

THE FUTURE MIDDLE EAST STRATEGIC BALANCE

Conventional and Unconventional
Sources of Instability

Ron TIRA

September 2016

The Institut français des relations internationales (Ifri) is a research center and a forum for debate on major international political and economic issues. Headed by Thierry de Montbrial since its founding in 1979, Ifri is a non-governmental, non-profit organization.

As an independent think tank, Ifri sets its own research agenda, publishing its findings regularly for a global audience. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, Ifri brings together political and economic decision-makers, researchers and internationally renowned experts to animate its debate and research activities.

With offices in Paris and Brussels, Ifri stands out as one of the rare French think tanks to have positioned itself at the very heart of European and broader international debate.

The opinions expressed in this text are the responsibility of the author alone.

ISBN: 978-2-36567-605-2

© All rights reserved, Ifri, 2016

How to quote this document:

Ron Tira, “The Future Middle East Strategic Balance. Conventional and Unconventional Sources of Instability”, *Proliferation Papers*, No. 56, September 2016.

Ifri

27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – FRANCE

Tel.: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00 – Fax : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60

Email: accueil@ifri.org

Ifri-Bruxelles

Rue Marie-Thérèse, 21 1000 – Brussels – BELGIUM

Tel.: +32 (0)2 238 51 10 – Fax : +32 (0)2 238 51 15

Email: bruxelles@ifri.org

Website: ifri.org

Proliferation Papers

Proliferation Papers is the publication of the Deterrence and Proliferation Program established within the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri)'s Security Studies Center. This collection of monographs reflects the program's ambition to stimulate public debate and to further our understanding of the complexity of the nuclear issue in its strategic, technical, regional, diplomatic, legal, and budgetary dimensions.

About the author

LTC Ron Tira (Res.) is the author of *The Nature of War: Conflicting Paradigms and Israeli Military Effectiveness* as well as other books and publications on policy, strategy, warfare and the Middle East. Currently a businessman and a reservist at the Israel Air Force's Campaign Planning Department, Tira is a former fighter pilot with over 30 years of experience in intelligence, special operations and campaign planning. He regularly contributes publications to the Tel Aviv-based Institute for National Security Studies and he is a contributor to most major Israeli newspapers. Tira contributed a publication to *Policy Review*, a journal of the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. Tira further serves on the Editorial Advisory Panel of *Infinity Journal*, a peer-reviewed publication concerned with strategy as a consequence of linking policy ends, strategic ways, and military means.

Editorial board

Editor: Corentin Brustlein

Layout assistant: Louise Mingasson

Abstract

This paper seeks to analyze the future Middle Eastern military balance of power, in a time horizon of five to ten years. It attempts to map future key players, and to identify future fault lines and subjects of regional competition. It then analyzes what drives military effectiveness, and examines the military paradigms of the key players, highlighting the growing gap between these paradigms and the regional context in which they would have to be applied, resulting in the inability of key regional players to overthrow their peers using hard power and the challenges they face to shape most of the conflicts conducted on distant, third-party soil. Finally, in terms of non-conventional capabilities, the Iranian nuclear endeavor is likely to drive Sunni powers to the nuclear threshold either after or even before the nuclear agreement's 10 to 15-year horizon, while rudimentary chemical, biological and radiological weapons might become the non-states' weapon of choice for mass impact.

Résumé

Cet article évalue ce que pourraient être les équilibres militaires et stratégiques au Moyen-Orient à un horizon de cinq à dix ans. Il en identifie les principaux acteurs et les sources de rivalités régionales susceptibles de les opposer. Du fait des limites de leurs capacités militaires, les principaux acteurs régionaux ne seront pas en mesure de renverser leurs adversaires par la force armée, et seront ainsi contraints de recourir à des guerres par procuration à l'efficacité pour le moins incertaine. Dans le domaine non-conventionnel, la région pourrait voir à la fois la multiplication des États sunnites « du seuil » se prémunissant face aux ambitions iraniennes, et une banalisation relative de l'emploi d'armes chimiques, biologiques ou radiologiques rudimentaires par les acteurs non-étatiques de la région.

Table of contents

INTRODUCTION	9
THE FUTURE MIDDLE EAST: ACTORS AND FAULT LINES	13
Actors	13
Fault Lines	15
Military Effectiveness and the Primacy of Context	19
FUTURE MILITARY BALANCE OF POWER – THE CONVENTIONAL SPHERE ..	33
Regional Powers	33
Array of Paradigms	35
Military Paradigm Tested in Context	38
Contextual Military Effectiveness	43
Conventional Force: Non-State Actors	45
FUTURE MILITARY BALANCE OF POWER – THE UNCONVENTIONAL SPHERE ...	49
JCPOA: A milestone Toward Nuclearization?	49
No MAD in the Middle East	51
Iran: The Implausible Partnership	54
Chemical Weapons and Non-State Actors	55
CONCLUSIONS	57

Introduction

Two and a half decades ago, the Middle East benefited from several stabilizing factors: the Iran-Iraq balance of power, which helped to contain them both; Turkey's pro-Western, cooperative stance; efficient levers against the Alawites, the de facto rulers of both Syria and Lebanon at the time; the stability of the pro-Western regimes of Egypt and Jordan; and, as the Soviets stepped down from the stage, the American global and regional hegemony – at the time not only the world's but also the region's most effective player.

Gradually these stabilizers lost some of their effectiveness. The Sunni regime in Iraq was toppled, and Iran became the most dominant foreign power in Baghdad. Not only was Iraq turned to Iran's strategic depth, but the theater was reshaped from a conventional, militarily symmetric front to an environment most favorable to Iran's proxies and covert forces – giving it competitive advantage. Turkey changed also, adopting a more antagonistic, though frequently oscillating stance. As Syria was forced out of Lebanon, the less-containable Iran and Hezbollah became the dominant powers in Beirut, and, next, came the Alawite struggle for survival in Syria itself, with a growing dependency on Iran, Hezbollah and Russia.

Egypt experienced two revolutions in three years, as well as increasing alienation from the US, and faces mammoth economic challenges. The Hashemites face both spillovers from the Syrian and Iraqi wars and signs of discontent amongst their Bedouin core constituency. And, finally, the US, traumatized by its ventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, and possibly losing some interest as a result of its emerging energy independence, has taken a step back from policing the region. A mix of difficulties in “reading the map”, an emerging risk- and cost-averse attitude, and declining strategic effectiveness have resulted in frequent American failures when it comes to turning its desired policies into reality.

In more recent years, the sequential tumble of Arab states, and, inseparably, the decline of the notion of distinct Arab nationhoods (namely, the existence of individual Arab national identities such as an Iraqi identity, a Syrian identity, etc) have further intensified the instability. Not only have several states born from the Sykes-Picot system tumbled

(Syria, Iraq and, arguably, Lebanon¹), but this collapse of distinct Arabic nationhood has also imploded states on the Arab peninsula (Yemen) as well as in north and east Africa (Libya, Sudan, etc). The notion of distinct Arab nationhoods can be traced back to events surrounding both World Wars, which gave birth to a host of essentially artificial states, lacking coherence in terms of solidarity, ethnicity, culture or faith. In many cases, even a century of forcefully superimposed nationhood generated neither common coherent identities nor much substance in the form of civil society, broad-based sociopolitical systems or a balanced economy.

Not surprisingly, some rising forces – unleashed by the collapse of distinct Arab national identities – are not committed to the old borders or nationhoods. Such forces are predominantly Sunni Jihadists, local tribes and clans, and distinct ethnic groups such as Kurds, Druze and others.

The road ahead for the emerged Arab state frailty is unclear; at least three alternatives may be considered. First, that parts of the Middle East will revert to a pre-Peace of Westphalia-like reality, in which the nation state is not the primary form of sociopolitical organization. Local kinsfolks, religion-based movements and supranational coalitions with a shared identity may compete with nationhood to constitute the nuclear sociopolitical unit. The second alternative is that some states will re-emerge, but this time on the basis of natural human borders created around ethnicity or faith. Indeed, some envisage the future of Syria and Iraq in the form of four states: Alawite, Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish². This conjecture might be too cleancut, both in its absence of sufficient “pixelization” (for example, it presumes that Sunnis are a single coherent population), as well as in the containment of spillovers to neighboring countries. The future political map might be more fragmented.

The third alternative for the future of the frail states is that an actor or a coalition of actors will prevail in battle over its adversaries, and gain control over what is essentially the territory of Syria, Iraq or other such frail states. However, that would only bring back the reality of an autocratic regime that suppresses its adversaries and, in so doing, maintains control of a territory. In and of itself, such victory in battle would not generate a coherent national identity or a fully competent state, and such cardboard states would, again, suffer from long-term inherent weaknesses and be prone to fail.

1. B. Berti, “Lebanon’s Growing Fragility”, Institute for National Security Studies (“INSS”), *Insight*, No. 708, June 11, 2015.

2. G. Sa’ar and G. Siboni, “Farewell to Syria”, INSS, *Insight*, No. 754, October 13, 2015.

The paper first attempts to map future key players, arguing that five powers could dominate the regional game in the next decade: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey and Iran. It assesses the role of non-state and global actors in the regional game, before identifying future fault lines and subjects of regional competition. It then analyzes what drives military effectiveness, and examines the military paradigm of the key players and the effectiveness of these paradigms in the emerging contexts, arguing that none of them was designed for such contexts. Therefore, in the main, key regional players mostly lack the military capability to overthrow their peers using hard power (though some are vulnerable to subversion) and struggle to effectively shape most of the conflicts that are conducted on distant, third-party soil. Given the time it takes to change the paradigms and capabilities of military organizations, the analysis argues that, even at the far end of the current and visible procurement plans – in a time horizon of a decade – the capabilities gap is likely to persist.

Finally, this analysis examines the risk of proliferation of nuclear weapons, arguing that the Iranian endeavor is likely to drive Sunni powers to the nuclear threshold either after or even before the nuclear agreement's 10 to 15-year horizon, and examines the proliferation of rudimentary chemical, biological and radiological weapons as the non-states' weapon of choice for mass impact.

The Future Middle East: Actors and Fault Lines

Actors

The first step in analyzing the future Middle Eastern military balance of power is to attempt to identify the potential future key players. It can be argued that there are only four real nation states in the Middle East: Egypt, Israel, Turkey and Iran. Each of the four faces significant challenges, yet they also seem to possess sufficient internal solidarity, shared identity, coherence and functioning state tools. Even in the event of a revolution (Iran 1979, Egypt 2011 and 2013, and debatably an ongoing slow-motion revolution in Turkey, potentially accelerating following the July 2016 failed coup d'état), the state framework remained cohesive and functioning. And even during the short-lived Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt, the Morsi administration proved to be more Egyptian and business-like than pan-Muslim and ideological. Given this relative resilience to the specific type of upheaval that is currently engulfing the region (in which less coherent or other-than-nation states often fail), and given their relative economic, political or military strength, it is therefore more likely than not that each of these four nation states will continue to play a leading role in the foreseeable future.

The second group of actors is the southern monarchies: Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the other peninsula principalities, constituting much of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Although they have to date survived the turmoil of the so-called Arab Spring, they suffer from weaker cohesion, questionable shared national identity, or looser state tools. Nevertheless, even though one may legitimately wonder whether the House of Saud will continue to rule its domain in a five to ten-year horizon, Saudi Arabia necessitates special cataloging due to its exceptional importance and power. Together with the four Middle Eastern nation states, Saudi Arabia will be considered as one of the five primary state actors, or the 4N+1. To a degree, Saudi Arabia will also be regarded as a representation of the GCC and in particular the UAE.

Then there are the rest of the actors, mostly found in the Arab state-frailty category: non-state actors, anti-state actors and would-be-state claimants. While the role of local kinsfolk and tribes as well as distinct

ethnic groups cannot be ignored, the most common prototyping of the forces operating in the state vacuum is that of Islamic groups. Yet the umbrella title “Islamic” captures too many different variants to be useful. Shiite non-state actors are often part of a supranational system orchestrated by Iran, and to a degree it is legitimate to wonder if they should indeed be classified as non-state. Some Islamist actors have distinctive ethnic or territorial ties (e.g. Hamas), while others are “global” (e.g. Al Qaeda). Some recognize nation-statehood (e.g. the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, in its de facto standing while in power in Egypt), while others aspire to form a pan-Arab or more commonly pan-Islamic state or caliphate (e.g. ISIS). Some are antagonistic to state sponsorship (e.g. ISIS, again) while others welcome it (e.g. Hezbollah). An attempt to capture the full range of at least dozens of forces rising in the state-frailty category must therefore portray a highly pixelized picture, which exceeds the scope of this paper.

As discussed above, the road ahead for the Arab state vacuum is unclear, and may include at least three equally viable scenarios (as mentioned above). However, what is in plain sight is that, in such territories as Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya, all-encompassing distinct national identities are nearly nonexistent, civil society is likewise unevolved, and the sociopolitical structure is force-based. These characteristics are also prevalent below the surface in some other Sunni Arab states, where they have not yet erupted to the surface. As the time it takes for a society to transform itself is measured in generations, what could be argued is that in any future scenario, even at a time horizon of a generation, the likelihood of the emergence of coherent and substantive Sunni Arab nation states is low. This Sunni Arab sociopolitical bedrock is an incubator for such forces as the old Muslim Brotherhood, contemporary Al Qaeda and ISIS, as well as similar future players; hence their re-emergence may be a recurring, characterizing phenomenon.

A related characteristic is the question of how pragmatic the political will of non-state actors is, and as such, of how relevant their analysis is to the understanding of the realpolitik game. On the one hand, the actions of an actor such as Hezbollah are coherent with Iranian political will, which provides it with a rationale and purpose, and thus Hezbollah is part of the political game. On the other hand, some extreme Sunni Jihadists (though definitely not all) either cannot articulate a clear political will, or their political will is so impractical and unachievable that it cannot be seriously regarded as providing violence with a political rationale. In that sense, their use of violence appears almost divorced from the inner-track realpolitik game.

Fault Lines

Status-quo Defenders and Challengers

The second step in analyzing the future Middle Eastern military balance of power is identifying potential future fault lines, or, in other words, who will compete with whom, and over what.

For decades, many viewed³ the key configuration of the Middle East as pertaining to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Yet, it can be argued that the Arab-Israeli conflict is nearly over. Several of Israel's adversaries have tumbled (Syria, Iraq, Libya), while most of the surviving Arab Sunni regimes are emerging, if away from the public eye, as de facto allies of Israel (Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and some other southern monarchies). Indeed, Egypt and Israel collaborate in the fight against Sunni Jihadists in the Sinai Peninsula⁴, and Israel permitted the Egyptian military to deploy to the peninsula much larger forces than those stipulated under the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement. Both countries also coordinate their steps vis-à-vis the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip. Israel is reportedly also putting aside Egyptian debt of nearly USD 1bn as a gesture of good will⁵. Reports also indicate that Israel has handed over to Jordan a squadron of attack helicopters⁶, that Israeli forces are assisting the defense of the Jordanian realm against Jihadists, and that Israel and Jordan are collaborating with regards to the Russian military presence in Syria⁷. Israeli-Saudi relations have recently begun to surface, including a first-of-its-kind overt visit by a Saudi delegation to Israel,⁸ and reportedly these relations even began to diplomatically formalize in connection with Egypt's handover of two strategically important islands to Saudi Arabia⁹.

Israel's adversarial relations with Arab actors such as Hezbollah or the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) are driven by Iranian – not Arab –

3. See, even, James A. Baker III, Lee H. Hamilton and others, "The Iraq Study Group Report: the Way Forward, a New Approach", US Institute of Peace, Washington, 2006, in which the resolution of the challenges of Iraq is surprisingly presented as interlocked with the Arab-Israeli conflict.

4. A. Harel, "Israeli Drone Strikes in Sinai Point to Close Defense Cooperation with Egypt", *Haaretz*, July 12, 2016.

5. D. Wainer, "Israel, Egypt Said Nearing Compromise on Natural Gas Dispute", *Bloomberg*, May 18, 2016.

6. "Israel Gives Jordan Helicopters for Border – U.S. Sources", *Reuters*, July 23, 2015.

7. L. Todd Wood, "Jordanian King Says Israel and Jordan Confronted Russian Aircraft Near Syria's Border", *Washington Times*, March 26, 2016.

8. "Former Israeli, Saudi Arabian Officials Talk Iran Nuclear Threat at DC Event", *Jerusalem Post*, May 7, 2016; B. Ravid, "Former Saudi General Visits Israel, Meets With Foreign Ministry Director-general", *Haaretz*, July 22, 2016.

9. G. Cohen, "Israel: Saudi Arabia Gave Written Assurances Over Freedom of Passage in Tiran Straits", *Haaretz*, April 12, 2016.

contexts. Hence, what is left of the broader Arab-Israeli conflict is mostly the Palestinian one, the resolution of which is no longer a precondition for discrete government-to-government understandings between Israel and conservative Arab regimes. However, this is of course subject to the risk of a revolution in Cairo, Amman or Riyadh, which might lead to a reorientation of these states' policies.

Arguably, the new primary fault line in the Middle East is between those who seek to preserve the pre-existing regional system and those who seek to rearrange it in their favor. The defenders of the system are Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, the rest of the GCC and Israel, and they seek to coordinate their steps, as described elsewhere in this paper. However, Saudi attempts to create tight political-military formations in the shape of the GCC or the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT) have not been particularly successful, other than on a case-by-case basis; mostly because the larger actors follow their own distinct interests (for example, Egypt disagrees with Saudi Arabia over Syria, and Pakistan (an IMAFT member) lacks the appetite for adopting a blunt anti-Iranian policy).

Those who seek to challenge the pre-existing regional order, each in an uncoordinated – even mutually exclusive – attempt to rearrange it in their own favor, are Iran, Sunni jihadists, and to a degree Turkey; possibly even Qatar (which plays on several different teams interchangeably). However, as Iran manages to win over footholds and clients, and carves out its bid for a new order, it and Saudi Arabia often alternate positions with regard to the (changing) order: indeed, in showcases such as Syria and mostly Iraq, it is Iran that defends its (new) order and Saudi Arabia that is challenging that order.

An examination of the objective conditions and contextual competitions amongst the $4N+1$ actors reveals the following key characteristics: first, competition is mostly conducted between non-bordering actors; second, it is mostly conducted on third-party soil (e.g. Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and, in contrast, also in the Shiite provinces of Saudi Arabia); and third, it is mainly conducted in the failing states' power vacuum (although not always, as demonstrated in the case of Bahrain).

Strategic considerations do not necessarily predetermine the future dynamics among the $4N+1$. In the past, political formations were tighter, and actors' respective vectors had to be more aligned with the weighted mean vector of the political bloc they belonged to. As political formations become looser, centrifugal forces strengthen, the differentiation between actors surfaces, and their respective vectors diverge. One effect of this is that the relationships between actors are less predetermined and less

dictated by affiliation with a political formation. Further, part-competitor part-partner relationships emerge, in which two actors may collaborate on one issue yet compete on another.

Consequently, as political structures become less tight, future options are wide open, and alliances between the 4N+1 actors may change with the context. For the time being at least, the current triangle of surviving Sunni Arab states and Israelis versus Iran and its Shiite supranational cluster versus Turkey may continue, as the two strong non-Arab Muslim states may push their way into the Arab power vacuum. Indeed, Turkey and Iran are potentially the fiercest competitors, although their competition has so far remained surprisingly subdued. A multilateral Middle Eastern “Great Game” for footholds and clients may intensify, with interests and coalitions that vary from one context to another.

Other fault lines pertain to non-state actors, such as distinct ethnic groups (e.g. the Kurds) or local tribes and clans, which are potentially more assertive in their attitudes to the frail artificial states. Yet the most observable non-state actors are the competing Sunni jihadists bidding for a new order of their own making, and Shiite non-state actors that play in something of a concert under Iran’s baton.

Competition over Natural Resources and Access Routes

Natural resources and access to them have long been the subject of Middle Eastern competition, yet attention should be drawn to two potentially emerging points of competition: first, the Red Sea and Bab-el-Mandeb Straits and, second, the East Mediterranean Gas Basin.

The Suez Canal has long been a focal point for armed conflict, yet all traffic heading to or from the canal must also navigate via the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb Straits. Freedom of access via these seaways is a vital interest of Egypt, Israel and Jordan. The Red Sea is a primary route for Gulf oil headed to Europe and North America. However, freedom of access via the Red Sea and Bab-el-Mandeb Straits might be threatened in the future by an Iranian footprint in Yemen, on the African shore of the Red Sea, and by repeated though not-yet-significant visits by Iranian navy vessels.

In the past few years, some of the world’s largest offshore gas finds and prospects have been discovered in the economic waters of Israel, Greek Cyprus, Egypt, and seemingly Syria too – the geopolitical effects of which have not yet crystallized. To date, the largest proven reserves were found in the exclusive economic zones (waters) of Israel and Greek Cyprus, as

demarked in a bilateral agreement between the two governments. This bilateral agreement is contested by the Turkish Cypriot government – backed by Turkey – and by the Lebanese government. Indeed, both the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot governments are claiming to grant licenses for exploring the same sea blocks. The Greek Cypriot government's position is backed by Greece and Israel, with Russian support as well. Indeed, Russia seems to complement or hedge its bid for naval bases and offshore gas sources in Syria with a foothold in Greek Cypriot ports and offshore gas reservoirs. This, in turn, may spread Russian-Turkish friction into the Eastern Mediterranean as well.

However, recent gas finds may also serve as a regional stabilizer. Israel may emerge as a prime provider of gas to Jordan, the Palestinian Territories, perhaps even Turkey. It remains to be seen if, following the recent discovery of Egyptian gas prospects, Egypt would still require Israeli gas. In any event, Israel, Egypt¹⁰, Greek Cyprus, Greece and other regional players (perhaps even Turkey) may collaborate in the construction of joint high-cost infrastructure (pipelines, LNG, etc)¹¹.

Gas and oil have further implications for regional stability or the lack thereof: many Arab economies as well as the Iranian economy depend heavily on energy exports¹². Energy revenues stabilize these countries' sociopolitical systems through social payments, subsidies and public-sector jobs. Indeed, following the so-called Arab Spring, the flow of funds intended to restabilize sociopolitical systems has significantly increased. Energy revenues also enable the offering of support to secondary dependents; Saudi Arabia and other Gulf principalities contribute to the financing of Egypt, Jordan and Morocco. Currently, as additional energy sources are being developed (mostly fracking of shale gas and oil), and as Iranian oil is rejoining the supply side – following the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)¹³ – energy prices are declining, and so is the ability of energy producers to fund their own sociopolitical systems and those of their secondary dependents.

Consequently, low energy prices entail two risks: first, a risk to the stability of some of the region's sociopolitical systems, and second, an

10. A. Abdel Ghafar, "Egypt's New Gas Discovery: Opportunities and Challenges", Brookings Doha Center, September 10, 2015.

11. J. Mankoff, "Eastern Mediterranean Energy", Statement before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats, Center of Strategic & International Studies, July 25, 2013.

12. Y. Guzansky and S. Even, "Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States Amidst Falling Oil Prices and Regional Upheavals", INSS, *Insight*, No. 744, September 7, 2015.

13. I.e. the Vienna Agreement on Iran's nuclear program.

enhanced tacit motivation to push energy prices up by generating political or even military crises that would change the equation.

What adds flammability is the Saudi policy of lowering energy prices as a means to pressure Iran and foil its post-JCPOA economic recovery, as well as drive some American fracking companies out of business, and possibly even punish Russia for its position on Syria and punish the US for JCPOA. Indeed, so far, Saudi Arabia has been willing to pay significant short-term prices – such as incurring unprecedented budget deficits, cuts in socially pacifying subsidies, and a sharp decline in foreign currency reserves – in order to pursue its objectives. Other oil producers (such as Bahrain and Oman) and secondary dependents (such as Egypt and Jordan), however, are more vulnerable to short-term austerity, and Iran considers Saudi behavior to be a form of economic warfare. Saudi Arabia's current low oil-price policy therefore puts it at odds with Iran and even Russia.

Military Effectiveness and the Primacy of Context

A comprehensive analysis of the question of what enables military effectiveness falls outside the scope of this analysis, yet it could be argued that neither size nor budget, nor even technology, drives military effectiveness. In a nutshell, it would be contended that military effectiveness is the result of (1) culture, (2) paradigm¹⁴ and (3) context.

Military culture includes, inter alia, common values; a state of mind; a sense of vitality, urgency and sharpness; the drivers of internal dynamics (e.g. excellence and meritocracy versus formal status and privilege); mutual trust within the organization; empowerment of subordinated levels; a willingness and desire to assume responsibility; open-mindedness and the drive to do whatever it takes (planned or improvised) to accomplish one's missions; encouragement of independent and unconventional thinking; risk- and failure-tolerance; honesty and transparency regarding underperformance, and a desire to improve, and a sense of ability as well as a sense of being a winning organization. Gauging the cultures of the different regional military organizations falls outside the scope of this analysis.

Military paradigm refers to the manner in which a military organization conceptualizes its challenges and the way in which it intends

14. R. Tira, *The Nature of War: Conflicting Paradigms and Israeli Military Effectiveness*, Brighton/Portland/Vancouver, Sussex Academic Press, 2009.

to accomplish its objectives in such reference scenarios. The paradigm drives the force's buildup, training and doctrine, and eventually strategy too. The military paradigm often reflects the way in which an actor perceives its own subjective competitive advantage and disadvantage, as well as those of the potential future opponent, and the attempt to dictate the terms of future armed conflicts so that they would revolve around the actor's competitive advantage and the opponent's competitive disadvantage. As discussed elaborately below, there are significant differences between the military paradigms of, for example, Turkey (masses of main battle platforms), Israel (standoff network of ISR and precision firepower) or Iran (asymmetric and subversive). The question of which paradigm would prevail, if any, also depends on the third variable: context.

Context is the environment in which the paradigm is being put to the test: the policies it needs to serve or resist; policy constraints on the use of the paradigm; the geographical, physical, economic, diplomatic and human characteristics of the specific conflict; the characteristics of the opponent; the opponent's paradigm, and the bilateral dynamics vis-à-vis the opponent. Context is the answer to questions such as why has a specific conflict erupted? How it is different from other conflicts? What would constitute success for either belligerent? Indeed, a military paradigm that could successfully serve one policy in a given theater against a specific opponent may still fail in the service of another policy in a different theater or against a different opponent. As will be argued below, none of the military paradigms of the key 4N+1 actors was designed for the contexts that are emerging in the Middle East. Hence their effectiveness is limited.

Therefore, a precondition to analyzing the future Middle Eastern balance of power is better understanding of contexts: a zooming-in on several important players, policies, dynamics, risks and interests.

Iran

Over the past two centuries, Iran's policy and military personality was defensive¹⁵, reflecting two underlying assumptions: that Iran was a victim of third-party aggression, and that such third parties were stronger than Iran¹⁶. However, not only have the threats on Iran diminished, but a power vacuum has emerged around the country: the USSR collapsed and new, mostly Muslim, states now serve as a buffer between Iran and Russia;

15. G. Friedman, "Iran's Strategy", Stratfor Global Intelligence, April 10, 2012.

16. J. Matthew McInnis, "Iran's Strategic Thinking, Origins, and Evolution", American Enterprise Institute, May 2015.

European powers reduced their regional footprint; contemporary Turkey is not as threatening as the Ottoman Empire, and is somewhat directionless; Sunni rule in Iraq was toppled, and with it the threat of a pan-Arab or pan-Sunni front diminished; the US withdrew from Iraq and is withdrawing from Afghanistan, Iran's eastern and western neighbors respectively, and thereafter seems reluctant to engage in additional armed conflicts; and Afghan Pashtuns are currently not in a position to pose a threat.

There is no indication of any recent institutionalized reassessment and revision of its national objectives, policy and strategy by Iran. However, by observing Iran's conduct, it can be concluded that Iran is drawn into the power vacuum that has emerged around it. Indeed, Iranian hegemony bids are put forward in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. Its footprint can also be found in Eritrea, Gaza, Bahrain and Shiite eastern regions of Saudi Arabia, as well as in central Asia and the Caucasus. Iran's hand was always on the Straits of Hormuz, but it may be attempting to also place its hand on the Bab-el-Mandeb Straits – a second global choke-point.

JCPOA may further empower Iran in its bid for regional hegemony. The Vienna Agreement accepts and legitimizes Iran's place at the nuclear threshold, and legitimizes Iran generally. JCPOA could potentially pave the way for an Iranian rapprochement with the West, as well as provide Iran with leverage whereby it could hold JCPOA hostage for other disagreements with the West. The lifting of sanctions will provide Iran with a financial dividend of billions of dollars (estimates are in the range of USD 50-150 bn¹⁷) in the first stage alone; at least some of this will be invested in armament, proxies and war efforts.

However, Iran is far from being on an assured empire-building spree. It could be experiencing an uneasy transition from a defensive actor seeking to dismantle threats by using subversion and proxies to a player claiming regional hegemony. By analogy, if Iran used to be throwing burning matches onto neighboring fields, it is now attempting to transition into a fire department that mobilizes firetrucks to put out fires started by others¹⁸. This is easily observable by contrasting Iran's past efforts (such as attriting the Americans in Iraq to prevent an American threat from Iraqi soil, undermining Sunni rule in Baghdad to prevent an Arab or Sunni threat, or keeping Israel busy in Lebanon by using Hezbollah) with its current

17. See, for example, Amos Yadlin, "Following the Problematic Nuclear Agreement: Scenarios and Policy Recommendations", INSS, *Insight*, No. 722, July 20, 2015. See also the White House's online Q&A on JCPOA : www.whitehouse.gov.

18. R. Tira and Y. Guzansky, "Is Iran in Strategic Equilibrium?", INSS, *Strategic Assessment*, Volume 18, No. 4, January 2016.

efforts (defending Alawite rule in Syria, defending Shiite dominance in Iraq, or attempting to demonstrate patronage in Yemen).

Iran's policy also differs from its traditional approach¹⁹. As a nation without many natural allies, Iran's policy sought to draw fault lines in a manner that dampened its obvious rivalries and placed it and its potential rivals on the same side. Indeed, it was not coincidental that, as the Iran-Iraq war erupted in 1982, Iran adopted two utilitarian policies: it founded Hezbollah, and sought close partnership with Syria's Alawites. These two policies served to dampen the Persian-Arab and Shiite-Sunni dividing lines and substitute them with a sharpened Muslim-Israeli fault line. Yet Iran's new policies are less utilitarian. With its growing footprint in multiple theaters, Iran manages to alienate and antagonize most regional powers, and, with its exploitation of sub-state actors within the Arab world, is unearthing deep, primal Arab fears. Consequently, the impractical outcome of Iran's new policies is the creation of a new coalition of its own making: that of most regional players versus Iran.

Israel

Israel has witnessed a dramatic change in its geostrategic landscape, which was previously defined by the Arab-Israeli conflict. Israel's adversaries such as Syria and Iraq have nearly collapsed, and surviving Sunni Arab states such as Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia are Israel's current de facto partners in a tacit collaboration against the common threats of the Shiite crescent, Sunni Jihadists and Turkish impulsiveness. Adversarial relations with Hezbollah and the PIJ are driven by Iranian and not Arab contexts, and all that is left of the broad Arab-Israeli conflict is the one with the Palestinians. And the Palestinian issue is no longer a precondition for discrete government-to-government and military-to-military collaboration with the surviving Arab regimes.

Jordan, in particular, has a near-symbiotic relationship with Israel²⁰. The Hashemites benefit from Israeli intelligence-gathering supremacy in the region, as well as from Israeli force projection into Transjordan²¹,

19. For additional background on Iran's traditional defense personality, see M. Eisenstadt, "The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Religion, Expediency, and Soft Power in an Era of Disruptive Change", Middle East Studies at the Marines University, *MES Monograph*, No. 7, November 2015.

20. O. Eran and E. Grove, "Threats to Stability in Jordan", INSS, *Strategic Assessment*, Volume 18, No. 2, July 2015. See also R. Tira, "The Jordan Valley in an Israeli-Palestinian Peace Agreement", INSS, *Strategic Assessment*, Volume 17, No. 1, April 2014.

21. See for example "La Jordanie ouvre son ciel aux drones israéliens", *Le Figaro*, April 21, 2013. See also footnote 4 above.

which deters foreign forces from entering Jordan and, in a limited manner, also deters some homegrown threats to the Jordanian crown. Jordan benefits from Israeli water supply and, in the future, probably also gas supply. It, in turn, provides Israel with pacification of its longest border, and strategic depth all the way to western Iraq and southern Syria. Jordan isolates Israel from Iraq, a consideration of increasing importance as Iran becomes a dominant force in Iraq, and also buffers Saudi Arabia from the upheavals of Syria and Lebanon. Hence, Jordan's stability is a vital interest of Israel and the other status quo defenders. The House of Hashim, however, faces mounting challenges: a flood of refugees from the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, the risk of a spillover of Sunni Jihadist campaigns into Jordan, and domestic unrest (even amongst the Jordanian crown's traditional Bedouin backers).

Israel correctly assesses that it has limited competence to shape or decide the political dynamics of third parties such as Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. Therefore, while it has vital interests in these theaters, it has adopted a fairly passive stance of non-involvement, intervening mostly in the narrow contexts of interdicting transfers of high-impact weapons or of collaborating with such welcoming partners as the Egyptians, Hashemites, Druze and, to a lesser degree, the Kurds. Israel has not seen the regional turmoil as an opportunity to forcefully promote a more favorable new Israeli order (say in Lebanon or Syria), and has not opted to vigorously participate in a Middle Eastern "Great Game".

Of the two main emerging threats – the Iranian-Shiite supranational and the Sunni Jihadist – Israel sees the Iranian-Shiite threat as more significant. This is despite the fact that Sunni Jihadists occasionally though infrequently turn against Israel, may threaten the Hashemite rule in Jordan, or may gain influence amongst the Palestinians or the Muslim minority inside Israel itself. Furthermore, Iran and its proxies have a proven track record of being practical in the establishment of a fairly regulated, utilitarian and predictable relationship with Israel. Many Sunni Jihadists have not yet developed such a pragmatic attitude.

Nonetheless, so far Sunni Jihadists have not prioritized Israel as a target, even as Ghabhat Al-Nusra (now realigned as Ghabhat Fateh al-Sham) controls much of the Syrian-Israeli border²². More importantly, the Iranian-Shiite cluster poses a much graver military threat than the Sunni Jihadist one. From an Israeli perspective, the Sunni Jihadist threat seems

22. Following the Jihadists' current inside-out approach: prioritizing first "blasphemous" Sunnis, then Shiites, then other religious denominations. See, for example, ISIS's Al-Naba magazine, March 15, 2016.

to consist of more-of-the-same terror, border skirmishes or some standoff fire, and could be summed up as a military nuisance. Iran and its proxies, however, represent a much weightier threat, ranging from the nuclear threat to a hundred thousand rockets and missiles, shore-to-sea/shore missiles, rudimentary cruise missiles, UAVs, advanced surface-to-air missiles, competent intelligence and electronic warfare capabilities, cyber, etc. Therefore, from an Israeli perspective, there is an advantage in the continued mutual attrition of Shiites and Sunni Jihadists, which keeps them both – but mostly the Shiites²³ – preoccupied and pinned-down to each other.

The Palestinian question does not occupy a significant place in the underlying strategic calculations of the major regional players, yet its footprint in the public and media sphere is substantial, especially in Israel's relations with the West. Nonetheless, reality offers little by way of viable, sustainable solutions. The Palestinian internal sociopolitical arena is dominated by Fatah (a sibling of the Baath movement), Hamas (a franchise of the Muslim Brotherhood), the PIJ (an Iranian proxy) and defiant local tribes and clans. These are similar ingredients to those used in baking the contemporary Syrian and Iraqi cakes, and are far from representing a recipe for a coherent, peaceful nation state. Indeed, a potential Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank would probably yield a similar political and security result as the 2005 withdrawal from the Gaza Strip; hardly an appealing proposition for either Israel or Fatah. Therefore, in spite of contrary rhetoric, there is probably a hidden political equilibrium between Israel and Fatah, as both sides realize that it is the Israeli military that keeps Fatah in power in the West Bank. Indeed, in spite of contrary rhetoric and occasional violence, there is probably a hidden political equilibrium between Israel and Hamas too: Hamas cannot accommodate formal peace with either Israel or Fatah, and Israel needs Hamas as an argument against an externally imposed settlement.

Egypt

Egypt is the historic leader of the Arab world. Yet its dire economic situation and high birthrate have created a range of challenges to its internal political stability and ability to fund regional political and military efforts²⁴.

23. See for example J. Moore, "Israeli Defense Minister: I Prefer ISIS to Iran on Our Borders", *Newsweek*, January 20, 2016.

24. Y. Gal, "El-Sisi and Egypt's Economic Future: Fundamental Challenges, Bold Moves, and High Risks", INSS, *Strategic Assessment*, Volume 18, No. 2, July 2015, p. 21-34.

Egypt is not only suffering from internal security challenges emanating from the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi movements in its heartland, but also from a host of challenges radiating from Libya and the Sinai Peninsula. Sinai has witnessed a rise of Sunni Jihadist movements as well as unrest amongst indigenous Bedouin tribes (Bedouin tribesmen are often joining Jihadist movements). The Peninsula has also become a smuggling hub for Hamas, Iran and a number of well-armed criminal organizations. Fighting in the Sinai Peninsula resulted in the fielding of Egyptian forces larger than those stipulated by the Israeli-Egyptian demilitarization agreement, yet Israel offered Egypt a “free hand”²⁵ in Sinai and even reportedly provided discreet assistance.

Egypt’s long-standing economic hardship and preoccupation with its own internal challenges have resulted in it having a more modest than expected footprint in regional matters, with practically no clients or proxies. Indeed, its role in the struggles in Syria and Iraq is marginal, with a more-symbolic-than-substantial involvement in its historic backyard – Yemen. Furthermore, Egypt’s financial dependency on third parties – mostly Saudi Arabia and the Gulf principalities – is high, and it is difficult to envisage Egypt undertaking significant regional endeavors solo, without third-party backing. Egypt’s financial dependency on Saudi and Gulf petrodollars sometimes sits uncomfortably with the occasional absence of common views on issues such as Syria, Hamas, etc.

In 2015 Italian energy company Eni made what it called a “world class supergiant gas discovery” at its Zohr Prospect, in the deep waters of Egypt²⁶. The economic and thus political and military outcomes of this gas discovery remain to be assessed.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia’s traditional policy and defense personality reflected preferences for operating discreetly behind closed doors and for soft power. Saudi Arabia preferred to pull the strings from behind the scenes, while leaving the center stage and limelight to players with a stronger appetite for a blunt, head-on approach.

However, Sunni rule in Iraq collapsed and with it the main power that contained Iran; Egypt is preoccupied with its internal challenges; the Alawites are no longer potential partners for moves such as the Taif

25. E. Miller, “Israel giving Egyptian army free hand in Sinai, official says”, *The Times of Israel*, July 17, 2015.

26. “Eni discovers a supergiant gas field in the Egyptian offshore, the largest ever found in the Mediterranean Sea”, Eni.com, Press release, August 30, 2015.

agreement; and, at least from some perspectives, Obama's US has taken a step backwards from effectively and credibly complying with the historic arrangements between the two countries.

Concurrently, Saudi Arabia finds itself facing a surge in threat levels from both Shiite competitors and Sunni Jihadists. This occurs in the middle of transition to a younger generation²⁷ of more risk-taking princes, and at a time when it is aggressively wielding its oil weapon, which may still prove to be a double-edged sword.

Saudi Arabia now finds itself in the unprecedented position of running point and fielding forces in Bahrain and Yemen, as the last significant status quo-defending Sunni Arab player (together with its GCC partners). It is the main Sunni Arab state with a robust reach into the conflicts in the frail Arab states, and is backing a number of clients and proxies in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere.

Due to Saudi Arabia's position as the "last man standing", its competition with Iran on third-party soil, and Iran's interests in the Gulf, undercutting Saudi Arabia is a top priority for Iran. Iran's growing regional footprint can be seen from the Saudi perspective as an Iranian effort to encircle it. Either directly or through proxies, Iran operates along much of Saudi Arabia's perimeter – from southern Iraq to the Shiite populations of Bahrain and eastern Saudi Arabia, Hormuz, Yemen and, until recently, Sudan.

These changing realities push Saudi Arabia towards greater self-reliance, both politically and militarily. However, it is also cultivating its partnerships, from Pakistan to its GCC allies. Indeed, since actors such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq, on the one hand, have left a political and military vacuum behind them, and, on the other, actors such as the UAE have managed to develop their economic and military muscles, the southern monarchies find themselves playing a greater role²⁸ both in funding actors such as Egypt and Jordan and in applying military force in theaters such as Yemen, Syria and Libya.

Turkey

Erdogan's Turkey has made a number of apparently clear policy statements (such as those relating to EU accession, "zero problems with neighbors",

27. Y. Guzansky, "A Game of Thrones: Royal Succession in Saudi Arabia", INSS, *Strategic Assessment*, Volume 17, No. 4, January 2015.

28. J. Kinninmont, "Future Trends in the Gulf", *Chatham House Report*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, February 2015.

and the need to oust Syria's President Assad), while some attribute to Turkey more blunt policies such as the bid to "renew Ottoman power". Nonetheless, with the exception of a clear and consistent Turkish policy on the Kurdish question, it is difficult to comprehend what exactly are Turkey's concrete, actionable and achievable policies on a host of issues.

Indeed, Turkey has somewhat vague and alternating policies on the Syrian conflict; on its relationship with regional peers such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel, and on its approach to ISIS and other Sunni Jihadist organizations, as well as on Iran. (Others have argued that Turkey is mostly misunderstood, and that it is mainly attempting to take pragmatic decisions in a complex environment.²⁹) Shockwaves such as the July 2016 failed coup d'état add further uncertainty to the question of Turkish geopolitical objectives. Without being able to distill what Turkey realistically wants, a large piece of the puzzle of Middle Eastern future dynamics remains unclear.

Another aspect of Turkish vagueness relates to achieving a coherence of national objectives and policies, strategy, reference threats and scenarios, and military buildup. As will be elaborated below, in looking at the structure and composition of the formidable Turkish Armed Forces (TAF), alongside Turkey's geostrategic environment, it is difficult to identify realistic scenarios in which the TAF would be optimally applied, especially if complying with the principles of economy of force.

What is clear is that Turkey is seeking an ever-larger degree of self-reliance – both politically (independent of the US and EU) and militarily (as independent of NATO as is practical). Nonetheless, Russia's occasional challenges to Turkey could strengthen the gravitational forces between Turkey and NATO.

ISIS

ISIS is arguably a symptom – not a root cause. Its rapid inflation was the result, not cause, of the breakdown of artificial Arab states and the notion of their distinct national identities³⁰. ISIS offers Sunnis an alternative identity, an inclusive ideological-religious path, and a champion against the rise of the Shi'ite menace. It emerged as a result of a combination of personal rivalries within Al-Qaeda as well as an alternative "line of business" in which former Iraqi military and party leaders can use their

29. R. Outzen, "Power, Islam and Pragmatism in Turkish Strategy", War on the Rocks, April 27, 2016.

30. For background and sources, see Y. Schweitzer and O. Einav, *The Islamic State: How Viable Is It?*, INSS, January 2016.

skills and ambitions following their deBaathification from power. While ISIS's declared long-term objectives are probably unattainable and dwell outside the realm of realpolitik (as do some of its short-term endeavors), the main visible realpolitik objective it might pursue with varying success is to achieve sustainability in some Sunni parts of Iraq and Syria (economic, functional, military, etc).

Now, however, the ISIS brand is extended over at least three different elements: first, it is a regional militia and a would-be caliphate. Second, it is a web of global terror cells, some of which are semi-autonomous. And third, it is an inspiration for groups and individuals worldwide, offering identity and adversarial posturing, yet without necessarily having organizational or functional connections. These three elements do not necessarily form a single coherent structure.

ISIS the would-be-caliphate gained ground amongst Sunni populations that suffer from an identity crisis and lack civil society and an empowered middle class. It thrives where the Sunni masses are silent, and local warlords can call the shots. ISIS the caliphate benefits from an additional tailwind wherever the menace of the Shiites is so strong that Sunnis welcome any champion whatsoever.

This contention has two implications. First, that ISIS's growth potential as a would-be caliphate is limited by the existence of these exact same conditions: its potential is very modest outside territories with significant Sunni populations (e.g. where it encounters Kurds or Shiites), or amongst Sunni societies with a deep-seated national identity (e.g. Egypt or Turkey) – although it may have broader reach, in its capacity as a terror web or as an inspiration.

The second implication is that, even if ISIS is defeated, the sociopolitical ecosystem that brought it about would remain, setting the conditions for the emergence of other similar, though potentially less flamboyant, entities. Following the repeated failure of the notion of nation-building (most noticeably in Iraq and Afghanistan), by now a critical mass of evidence has been accumulated to suggest that this idea should be abandoned. Therefore, it can be concluded that, in the foreseeable future, the above-mentioned sociopolitical ecosystem is unlikely to give birth to very different symptoms. Even if ISIS is overpowered, defiant Sunni Arab warlords are probably going to constitute a part of the landscape in a time horizon of at least a generation.

Furthermore, should ISIS survive and be serious in its efforts to establish a caliphate and assume responsibility for territory and people – including the provision of functioning utility services and a sustainable

economy – it would develop state-like vulnerabilities and be tamed by state-like constraints that eventually lead to pragmatism. ISIS the terror organization and ISIS as inspiration may remain relieved of realpolitik constraints, may continue to uncompromisingly uphold unattainable policy objectives, and may, in that sense, remain outside the political game.

Global Powers

After 1990, the US was not only the world's sole superpower but also the Middle East's key player. Yet over the past decade, it has been losing its strategic effectiveness and finds it increasingly difficult to turn its policies into reality. America suffers from difficulties in “reading the map”, as demonstrated by its belief that there was an Iraqi nation and that the conditions existed to introduce a functioning democracy in Iraq; by its belief that allowing Hamas to participate in the Palestinian elections was a helpful idea, or most recently in its belief that there is such thing as an “Arab Spring” that could lead to a better reality. It “led from behind” the unnecessary campaign in Libya, which could not have created anything but a worse reality than its status quo ante bellum. Currently, its anti-ISIS military endeavors are unintentionally serving to consolidate Iran's grip over Iraq and the Russian-Alawite-Shiite grip over Syria.

The US, furthermore, found it increasingly difficult to articulate what its policy is, for example with regard to Syria or the Bahrain crises. Having had its self-confidence eroded in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US seems to prioritize risk- and cost-aversion over making genuine efforts to realize its stated policy objectives, as best demonstrated by the Iranian nuclear challenge as well as in the Syrian chemical weapons crisis. A long line of American steps – from turning its back on Mubarak to its position during the Gaza 2014 conflict to what seems to be a rapprochement with Iran at the expense of America's historical alliances – have combined to result in a perceived discounting of the value of American patronage.

Consequently, as far as is practical, regional players' reliance on the US is scaling down. The Gaza 2014 conflict was unprecedented in a manner that attracted insufficient attention: it was the first conflict of its kind to be terminated by the regional powers themselves, while excluding the US from key processes. Indeed, due to Israel's assessment of new regional dynamics (most regional players tacitly being on Israel's side) and its balance of power with the adversary (Hamas), Israel did not even make a serious effort to bring the State Department around and reach understanding with it. As it became apparent that the US was attempting to work with Turkey and Qatar and adopted a stance that was not on the same

page as Israel's, the latter (together with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other traditional allies of the US) pretty much shut off the State Department from the game. American intentional munitions supply disruptions failed to influence Israel's course of action, as Israel assessed that these hiccups would not affect the endgame.

Saudi Arabia's engagement in Bahrain and, to a degree, Yemen established precedents for GCC self-reliant military operations. Saudi collaboration with the US in the Syrian theater is less than partial, and in the aftermath of JCPOA Saudi Arabia is considering a more self-reliant approach for conventional and non-conventional defense. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey are signing massive arms procurement deals with non-American manufacturers (Russian, Chinese, French, etc), and, following munitions supply hiccups during the Gaza 2014 conflict, Israel is beefing up its munitions self-production apparatus.

It is not possible to assess how American attitudes will change in the next administration, yet at least some of the drivers that shaped the past decade are likely to remain in force in the next four to eight years. American mid-ranking officials are also traumatized by their country's experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, setting the conditions for a long-term effect; as the US becomes an energy exporter, fewer resources may be allocated to protecting access to Middle Eastern energy sources; and American demographics are changing, and with them America's worldview and political instinct.

As yet, no other world power can step into America's Middle Eastern shoes, but, in a limited way, Russia is entering into the void left by the US. From arms deals with both America's foes and allies, to its pivotal role in the Syrian chemical weapons crisis, to its deployment of an expeditionary force to the Syrian coast (as well as its potentially short-lived deployment of warplanes to Iran and a similar debated deployment to Turkey), Russia's regional footprint is expanding. Indeed, while America's allies in the region are disappointed with its position on a host of issues, Russia is perceived (rightly or wrongly) as covering its allies' backs, even when the stakes and costs are seemingly higher. President Putin's statement during a visit to Iran that, "unlike others, we are committed to not stabbing our partners in the back³¹", while factually incorrect, is spot on in reflecting the sentiment of America's friends and foes in the Middle East. Not surprisingly, a growing number of regional players are seeking closer dialogue with Moscow.

31. N. Bozorgmehr, "Iran and Russia Reiterate Support for Syria's Bashar Al-Assad", *Financial Times*, November 23, 2015.

A more appropriate interpretation of Russia's deployment into Syria is not that it came to the aid of its battered allies, but rather that both Iran's and America's four-year-long low effectiveness in that theater created a crack into which Russia could enter. Russia was concerned with the emergence of a school of thought that foresaw an American-Iranian rapprochement following JCPOA, and was concerned that the US would begin to see Iran as part of the solution³², leading to an American-Iranian deal over the Levant. Hence, Russia wanted a military foot in the door to prevent any future deal that failed to protect its interests (e.g. a Mediterranean port and maritime access, possibly even a position in the East Mediterranean Gas Basin, as well as Central Asian-Caucasus interests). Considering the risk that Saudi Arabia's low energy prices policy and Iran's additional energy supply post-JCPOA could pose to Russia's energy-based economy and to its very regime, part of Moscow's calculation may also have been to make sure it would wield greater military influence in the region.

Russia, too, follows its own interests and not those of its partners, and may therefore trade some of its Syrian cards also in the context of broader, more important deals, relating to its immediate periphery such as the Ukraine or broader Eastern Europe. As a result, Russia's involvement in Syria, in concert with Iran and Hezbollah, is not necessarily good news for the Shiite supranational crescent. On the one hand, Russia's stance in Syria is greater than before; on the other, Russia will pursue its own self-interest and its future direction is far from guaranteed. A sign of things to come could be Russia's yellow or even green light to Israel to continue attacking arm shipments to Hezbollah that are delivered inside Russia's integrated air-defense system in the Levant, or Russian-Saudi discussions about oil prices.

Considering America's stepping-back, the growing Chinese civilian and military footprint in East Africa and even the Middle East itself, and threats to Europe from Middle Eastern refugees and terrorism, it is conceivable that China³³ and European actors would intensify their presence in the theater. However, it is difficult to see how Chinese or European actors could, in the next five to ten years, introduce a coherent Middle Eastern strategy composed of ambitious yet achievable policy ends, alongside robust military ways and means. At least in the foreseeable

32. S. Heavy, "Saudi Arabia, Iran Must Shape 'Cold Peace,' Obama Says", *Reuters*, March 10, 2016.

33. O. Winter, A. Orion, and G. Lavi, "Egypt and China Following Xi's Visit", INSS, *Insight*, No. 795, February 11, 2016. See also A. Orion, "The Dragon's Tail at the Horn of Africa: A Chinese Military Logistics Facility in Djibouti", INSS, *Insight*, No. 791, February 1, 2016.

future, Chinese and European footprints should be limited to showing the flag, or conducting limited “pokes”, both of which mostly serve public and diplomatic purposes rather than reality-changing ones.

Syria

Syria used to be a key regional player, but the collapse of its governance and would-be national identity turned it into not much more than a chessboard for others to play in. Still, Syria is a useful showcase for demonstrating two points.

