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## ISRAELI MARITIME POWER AND EURASIAN COMPETITION

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*Seth Cropsey*

**M**odern Israel stands at a strategic crossroads. Bilaterally, the Trump administration was more accommodating of Israeli interests than any U.S. presidency had been since the first years of the century, if not the late 1960s. The Abraham Accords constituted the most significant diplomatic shift in the modern Middle East, creating the possibility of a legitimate Arab-Israeli coalition to counter Iranian expansionism.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Israel's diplomatic opening to Russia provided Israel with greater freedom of action in Syria and Iraq against Iran, potentially indicating a broader Eurasian political shift.

However, the situation has shifted over the past year. The United States now seems eager to return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Obama administration's nuclear deal with Iran that likely would provide a core aspect of a regional realignment.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's subsequent victory may indicate a broader American pivot away from the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean. The U.S. military force structure—particularly at sea, but also more broadly—increasingly reflects this pivot away from European and Middle Eastern security concerns and toward East Asia. Russia remains a potential threat to Israeli interests, depending on its political relationship with Iran. Turkey is now an active hostile power with clear ambitions to control the Levantine Basin. Increasing daylight exists among the Gulf monarchies over their policies toward Iran and Russia. China steadily has expanded its regional economic influence, within and without Israel, and will seek a more explicit political role if the United States departs from the Middle East. Internally, although Israel has escaped the electoral deadlock that paralyzed its domestic politics from early 2019 to June 2021, the new governing

coalition has yet to resolve the tensions within Israeli society that generated internal gridlock.

The strategic situation requires an understanding of Israel's maritime interests and strategy. Israel's physical and human geography, economic realities, