Russia and with NATO. In June 2016, Egypt received its first French-produced Mistral-class helicopter carrier/amphibious assault ship. In August 2016, a Russian 32-R missile corvette that Russia donated to the Egyptian navy began active service. Egypt also announced that it is equipped with Russian Kamov-52 naval attack helicopters, which will serve on the deck of the Mistrals.³⁰ In Germany, construction continues on two submarines intended for the Egyptian navy. This latest wave of buildup signals moving away from depending on American naval platforms, although the American administration did approve the sale of Harpoon Block II missiles (UGM 84L) to the Egyptian navy this year.

In August 2016, the Egyptian navy conducted a joint exercise with a NATO force as part of a NATO visit to Egyptian navy bases in the Mediterranean.³¹ Egypt is also continuing its efforts to counterbalance the Turkish buildup in the region by creating an axis of cooperation with Greece and Cyprus. In an interview in August 2016, the Egyptian President announced a planned three-way summit between the countries in order to deepen the cooperation between them.³²

All of the recent developments – the expansion of the Suez Canal, the large-scale naval buildup, the discovery of the natural gas field off the coast of Egypt (Zohr), the active participation in the sea blockade as part of the civil war in Yemen, and increased involvement in preventing maritime drug and migrant smuggling – demonstrate that the maritime component of Egypt's national security doctrine has become more dominant. Tensions with Iran, Turkey and political Islamist groups, including Hamas in Gaza and ISIS in Sinai, also contribute to the continued security coordination and cooperation between Egypt and Israel, including in the maritime arena.

The Palestinians: The Gaza coast continues to be a source of risks and challenges for Israel, but also allows for a series of solutions to relieve the plight of Gaza's residents. The risks include Hamas's efforts to develop a highly capable marine and submarine force that could raid Israel by sea. The success of such a force, in the summer of 2014 during Operation Protective Edge, in penetrating from Gaza onto the Zikim beach and attaching an explosive device to an Israeli Merkava tank

30 <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/naval/naval-aviation/2016/01/01/russia-supply-egyptian-navy-with-46-ka-52k-helicopters/78182410/>

31 <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/238917/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-conducts-joint-military-drill-with-NATO-nava.aspx>

32 http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/nations/cyprus/2016/08/22/egypts-foreign-relations-not-based-on-dependency-sisi-says_1625ac2d-e30e-42bd-8102-f1dd526d0399.html

illustrated for Hamas the potential of this military channel. In addition, the Israeli navy must cope with three main challenges with Gaza: the continuation of the naval blockade of Gaza; limiting the movement of fishing boats to a distance of three miles in order to prevent smuggling by sea; and preventing attacks on Israeli vessels and/or coastal targets.

On the other hand, in light of the difficult humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, a number of solutions have been proposed that have the potential to improve the situation of Gaza's residents, and perhaps thus reduce the risk of another round of fighting in the conflict between Hamas and Israel. When it comes to infrastructure, Israel is currently preventing the Palestinians from developing the Gaza Marine gas field off the coast of Gaza, and even refusing to sign a long-term agreement with Gaza on the sale of natural gas. An energy source such as natural gas is essential for the Palestinians in order to develop infrastructure to provide electricity and desalinate water. Recent efforts by the European Union have provided the funding necessary for such projects, but their implementation depends on Israeli policy. In addition, the Israeli defense establishment recently discussed the possibility of constructing a civilian port in Gaza, on the coast or on an artificial island close to the coast. While there are those in the army, both in the navy and military intelligence, as well as in the Ministry of Transport headed by Transportation Minister Yisrael Katz, who support the idea as a way to ease pressure in Gaza, the previous defense minister and the current one oppose the plan, mainly because a seaport is an important symbol of sovereignty. The agreement signed in July between Turkey and Israel indirectly affects the Gaza issue in that it allows Turkey to provide Gaza with humanitarian aid via Israeli ports. However, this does not currently lead to significant relief for Gaza.

Conclusion

The shockwaves of the Arab Spring continue to affect the maritime military environment of the Eastern Mediterranean. The two major expressions of this are the Russian penetration of the region and the hesitant American response, and the wave of refugees (a large portion of them fleeing the wars in Syria and Iraq) who are trying to reach Greece via Turkey.

Certain characteristics indicate an increase in international activity in the Eastern Mediterranean. One that stands out is the first-of-its-kind firing of cruise missiles from a Russian submarine towards targets in Syria, and the unusual, though brief, stationing of two sets of American aircraft carriers in the region. According to some experts, the Russian naval deployment to the Syrian coast created a kind of

"bubble" around Syria and its territorial waters, in which the Russians can prevent military activities by anyone else. NATO has also begun limited operations in the Aegean Sea in an effort to assist Greece in monitoring the movement of refugees from Turkey. In the background, China's slow buildup in the region continues, though at present it is limited to civilian aspects of constructing, acquiring and operating ports, including Israeli ports.

Alongside the increased activities of the superpowers in the region, the buildup of the strongest regional navies continues. Turkey continues to construct a light aircraft carrier, and its president has even declared that in the future his country will be able to construct a "full" aircraft carrier. For the first time since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Turks have established a military base in the region, located in Qatar. Egypt continues to build up its naval force. This year it received a *Mistral*-class helicopter carrier/amphibious assault ship from France. Egypt has also made use of a Russian corvette that it received as a gift from Moscow. Meanwhile, construction of two diesel submarines for Egypt continues, in addition to the American Congress's approval of arming the submarines with Harpoon Block II missiles.

In Israel's immediate environment, the internal discussion continues on the possibility of opening a civilian port in Gaza, although some in the Palestinian Authority oppose this because it could, in their opinion, aid Hamas in Gaza.

In the final analysis, despite the intense maritime activity, especially by Russia but also by the U.S., and despite the buildup of the Israeli, Egyptian and Turkish navies, the maritime environment remains generally stable, though more complex and crowded. This stability is the result of the absence of direct competition between the main players in the region, and even some overlapping interests. The Turkish effort to reconcile with Israel and with Russia certainly contributes to this trend. At the same time, in a reality where multiple players are armed with advanced weaponry, along with existing but latent tensions (U.S.-Russia, Turkey-Cyprus, Israel-Hezbollah), any exacerbation of this tension would require deeper coordination in order to prevent unnecessary mishaps or even a direct conflict between various sides.