The first is the process of loosening political formations, increasing differentiation in the distinct interests of stakeholders, and the emergence of part-competitor part-partner relationships. Indeed, Saudi Arabia wants to replace the Alawite regime with a Sunni government; Egypt is not heavily influential but is surprisingly defiant of the Saudi position on Syria; Turkey wants to weaken Syria’s Kurds and strengthen its Turkmen; Israel wants Iran and its proxies to be pinned down to Syria and bleed for as long as possible; Jordan wants to prevent a southward spillover of the Syrian mayhem; Iran wants to defend the Alawite regime and its access to Lebanon; Russia wants a beachhead on the Syrian coast and access to offshore gas fields as well as cards for its more important global game; Europe wants to stop the wave of refugees; the US wants “a better state of peace” but so far has found it challenging to articulate what that might realistically be; ISIS wants a caliphate; Al-Nusra wants to fight all other parties, though it is open to alternative suggestions as its realignment as Ghabhat Fateh al-Sham suggests; the Kurds want independence; and the Druze want to stay out of harm’s way. (Ordinary Syrians have no vote.)

The second point that can be demonstrated in Syria is the low effectiveness of most of the relevant players. Indeed, so far, some fail to employ an efficient strategy, some do not have the relevant military capabilities, some cannot reach into populations beyond their ethnicity or faith, and some are unwilling to make a commitment and assume the risks and costs associated with heavy involvement in Syria. Hence, for five years (so far) almost none of the actors has effectively orchestrated ways and means that would bring about its desired end state.

This probably means that Syria’s instability is a long-term phenomenon, challenging to resolve either via military means or via the diplomatic process (as the latter is neither backed up by appropriate military means nor able to bring around all relevant stakeholders). Stakeholders may stay partially invested in Syria, neither abandoning nor deciding the conflict, in a time horizon of at least several more years.

Future Military Balance of Power – The Conventional Sphere

It is contended here that that the most pivotal regional participants in the future Middle Eastern balance of power are the 4N+1 forces. Indeed, in spite of numerous challenges and disappointments, the nation state remains to date the most powerful producer of organized political violence. Analyzing the capabilities of non-state forces is also important. The other participants – global forces and non-4N+1 regional players – are not analyzed in this analysis.

Regional Powers

The first step in gauging the 4N+1 conventional military forces is to glance at their respective infrastructural differences: budget trends, human resources and domestic defense industries.

Iran's military apparatus is likely to benefit from significant budget increases as a result of JCPOA, though low oil prices may limit that; Saudi Arabia is beefing up its military expenditure, becoming one of the world's largest arms buyer (the UAE is likewise increasing its defense procurement budget); and Turkey has adopted a long-term policy of increasing its military spending. Egypt suffers from massive budget constraints and its military expenditure is critically dependent on foreign funding, though the impact of its potential new gas finds remain to be assessed. Israel is stuck between growing financial ability to beef up its military apparatus, on the one hand, and, on the other, a change of budgetary priorities away from military spending, partly due to a reduced perception of imminent threats. Israel invests more resources in future weapons even though it has sharply cut the size of its current armed forces. It benefits from high-quality human resources, as compared to the remaining four actors, for whom the drafting of large numbers of quality personnel is a challenge.

Iran's policy is that of self-reliance in arms sourcing. With a less convincing claim for manufacturing a full range of military platforms, the indigenous defense industry is competent in asymmetric weaponry. Iran is capable of producing simple yet effective missiles and rockets, humble

UAVs, shore-to-sea weapons, small naval vessels, etc. Such weapons may not be based on top-notch advanced core technologies, but can provide their user with a fair fighting chance in the attempt to realize its paradigm, generate attrition or disrupt the opponent's operations. One exception to the rule is cyber, in which Iran is probably a top-class source. Iran's homegrown defense industry is increasingly desynchronized with its emerging policy ambitions, and a would-be hegemon requires other tools; hence, either the industry would need to reinvent itself and produce capable main battle platforms, or Iran would need to turn to external sources for top-notch main battle platforms (or reconsider its drifting toward its ambitions of hegemony).

Turkey's policy is to achieve self-reliance in arms procurement. According to the Turkish Under-secretariat for Defense Industries (SSM), Turkey already manufactures more than 60% of its defense equipment, and the proportion is increasing³⁴. The legacy core competence of the Turkish arms industry is the manufacturing of vehicles as well as metal and structural works for main battle platforms, yet Ankara is laboring to broaden its competence (also into high-tech), inter alia, via joint projects, know-how transfer agreements and domestic production of advanced systems under license from foreign companies. This policy is ambitious, yet may face two main challenges: first, the economic viability of an autarkic defense industry is questionable, and second, so far Turkey has not managed to produce best-of-breed weaponry that is superior to external sources.

While Israel manufactures platforms such as main battle tanks, armored personnel carriers (APCs) and missile boats, Israel assesses that self-reliance is neither economic nor practical (also since Israeli-made platforms incorporate critical foreign components such as engines). Indeed, the Israeli domestic defense industry is focused not on the platform but on added-value capabilities and on allowing platforms to operate jointly in synergy (known as network-centric warfare). The Israeli arms industry is indeed recognized as a world leader in unmanned systems, missiles, anti-missile defense, sensors, command-and-control, datalink and communication networks, electronic warfare and cyber.

Egypt's domestic defense industry is fairly rudimentary, highlighted by the assembly of platforms under license from foreign sources. Given Egypt's economic state and an American semi-cold shoulder, it may possibly be interested in diversifying its supply sources, but a change in its

34. C. Forrester, "IDEF 2015: Turkey Aims for Defence Industrial Independence by 2023", *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, May 6, 2015.

domestic capabilities is less foreseeable (as it does not have the technology, manpower or funds to significantly upgrade its domestic defense industry). Saudi Arabia has yet to establish an impressive domestic arms industry, even though it possesses both the financial means and the domestic demand for it. A future Saudi Arabian arms industry could also meet the demand from other GCC partners. Nonetheless, in the next three to five years the Saudi industry would not be able to show much more than an assembly of foreign systems and manufacturing spare parts.

The differences between the various domestic defense industries – from focusing on main battle platforms to concentrating on asymmetric weaponry to focusing on adding advanced capabilities and having platforms operate in synergy in a network – provide important clues to the different defense paradigms of the 4N+1 players.

Array of Paradigms

Both Egypt and Turkey employ an “old school” military paradigm. The Egyptian military is essentially still modeled to refight the 1973 war, with a war paradigm very similar to that of 1973, yet with more advanced hardware and somewhat improved tactics. Its core competence is to move large armored and infantry formations into forward defense positions, under the cover of a mobile integrated air-defense system. Egypt’s focus is still on main battle platforms (such as tanks, frigates, jets, etc).

The Turkish Armed Forces (TAF), second in size within NATO, are also focused on the mass of main battle platforms, though they are making a real effort to advance in the areas of networks and added-value capabilities. This effort is likely to show some results in the coming years. The TAF have spent much of their evolution within the NATO framework, and are interconnected with NATO. This has to some extent held TAF back from developing an ability to operate outside a NATO or coalition context, and has embedded in the TAF its expected participation in NATO’s defensive anti-Soviet paradigm. The TAF’s core competence is manifested in the mass of its ground forces, which are mostly structured to defend Turkey from a ground invasion. Turkey has demonstrated its capability to operate alone against less able adversaries such as the Kurdish PKK no more than a hundred kilometers away from Turkey’s border, including its current incursion into the area bordering Jarablus, yet its ability to operate outside NATO, against competent peer competitors, in an extensive campaign and deep beyond Turkey’s immediate border zone, remains to be demonstrated. Turkey’s procurement plans (from air defenses to heavy-lift

airplanes to frigates) should eventually allow it to increase its standalone war-fighting capabilities, and reduce its reliance on NATO.

Iran's military is nothing but "old school"³⁵; in fact it is an unusual military organization. Based on deep-seated historical assumptions that Iran is both the weaker and the defensive side, facing aggression from much greater forces, the Iranian military is essentially an asymmetric organization. It is built on the assumption that it cannot face the opponent head-on, in symmetric, large-scale battles, and it is therefore structured on three echelons. The first echelon is the conventional army, the Artesh, and some regular-like elements of the Revolutionary Guard. Faced with the reference scenario of an American invasion (as was the case immediately after 2003), the Artesh and Revolutionary Guard developed the Mosaic Doctrine that sought to achieve the long-term attrition of American forces by decentralized guerilla-like warfare in Iran's urban areas. The Iranian maritime buildup is focused on shore-to-sea missiles, deployment of sea mines and swarms of small vessels, rather than on frigates. These are appropriately used in attrition and disruption of seaways, mostly in green-water, not in large-scale symmetric battles in blue-water. Iran also prefers surface-to-air and surface-to-surface missiles over the fighter jet and bomber. Indeed, beginning with its "War of the Cities" missile exchanges with Iraq in 1985, Iran started to prioritize its arsenal of surface-to-surface rockets and missiles for a variety of ranges and with a variety of warheads. Generally, they fall into three categories: either assets for ranges of several hundreds of kilometers that are intended for potential use in Iran's immediate vicinity or across the Gulf; or fewer though longer-range missiles intended mainly for posturing vis-à-vis regional peers; or still fewer missiles with ranges beyond 1,000 km, and a small number with ranges of even beyond 2,000 km, that are intended to deter global actors – beyond the Middle East. Some of Iran's missiles are potentially capable of delivering nuclear warheads. The Iranian regular forces are, however, probably unable to conduct a major ground offensive against a competent peer (perhaps not even successfully defend Iran against a peer competitor), or to dispatch a large-scale expeditionary force with the full array of warranted capabilities.

The second Iranian echelon is clandestine forces, mainly the Quds Force, which is both Iran's boots on the ground in the various theaters of interest as well as an enabler and handler of Iran's proxies and clients. Indeed, the web of proxies and clients constitute the third echelon of Iran's

35. A. S. Hashim, "The Evolution of Iran's Military Doctrine", Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 9, 2013.

defense apparatus. These proxies vary in capabilities from lightly armed militias at the lower end of the spectrum to Hezbollah at its higher end. Indeed, as will be discussed below, Hezbollah possess strong-state-like firepower that surpasses the combined firepower of most NATO members together.

The second and third echelons provide Iran with the competence to attrit its opponents in secondary theaters, pin opponents down while drawing their attention away from Iran, and restrain opponents by providing a lever against them – all in a deniable manner that keeps Iran itself out of harm's way. As demonstrated, for example, in Iraq, Iran's second and third echelons provided it with exceptional competence to understand, infiltrate and shape the internal Iraqi human, social and political landscape – from grassroots to cabinet. It used both unconventional sticks (such as assassinations and kidnapping) and carrots (such as bribery or funding tribal politics). This demonstrates much of Iran's war paradigm.

Israel's defense apparatus and doctrine have undergone profound changes, from being focused on offensive combined arms forces and doctrine to standoff saturated precision firepower steered by real-time targeting-enabling intelligence. While Israel is fielding top-notch main battle platforms, its focus is on both adding capabilities to such platforms as well as interconnecting them in a network. Platforms are fitted with added-value sensors, countermeasures, electronic warfare, advanced missiles, etc. Platforms not only share data in networks, they create synergy: the capabilities embedded in platforms are “unbundled” and made available to the network. One platform may sense a target, another shoot at it, a third platform guide the weapon, a fourth provide battle damage assessment (BDA), and a fifth offer electronic warfare protection. Under the prevailing Israeli paradigm, the network can be seen as orchestrating the fighting, drawing whichever capabilities it needs from the available platforms.

Israel also began focusing on defensive capabilities, from intercepting ballistic missiles, rockets and even mortar shells to shooting down anti-tank missiles and rocket-propelled grenades. Israel is also investing heavily in both defensive and offensive cyber.

As recurring conflicts shifted from an invading coalition of peer competitors backed by a hostile superpower to merely “harassment” by non-state actors backed by a non-bordering regional power, the level of threat represented by such reference scenarios diminished. Israel believes it can now afford to prioritize risk- and cost-aversion over the execution of daring ground offensives. And even when the outcome is less decisive, as in

the 2006 conflict, Israel believes it can now afford such outcomes when weighted against more decisive, yet more costly, alternatives. In fact, since Israel does not face existential threats at present, its trending defense endeavors are centered on optimizing between, on the one hand, defending what are essentially sets of second-grade interests and, on the other hand, costs and risks.

In contrast with the past, the IDF now sees the capturing of, or even presence in, enemy territory as a liability and not an asset. Even as opponents such as Hezbollah acquire high-impact weapons that upgrade the organization's potential effect from "harassment" to inflicting serious damage, the utility of a ground offensive against the organization is limited; as such, upgraded weapons have long ranges and are launched from manifold locations deep inside enemy territory.

Saudi Arabia is one of the world's biggest buyers of advance military hardware, main battle platforms and some added-value capabilities. Yet the Saudis have not yet been able to compose from these pieces of hardware an overall war machine with capabilities that would enable them to maximize the utility of these assets. For example, top-notch Saudi jets in Yemenite skies often cannot rely on Saudi-generated real-time targeting-enabling intelligence. Indeed, Saudi competence in large-scale or time-sensitive operations, from a ground offensive against a competent peer to the suppression of a robust integrated air-defense system, remains to be demonstrated. Similar observations can probably be made with regard to the UAE.

Military Paradigm Tested in Context

The next step in gauging the 4N+1 conventional military forces is evaluating their paradigms in the emerging contexts. While the exact contexts of future armed conflicts cannot be predicted and could only be evaluated in real time, several generalizations about the emerging contexts can be outlined. Indeed, the military paradigms of the 4N+1 were not conceived for such emerging contexts, hence all the 4N+1 should experience challenges in applying their paradigms in these contexts.

If Iran is indeed undergoing a policy transition from being a defensive, subversive actor that seeks to dismantle threats, to being a claimant for regional hegemony, then the Iranian defense apparatus and paradigm are less compatible with this new policy.

Iran's synchronization challenges, as between current policies and its legacy military toolbox, are evident in its protracted engagements in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, in which Iran has failed to deliver timely and decisive

successes. It committed its proxy militias to large-formation ground combats in Iraq, and has even dispatched its air force to carry out strikes. These endeavors are far from Iran's legacy core competence, and have so far delivered unimpressive results. Iran committed Hezbollah, the Quds Force and other Shiite elements to large-formation battles in Syria's cities, yet has not been able to decide the conflict, and the long-drawn-out power vacuum has opened the door for Russian intervention (which may still turn against Iran's interests). Iran nearly made a mistake in Yemen, dispatching its navy for a hegemon-like offshore force projection, only to turn its vessels around as other navies also headed to the theater. Indeed, its naval paradigm is less effective in securing access to Yemen, and Iran finds it difficult to establish robust, continuous supply lines to the Houthis³⁶. Not surprisingly, the Houthis' offensive is being rolled back and they may be coerced to negotiate.

Iran borders Turkey and has no land border with other key peer competitors. The Iranian military is ill-structured for conducting a major ground campaign against Turkey; in any event, the terrain around the border is rough and no vital interests or centers of gravity can be found anywhere near it, making a hypothetical direct ground conflict between Turkey and Iran of little operational utility for either side (though in some contexts limited or local operational designs, such as border skirmishes or attrition, could have a policy utility). The Iranian military paradigm and force buildup are not tailored for directly, symmetrically and robustly reaching Saudi Arabia, Egypt or Israel. Neither its air force nor its navy is capable of conducting extensive, sustainable long-range campaigns.

The Iranian military is not built to dispatch a robust expeditionary force with full war-fighting capabilities against either a peer competitor or even a failed state; the modest performances of the Quds Force in Syria are evidence of that. Indeed, at present, Iran's main self-reach capability is either through its fairly limited arsenal of surface-to-surface missiles or through cyber-attacks. As these are two fairly cost-effective, expedient and simple tools, which can be procured inside Iran itself, it should not come as a surprise if in the next five to ten years Iran will continue to enhance its surface-to-surface missiles and cyber capabilities as key tools for reaching non-bordering competitors.

Iran and Saudi Arabia might engage in the green-water of the Gulf, and may "poke" each other with air- and sea-based fire (mines included) – essentially throwing javelins across the Gulf – but this is unlikely to deliver

36. S. Brom and Y. Guzansky, "The Conflict in Yemen: A Case Study of Iran's Limited Power", INSS, *Insight*, No. 747, September 16, 2015.

a decisive military outcome above a specific battle's level; at the higher levels of war, neither side is likely to overcome the other in conventional war-fighting.

Iran relies on its proxies as a lever (not as a decisive force) against Israel, and may instigate proxy-based subversion against Saudi Arabia, perhaps even posing an existential threat to the Saudi crown's order. Iran is in fact the most competent operator of proxies in the Middle East. However, its proxy-based footprint and reach are limited by the boundaries of religion: the Shiite sphere. While Iran has been operating Sunni proxies such as the PIJ, and has engaged in instrumental relations with such non-Shiite actors as Hamas and even some Kurdish elements, these are exceptions to the rule. Zooming out, it can be argued that Iran's attempted reach is successfully resisted outside its religious core constituency. Accordingly, Iran has so far been unable to shape and decide conflicts in mixed-faith theaters such as Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

Iran should be credited with a high level of self-awareness. Therefore, looking forward, it is expected to revisit either its ends or ways and means: either reconsidering its bid to become a hegemon in theaters with significant non-Shiite populations, as well as restraining its intensifying challenges to the other 4N+1 actors; or developing a military paradigm and toolbox suited to a hegemony-bidder capable of directly confronting its peers (as, for example, is echoed in reports of Iran's planned arm deals, which are focused on main battle platforms³⁷). The latter is a long-term, costly undertaking far from Iran's legacy core competence, though JCPOA's financial dividend may fund such an endeavor.

In a way, the Israel Defense Forces' contemporary order of battle, training and much of its doctrine still correspond with the reference scenario of the 4,000 tanks-strong Egyptian-Syrian offensive of October 1973. And given the tendency to prioritize the riskier over the probable, and to consider the risk of another future revolution in Egypt, it is probably understandable for Israel to shape its paradigm first and foremost for an invasion by bordering peers – even though since 1982 Israel has only been confronted by either non-state or non-bordering opponents.

Israel is probably the 4N+1 actor with the most developed ability to conduct long-range air and naval operations, and it has reportedly operated in non-bordering states such as Iraq, Sudan and Tunisia. Those, however, were operations of a limited objective, scale and duration. Israel would overstretch its current paradigm and capabilities, built

37. "Iran Defense Ministry Heads to Moscow", PressTV, April 26, 2016.

predominantly for bordering conflicts, should it attempt to conduct an extensive, prolonged air or naval campaign in a non-bordering theater, with objectives that are more ambitious than servicing a fairly limited target list. Israel has also carried out brigade-level combat airlifts and an amphibious landing, although these were in locations where its conventional ground forces could offer relief within hours or a few days. It is ill-equipped to dispatch a large-scale expeditionary force to a non-bordering theater in the context of a prolonged, extensive campaign. Israel is probably the only Middle Eastern actor with the capability to suppress on its own a robust opposing integrated air-defense system; a capability which is a precondition for launching any successful conventional large-scale campaign, whether in the air, on the ground or at sea. Israel's most expedient reach to non-bordering competitors may be via cyber.

Israel does not have natural proxies; Middle Eastern clients tend to follow patrons from within their ethnicity or faith. Indeed, with such exceptions as the South Lebanon Army, Israel has engaged in mutually beneficial relations with non-state actors that have preserved their independent political will. Israel's track-record in attempting to politically engineer third parties is fairly disappointing; it did not succeed in its efforts to instigate a regime change in Egypt in the 1950s, or to install a Christian regime in Lebanon in the 1980s, or in several attempts to foster a friendlier Palestinian leadership. It seems as if contemporary Israel is fairly disillusioned with what it can expect to achieve beyond its walls; therefore, perhaps more interesting than what Israel is doing is what it is not doing: it has not made a robust kinetic or non-kinetic attempt to shape the outcome of Syria's civil war (Israel's north-eastern neighbor); it does not attempt to take advantage of Hezbollah's multi-theater stretch and challenge the organization (on Israel's northern border), and it has taken limited steps vis-à-vis the Jihadist threat from the Sinai Peninsula (on Israel's south-western border).

With some resemblance to Israel, the Egyptian paradigm also revolves around fighting the 1973 war again, with improved assets and capabilities. Yet while 1973 is to a great extent still a reference threat for the Israeli paradigm, the latter has significantly changed since the 1970s. Not so for Egypt, whose core competence remains the movement of large mechanized and armored formations over its peripheral desert. This core competence is less useful for the emerging contexts of power projection toward Egypt's non-bordering peers or intervention in non-bordering third-party theaters. The Egyptian air force has modernized, yet it is not structured to bring the full range of capabilities needed for air warfare to a distant theater (such as real-time intelligence-gathering, air control, information fusion and

management, robust electronic warfare, etc). For the Egyptian air force, the capability to operate outside the Egyptian surface-based integrated air-defense system remains to be demonstrated.

The Egyptian navy is the largest in the Middle East, yet it too is mostly structured for green-water operations, and while Egypt has acquired Oliver Hazard Perry (OHP) class frigates and is acquiring Mistral amphibious assault ships, it is questionable whether the Egyptian navy can carry out a large-scale, prolonged campaign in a remote theater if opposed by a competent player (in contrast with, for example, a showing of the flag off Yemen's shore). Indeed, sustaining an expeditionary force with full, modern war-fighting capabilities requires much more than merely being able to deliver assets to a shore with amphibious assault ships, especially when competently opposed by a peer; it requires the establishment of air supremacy offshore and in the landing-zone and expeditionary area of operation; the provision of accurate real-time sea-based and airborne supportive fire; deployable, sea-based or long-range air-carried real-time intelligence-gathering and processing systems; maintaining and securing offshore and onshore lines of communication; appropriate deployable and mobile logistics for sea, air and land platforms as well as personnel; deployable command and control systems; and of course agile combined arms force appropriately trained for such missions. Egypt is far from owning such capabilities, and is likely to stay so even at the far end of its current procurement plans.

It is astonishing that Egypt – the largest Arab country and the traditional leader of the Arab world – is without a meaningful proxy in the main conflicts of the Arab world. Egypt's reach into the conflicts in Syria, Iraq or Yemen is unimpressive, be it politically, economically, via proxy or through direct expeditionary intervention. In such circumstances, Egypt is currently not a key factor in shaping and deciding regional conflicts.

Neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE has managed to put forward a comprehensive, full-capabilities military orchestra, yet with their niches of top-notch military instruments and a significant degree of outsourcing to foreign contractors, the GCC is managing to produce air-launched firepower and even boots on the ground in Yemen, and modestly participate in air campaigns of partial effectiveness in Iraq, Syria and Libya. While Saudi Arabia is procuring longer-range air and naval assets, and is building up its equipment- and personnel-carrying capabilities, it is doubtful whether either Saudi Arabia or the UAE could in the next five to ten years carry out an independent, large-scale, extensive campaign against a non-bordering peer competitor or in a non-bordering failing state, if competently opposed.

Saudi Arabia and its Gulf partners are, however, the most significant patrons of Sunni Arab proxies in the various Middle Eastern theaters. Harnessing their political, religious and economic clout, the Saudis demonstrate the best Sunni Arab reach into these theaters, and are the most relevant Sunni Arab players in attempting to shape such conflicts. Even the Saudis and Gulf principalities, however, fall short of being able to singlehandedly decide the conflicts in the Arab state frailty.

Turkey's paradigm, too, lacks effectiveness in context. In spite of its robust size (in particular, sizable ground echelon), it is doubtful if the TAF could carry out a large-scale campaign against a non-bordering peer competitor, and its standalone (outside NATO or coalition) expeditionary capability is probably insufficient. Turkey's long-range naval operations could be restricted by the reach of its land-based air cover, and the Turkish air force could find it difficult to continuously maintain the full range of capabilities that are needed for air warfare far from its bases (again, outside a NATO context).

While the Ottoman Empire was a leader of sorts in the Sunni world, and governed much of the Arab population, Turkey's reach into the Sunni Arab world is uneasy. Turkey's natural clients in the theaters of conflict are Turkmen, and Turkey finds it more challenging to foster Arab proxies. Hence, even though the Levant was the Ottomans' backyard, Turkey should find it challenging to shape, not to mention decide, the conflicts of the Arab state frailty. Its chances are higher, though, in areas immediately bordering Turkey, in which populations (some Turkmen) and localities are more accessible.

Contextual Military Effectiveness

The military paradigms of the 4N+1 players were designed for defending their respective homelands. They were not designed for the emerging contexts of competition with non-bordering peers or a regional "Great Game" for hegemony and foothold, conducted often on distant third-party soil. Indeed, the emerging strategic environment presents two reach-related challenges: first, the military-geographical reach over long distances, sometimes into non-bordering theaters, in particular if opposed by a competent force; and second, the hard- and even soft-power reach into populations outside the players' respective natural ethnic or religious constituencies.

As a result, the military effectiveness of all players in such contexts should not be particularly high. The 4N+1 actors are not in a position to conduct intensive military campaigns against each other, where the

objectives are annihilation of an opposing military force or its ability to continue fighting³⁸, or capturing significant pieces of land from each other.

The 4N+1 players may still reach each other via limited military operations whose immediate objective could be the infliction of specific or general damage, or generating nuisance and attrition. They could reach each other via cyber-attacks, limited numbers of surface-to-surface missiles, or limited air strike packages; they could affect each other via subversion and proxies, and may operate vis-à-vis seaways or onshore and offshore natural resources.

The 4N+1 actors may conduct limited military operations in the Arab state vacuum, can operate proxies within their natural respective constituencies, and can engage actors outside their natural respective constituencies in a limited quid pro quo context. This limits the ability of the 4N+1 actors to shape the region and decide conflicts in the territories of failed or weak Arab states. Into the cracks in this jigsaw puzzle of hegemony and power, new players may enter.

Some regional players have a high degree of self-awareness, and would therefore aspire to close the capabilities gap. Indeed, some current and visible procurement plans are focused on longer-range jets and air- or surface-launched missiles, more robust airlift assets, more capable frigates, amphibious assault vessels, and so on. Yet, it is doubtful if the procurement of a specific platform or even an array of related platforms would suffice to significantly enlarge the envelope of military effectiveness. If a player intends to evolve from merely being able to “poke” a non-bordering competitor to being able to overcome it, then such a player needs to expand or alter its paradigm. This may require developing and mastering the full range of war-fighting capabilities needed to conduct an independent, extensive campaign away from home; from establishing air supremacy over vast access routes to logistics and supply, robust deployable or air- or sea-based continuous real-time intelligence-gathering across the spectrum, information fusion, command and control, electronic warfare, etc.

This threshold might be too high, even at the far end of the foreseeable force buildup plans of the relevant regional military organizations. Therefore, while regional actors may be aware, dynamic and animate, the fundamental factors that drive the rationale of this analysis should remain intact, at least for a decade.

38. Except in the Israeli-Egyptian case, although this is currently not a rivalry.

Conventional Force: Non-State Actors

The number of Middle Eastern armed non-state actors is so large that a full narration of all relevant ones falls outside the scope of this analysis. Such non-state actors can be profoundly different from each other and from the stereotypical insurgent or terrorist organization. First and foremost, one has to differentiate between those that are not sponsored by state actors (such as ISIS), those supported by a state power (as many militias are), and those (such as Hezbollah) that are fully underwritten by a state.

Indeed, the intensive finance, armament, training, oversight and guidance provided by Iran to Hezbollah are such that one may wonder if it could be seen as a kind of branch of the Iranian armed forces. In contrast, while Ghabhat Al-Nusra is probing the possibility of Qatari, Saudi or other state sponsorship – indeed this is how its realignment as Ghabhat Fateh al-Sham (alongside its decision to blend-in and strengthen its Syrian-homegrown image) should be interpreted – at the moment it can still be regarded as unsponsored. Therefore, Hezbollah and Al-Nusra (or Ghabhat Fateh al-Sham), as two useful examples, have developed profoundly different paradigms, which are interesting to compare and contrast.

Hezbollah benefits from over three decades of Iranian funding, which is likely to be ramped up by JCPOA's financial dividend. At the moment, Al-Nusra is living off the land (taxing populations it subjugates) and donations from private individuals. Further, some of Al-Nusra's forces are scattered around the Levant, creating a logistical challenge in the physical delivery of money and other support to the more remote, isolated forces.

Hezbollah's military paradigm is incomparable: a non-state-like actor with the ability to disappear amongst its people and not be detected by many conventional ISR systems, yet with strong-state-like capabilities, both numerically and qualitatively. Hezbollah holds over a hundred thousand high-trajectory weapons (more than most NATO members combined), shore-to-sea missiles, an array of other surface-to-surface weapons, UAVs, advanced surface-to-air missiles, as well as intelligence-gathering, electronic warfare and cyber capabilities. Hezbollah's paradigm has changed since its last armed conflict with Israel a decade ago. In 2006, Hezbollah relied mostly on large numbers of non-precision short-range surface-to-surface rockets that were statistically launched at large targets such as urban areas, with the intent of generating attrition. Since then, it has acquired missiles with a range of many hundreds of kilometers and advanced warheads, including precision guidance. It has also acquired other types of precision munitions against onshore, shore and offshore targets. This elevates the organization's capabilities from attrition to

delivering precise and effective strikes against critical military and civilian nodes. Hezbollah is well trained by Iran, Syria and its own internal echelon.

Al-Nusra/Gabhat Fateh al-Sham, on the other hand, is armed with light weapons as well as an eclectic assemblage of vehicles, even some tanks and rockets, most of which it scavenged off collapsing Arab armies or competing non-state actors. Al-Nusra's training is rudimentary, and its paradigm is uncomfortably stretched between terrorism, guerilla and conducting battalion-sized (or larger) regular-like combats in both urban and open terrain. Hezbollah has stretched beyond Lebanon, and its footprint is increasingly visible across the Shiite frontlines. Gabhat Fateh al-Sham is mostly congregated in the Levant, although it has the potential to expand into other ungoverned Sunni areas.

Much attention is drawn to ISIS, yet, in its capacity as a militia, and not in its other two capacities, it suffers from significant weaknesses³⁹. Since it does not benefit from the patronage of a state power, and its militia mostly feeds off scavenging the remains of collapsed Arab armies or leftovers from former US expeditionary deployments, its potential military competence is, by definition, limited. It has humble training facilities and programs; it does not have meaningful resupply sources; its weaponry self-manufacturing capabilities are rudimentary; it does not have the logistics necessary for long-term maintenance of advanced weapons systems, and it cannot rule the skies or consistently deny its enemies the use of the skies. Short of the latter, when opposed by a competent force, ISIS the militia will find it challenging to move large formations in open terrain, and can mostly either congregate amongst urban civilian populations (Sunni) or travel in small civilian-like formations. This greatly hinders its offensive capabilities against a competent adversary – though it may still demonstrate high survivability in defensive urban operations, in rough terrain or amongst Sunnis. It may further enhance its survivability by transforming back from militia to guerilla.

Indeed, each of the non-state actors benefits from a natural advantage fighting amongst its own ethnicity or faith, while the capturing and holding over time of territories densely populated by alien communities is difficult and sometimes impractical. To a degree, this is true both in competition between rival non-state actors, and between non-state and state actors or global powers.

39. A. Yadlin, "The Islamic State Challenge: How Severe Is It?", in Schweitzer and Einav, *op.cit.*, p. 275-283.

A non-state actor can threaten an already-weak Middle Eastern state through subversion and insurrection, mostly when the state lacks a coherent national identity, and has mixed ethnicity or religion, or when the non-state actor has closer connections or offers a more appealing identity to the state's indigenous population than does its own regime. This places such still-surviving states such as Jordan, Bahrain and even Saudi Arabia itself at risk.

A foreign non-state actor can probably not pose such risk to states that have a strong national identity. Hence, for example, it is less likely that an assemblage of foreign nationals (Chechens, Afghans or Yemenites, to name but a few popular sources) operating under the banners of ISIS or similar "transnational" Jihadists organizations could threaten the stability of the regime in Egypt (though internal Egyptian Islamists might so do). It is unlikely that a non-state militia could invade a competent state and defeat a competent army in battle.

Nonetheless, the ability of non-state actors to "poke" state actors, inflict damage and cause nuisance, is increasing. Terrorism has been around for a long time, but the commoditization of such standoff technologies as surface-to-surface rockets and the opening of new fields such as cyber, should place in the hands of non-state actors the ability to strike harder in a stand-off attack at the soft underbelly of state actors. Some non-state actors such as Hezbollah are even acquiring high-impact weapons, which should give them the ability to inflict severe functional damage in a standoff attack on a state's civilian, economic and military systems.

From the other side of the hill, a competent state's military force should be able to defeat a non-state force in a specific battle, and remove specific threats, but has and will continue to have limited ability to "fix", shape or decide the fate of a frail state. In other words, a state military can kill mosquitos, but it (and even a "Whole of Government") cannot be expected to dry up the swamp.

Therefore, there isn't much that can assure the state actor that, once it has removed a specific threat, such a threat would not resurface. In this context, a proposed military operation can be useful via the prism of conflict management, but it should not be expected to deliver an "end state" that involves the sociopolitical re-engineering of failed states. Furthermore, the utility of a ground offensive into an area of a failed state, populated by a community outside the attacking army's natural sphere of hegemony (alien by religion or ethnicity), should be looked at with caution: it might provide the non-state forces with a better opportunity to conduct guerilla and attrition operations, might merely push the threat to a new

line – and the threat could then re-emerge after the operation ends. Therefore, the usefulness of offensive military intervention in the Arab state frailty could be modest if not negative, while the significance of defensive capabilities – including against the non-state forces' growing, high-impact standoff firepower and cyber capabilities – is increasing.

Future Military Balance of Power – The Unconventional Sphere

While some Middle Eastern actors have been engaged in nuclear programs, Israeli strikes against the Iraqi and Syrian programs, as well as Libya's concern that it was next on the US's list following the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, have so far managed to halt nuclear proliferation and prevent a regional nuclear arms race. What threatens to tilt the region into such a race is Iran's success in establishing itself at the nuclear threshold, with a capability and possibly intent to cross it.

Iran's nuclearization policy should be looked on as a continuation of its overall defense personality – its self-perception as a weaker actor subjected to severe threats from both regional and global forces, distrust of the international system, and sense of isolation. From its perspective, nuclear capabilities would provide it with a shield of untouchability against the Americans, Russians, Arabs, Turks, Sunnis, Israelis, Pashtuns, Azeris and whoever else might wish to undercut Iran or the Nizam (Iran's political-religious system). Should Iran achieve a nuclear weapon, this sense of untouchability might encourage Iran to adopt a more aggressive approach to sub-nuclear conflicts, perhaps even deter global powers from attempting to curb Iran's regional expansion efforts. More importantly, it is more likely than not that Iran's nuclearization process will trigger several regional mirroring processes no later than JCPOA's ten- to fifteen-year time horizon, which could result in a more volatile regional multilateral nuclear system than the Cold War's MAD – one that might develop an escalatory rationale.

JCPOA: A Milestone Toward Nuclearization?

The most important milestone of recent times in the Middle Eastern unconventional armament trend is JCPOA. First, one needs to map the scope of JCPOA; it mainly targeted some of Iran's enrichment capabilities, and only marginally affected its weaponization and delivery dimensions. Neither JCPOA nor the processes that brought it about targeted the most important dimension: Iran's policy objective of acquiring nuclear weapons.

Indeed, while strategy's main, if not sole, objective is to alter the opponent's policy, JCPOA – almost to the contrary – legitimizes previously unacceptable military aspects of Iran's nuclear program and accepts Iran as a nuclear-threshold state.

Therefore, JCPOA leaves Iran with both a policy of acquiring nuclear weapons and sufficient residual capabilities to breakout to a deliverable bomb within a fairly short period. It attempts to mitigate this risk by seeking to regulate Iran's behavior. However, a strategy that accepts the other side's policy and capability to pursue that policy, yet merely tries to regulate the other side's behavior so that it will not pursue the very same policy that it both wants to pursue and is capable of pursuing, is a very fragile one. At the very least, it requires complete knowledge of Iran's behavior and assumes rapid, decisive, unilateral American enforcement at the first sign of breach – both of which are inconsistent with experience. Indeed, the process that led to JCPOA demonstrates that, for the US, the constants were the minimization of risks and costs (ways and means) while the variables were the policy objectives (ends).

JCPOA therefore leaves Iran with several apparently viable options for pursuing its nuclearization policy. First, it can break out to a bomb at a time of its choosing, most likely when the US is preoccupied and overwhelmed by some other pressing domestic or international crisis. Second, it can attempt to gradually erode JCPOA's terms, or enter into continuous cat-and-mouse enforcement games. After all, salami tactics and brinkmanship are a distinct competitive advantage of Iran over the West. And third, Iran can sit out and wait until JCPOA's restrictions are lifted, the first stage of which will occur in the next decade.

With Iran standing at the nuclear threshold and with options to move beyond it, pressure on Sunni peers to also push to the nuclear threshold will be mounting. And as the Shiite nuclear program receives legitimacy from the West, it will be a tough call to deny Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners, Turkey or Egypt, similar legitimization. It is therefore reasonable to assume that JCPOA will lead to a gradual process in which Iran's Sunni competitors will begin developing nuclear knowhow and infrastructure, some civilian, en route to the threshold. This may not necessarily be achieved through an independent nuclear program, but may also involve sourcing to external partners such as Pakistan. Hence, should Iran inch across the nuclear threshold, it is realistic to expect that several other players may not be far behind it.

Saudi-Pakistani defense relations are multifaceted, and their nuclear relations seem also to have more dimensions than meets the eye. However, there may be gaps between Riyadh and Islamabad with regard to their

mutual expectations⁴⁰, as well as gaps between Pakistani promises to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan's actual willingness to assume risks on account of its partner at a time of future crisis. Indeed, Pakistan must also consider its own risks resulting from a nuclear crisis, given its own sizable Shiite minority as well as its bilateral, multi-front and global calculations. It should therefore not come as a surprise if, at a time of future crisis, Pakistan will reassess whether or not to meet its Saudi partner's expectations. Nonetheless, within the spectrum of feasibility are the possibilities of Pakistani technical and knowhow assistance to an indigenous Saudi nuclear program, or a sale of nuclear weapons or components thereof, or even a Pakistani positioning of nuclear weapons on Saudi soil under a Pakistani chain of command. However, equally, to the Saudi disappointment with the US over JCPOA it is now possible to add disappointment with Pakistan over its refusal to participate in Riyadh's regional wars. Therefore, it is possible that Saudi Arabia will attempt to pursue a self-reliant nuclear track.

No MAD in the Middle East

Should the Middle East indeed see the future emergence of a rudimentary, regional, multilateral, nuclear system (RRMNS), its dynamics⁴¹ may be profoundly different to those of the nuclear Cold War. In the absence of empirical experience with an RRMNS, capable of providing demonstrable knowledge, it seems inescapable to experiment with abstract conceptualization of the relevant dynamics.

In contrast with MAD, in RRMNS a nuclear strike may even be a rational course of action; in the Cold War, both superpowers possessed thousands of nuclear assets, carrying them on highly survivable platforms (e.g. nuclear submarines loitering under the polar ice cap and strategic bombers circling the globe). This makes the continuous real-time tracking of all or even most of the opponent's assets unrealistic and the destruction of all or even most platforms unfeasible. The survivability of sufficient deliverable nuclear assets is thus assured. Therefore, the opponent should always be able to deliver a Second Strike, as a First Strike (one that eliminates the opponent's Second Strike capability) is unachievable. This means that any nuclear exchange assures the mutual destruction of both sides, making the exchange both unwinnable and irrational.

40. Y. Guzansky, "Pakistan and Saudi Arabia: How Special are the 'Special Relations'?", *INSS Insight*, No. 797, February 16, 2016

41. R. Tira, "Can Iran be Deterred?", *Policy Review*, No. 169, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, October 1, 2011.

However, when a regional player merely possesses rudimentary nuclear capability – say a handful of bombs – kept in an onshore bunker, tracking those bombs becomes feasible. Furthermore, their destruction in a First Strike becomes achievable. This means that not only could Actor A carry out a First Strike against his RRMNS peer, Actor B, but Actor A should also wonder whether Actor B has already traced Actor A's own bombs, and whether a First Strike by Actor B is imminent. This could lead to a “beat the enemy to the draw” dynamics, creating an escalatory rationale of “use it or lose it”.

In addition, in the American-Soviet case a nuclear attack could have been carried out only in an “industrialized” way, attacking thousands of nuclear assets with thousands of nuclear assets. Such an “industrialized” attack would have unmistakable signature, providing an early warning and leaving no ambiguity as to the identity of the attacker. But an attack on a regional player's handful of bombs, kept onshore, can be carried out in a variety of creative ways that do not allow an early warning and do not leave such an unmistakable signature. Attacks from the territory of a proximate failed state, from a civilian vessel, or using a container bomb – to name but a few unorthodox examples – could prevent situational awareness in the RRMNS.

It is not only that the attacked Actor A may not know who attacked it (in and of itself a dangerous situation), but Actors C, D and E might also lack situational understanding. They may not know, for example, whether the attack on Actor A was a standalone strike, or if it was part of a larger play, and additional strikes are in progress. And not only may Actor C be perplexed, having to take immediate decisions while lacking understanding of what exactly occurred with Actor A, but Actor D is also looking at Actor C, second-guessing C's next move. Actor D needs to assess not only what happened to Actor A, but also how would Actor C subjectively understand the situation, would Actor C make mistakes, would he lose his cool, and can Actor D rely on Actor C to take the correct, calculated decisions (and what might those be, anyway?)? Likewise, Actor E is looking at Actor D. In fact, during those critical decision-making minutes following a triggering event, when all RRMNS participants are examining each other while their fingers are placed on the red button, the potential for mistakes is substantial, and the dynamics might well spin out of control.

Actors with a rudimentary military nuclear capability rationally aspire to evolve to the next stage, in which they acquire an assured Second Strike capability, which tends to restabilize nuclear dynamics. Yet an evolved Second Strike competency requires such enabling capabilities as early-warning (mostly space-based), highly survivable platforms (nuclear

submarines, long-endurance bombers), highly survivable command and control systems, and significant numeric superfluity. While crossing the nuclear threshold and acquiring a few nuclear weapons could be attainable for some regional powers, the development of such capabilities that enable a Second Strike should be beyond the reach of most regional powers, at least in a ten-year horizon.

Further, Middle Eastern realities may involve escalatory risks that were not seen in the Cold War, such as unstable regimes and the danger of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of revolutionary groups, or, in contrast, an unstable regime viewing large-scale subversion as a nuclear *casus belli* – essentially equating an existential threat to the regime with an existential threat to the country. The Middle East also presents the risks of state actors characterized by internal tensions resulting in incoherent behavior, and issues of civilian control of the military.

Finally, it should be noted that some of the post-Cold War nuclear conceptualization, such as that relating to the Second Nuclear Age⁴², correlates with the above-stated characteristics of RRMNS. For example⁴³, the Security Trilemma – the idea that, in a multilateral nuclear system, action taken by one actor to protect itself from a second actor could make a third actor feel less secure, thereby causing a ripple through the nuclear system – is echoed here.

Nonetheless, many other elements of the Second Nuclear Age are probably of lesser relevance to the Middle East. For instance, the conceptualization related to improvement of strategic stability and crisis stability (preventing a crisis from escalating to a nuclear exchange) dwells on the assumption that it is possible to establish cordial multilateral frameworks that assure transparency and situational awareness for all participants, regulate the procurement of anti-missile defenses and anti-nuclear cyber, and eventually build mutual trust. These seem less applicable given the fierce competition, mistrust and zero-sum-game attitude that prevails in the region.

42. P. Bracken, *The Second Nuclear Age: Strategy, Danger and the New Power Politics*, Times Books, New York, 2012.

43. G. Koblentz, "Strategic Stability in the Second Nuclear Age", Council on Foreign Relations, *Council Special Report*, No. 71, November 2014.

Iran: The Implausible Partnership

More than rivalry, the Cold War involved partnership – a paradigm-sharing partnership. Indeed, a pre-condition for MAD to work was that both sides had to believe in MAD. Both the Americans and the Soviets had to think in the same terms; namely, that a First Strike that takes away the attacked side's nuclear retaliatory capability was not feasible, and the surviving residual nuclear capability would suffice in order for the attacked side to carry out a Second Strike that would also destroy the initiating side. And (at least most of the time) both sides acknowledged a dichotomy: it was all or nothing, either nuclear peace or full-scale nuclear war. Therefore, they both agreed that nuclear weapons were in effect unusable. Both sides of the nuclear Cold War thought “inside the box,” usually within similar, well-defined boxes. Further, after the Cuban crisis, they both realized the importance of mutual transparency and real-time communication between both sides' supreme commanders.

How a nuclear Iran would behave is not simple to assess, and no contention can be proven. But, from observing Iran's defense personality and the way it manages its military struggles, it is probably not a natural candidate for a paradigm-sharing partnership.

In fact, Iran excels in applying strategies that counteract opponents' paradigms. Its natural inclination is to create gray areas and to practice brinkmanship, be defiant here and give way there. It frequently initiates a series of crises, then passes the escalation buck to the opponent (the “rational” and “responsible” opponent sometimes acquiesces to the defiant act to prevent escalation). Iran deliberately creates vague “in-between” situations, operates outside the spectrum of the opponent's plans and concepts, practices ambiguity concerning its positions, frequently changes its stance, uses deniable means or denies the undeniable; thereby Iran eventually undermines the opponent's determination and strategic credibility. And Iran excels in creating lines of operation not necessarily identifiable by its opponents.

Therefore, and given Iran's unique defense personality, it can be argued that Iran might find a cumulative strategic-political advantage in a series of nuclear-related crises. In view of Iran's past behavior patterns, it is not a natural candidate for viewing nuclear weapons solely as a defensive weapon of deterrence for extreme scenarios, and it is possible that it will find “outside the box” ways of using nuclear weapons as a strategic tool for promoting its interests, even if it would not launch a nuclear attack.

Chemical Weapons and Non-State Actors

Three drivers are rewriting the relationship between non-state actors and chemical and other non-nuclear weapons of mass destruction. The first is the proliferation of chemical weapons from the depots of collapsing Arab armies, and self-production of simple materials by non-state actors themselves, as technology is being commoditized and know-how is more accessible. The second driver is the proliferation of delivery means, mostly rockets. Again, the sources are collapsing armies alongside self-manufacturing. Rocket science is no longer “Rocket Science”, and even a second- or third-tier non-state actor that is not backed by a state can now deliver rockets for ranges of hundreds of kilometers. The third driver is the “normalization” of the use of chemical weapons by various sides in the Syrian and Iraqi wars. Chemical attacks are by now a recurring event, which goes unpunished (as epitomized by the crossing of President Obama’s red line); hence the political and psychological lines have been crossed.

The marrying of chemical materials and rockets in the hands of non-state actors, and the crossing of the lines for their use, could escalate to a new reality in their relations with state actors. The physical impact of a rudimentary chemical missile is not overwhelming, even when targeting densely populated urban areas. There are significant challenges for efficient application of these weapons, such as the insulation of payload, the need for ultra-accurate, ultra-fast detonation and dispersing at a precise altitude above ground level, or the need for supportive weather conditions. Storage over time is also challenging, as some materials eventually degrade their own containers. Consequently, it is doubtful if a handful of such weapons would actually generate mass destruction. However, the application of chemical weapons against state actors’ population centers could generate a new level of terror, the consequences of which are still uncharted. In this respect, differentiation should be made between non-state actors with some state-like characteristics (such as Hezbollah and its responsibility for Lebanon’s Shiite community) and non-state actors without quasi-responsibility for an ethnic group or a territory (such as some of the militias operating in Syria and Iraq). While in the former case some deterrence can be established, in the latter case much of the page remains blank. In any event, the emerging capability of non-state actors to attack state actors with chemical rockets reemphasizes the growing need to develop corresponding defensive missile-interception capabilities.

The manufacturing, acquisition, weaponization, storage or handling of biological or radioactive materials is more challenging, though there have been some reports concerning their acquisition by Middle Eastern non-state actors⁴⁴.

44. M. Nichols, "ISIS Militants Just Seized 88 Pounds of Uranium Compounds Materials In Iraq", *Reuters*, July 9, 2014.

Conclusion

With the collapse or decline of several previously prominent Middle Eastern actors, the Middle East is characterized by four nation states (Egypt, Israel, Turkey and Iran) as well as so-far-surviving Saudi Arabia, or the 4N+1. The 4N+1 are probably the ones that will really determine the regional game and the future military balance of power.

Where once there was a continuous array of actors, some of them regional powers, there has now emerged a state frailty – a habitat of weaker non-state actors, local clans and ethnic groups. While attracting much attention due to the threat that non-state Sunni actors represent to the weaker or artificial states, such non-state actors pose a less significant threat to the stronger regional powers that benefit from a coherent national identity (Saudi Arabia being the odd case of a strong actor with weaker national coherence). Indeed, even today no entity can wield force like a nation state.

The emerged state frailty creates geographic gaps between the 4N+1 actors, and the emerging game is one in which the stronger peer competitors are mostly non-bordering. The dynamics between the 4N+1 actors are not predetermined, and could evolve into several potential alliances – revolving and contextual ones too – or into a regional “Great Game” of a sort for footholds and clients in the political and geographic vacuum between them.

Geopolitics is no friend of vacuums, and, all other things being equal, the emerged power and geographic vacuum should be filled. One alternative is for domestic grassroots forces to emerge and form new actors. Yet, given the deep frailty of Sunni Arab sociopolitical structures, the emergence of new, coherent, strong Sunni Arab states is less likely even in a longer time horizon of a generation. A second alternative is that a domestic actor (e.g. the Alawites), on its own or backed by patrons, would defeat in battle its opposing ethnicities and faiths, and would gain or regain control of the territory of one of the old states (e.g. Syria). This might happen even in the near future, but would only bring back the reality of an artificial state, composed of antagonistic ethnicities and faiths, and lacking national coherence. Such a cardboard state would be weak and prone to fail again.

The third alternative is that some of the 4N+1 actors would attempt to essentially take over territories of frail or failed states, filling the geopolitical gap buffering between them, and creating de facto geographic continuity (direct or via clients) between the stronger peer competitors. This alternative is of limited feasibility, due to two reasons: first, the soft power reach of the 4N+1 actors into the frail states' space is limited and demarcated by boundaries of ethnicity and faith. While contextual quid pro quo deals can be made between any two actors in the regional theater, including across boundaries of ethnicity and religious denomination, in the Middle Eastern reality, a successful hegemony bid established across such boundaries is less likely. This is probably true even in the longer time horizon of a decade. The second reason why 4N+1 actors would find it challenging to establish hegemony away from their borders is that their armed forces are ill-structured for such missions, limiting their hard power options.

The armed forces of the 4N+1 actors typically evolved in environments of competition with bordering challengers, or where a significant synergy with global forces was assumed (Turkey with NATO, Saudi Arabia with the US). Therefore, the 4N+1 armed forces have neither the paradigm nor the fully evolved buildup for the emerging reality of competition between non-bordering peers, or for competition between such peers that is conducted on third-party soil, in blue-water seaways or around offshore economic interests. Consequently, when such competition might escalate to military violence, a decisive outcome is less likely. It is probable that no 4N+1 actor could overthrow a peer competitor through the use of hard power; though some are more vulnerable to indirect threats of subversion. Given the time it takes to change a military organization's paradigm and buildup, this gap in capabilities should remain valid for the foreseeable future. Indeed, even at the far end of the current and visible procurement plans – within a decade – this capabilities gap should for the most part remain open.

The consequences are that either a fairly stable reality will define the next decade, in which the peer competitors will be relatively insulated from each other as they are buffered by frail states, or that an unstable reality will emerge as the 4N+1 attempts to follow more ambitious policies that cannot be backed by properly enabling soft and hard power. In contrast, the capability of a 4N+1 actor to militarily “poke” its peers, inflict damages or cause nuisance is increasing.

A second growing power vacuum is that of global actors playing the regional game, centered on nearly a decade and a half of declining American strategic effectiveness. Global powers used to be the center of Middle Eastern political formations, and have kept them relatively tight

and coherent. While steps such as Russia's deployment to the Syrian coast cannot be ignored, as a general rule (with exceptions), when compared to the tighter international formations of previous periods, the regional state players' freedom of action vis-à-vis global actors is increasing.

The next decade can also be defined by nuclear proliferation. Indeed, JCPOA is not the end of Iran's nuclear game, as it leaves Iran with both the policy objective of acquiring nuclear weapons as well as sufficient residual capability to build and deliver them. Iran has its options: it can break out to a bomb, attempt to gradually erode JCPOA, or sit JCPOA out. Consequently, the Sunni powers are also likely to gradually head to the nuclear threshold, alone or with such partners as Pakistan.

Chemical weapons and their delivery means are proliferating and commoditizing, including to the hands of non-state actors, and the political and psychological lines for their use have already been crossed. Chemical weapons provide the non-state actor with a powerful "poking" tool against state actors, the endgame of which remains to be ascertained.

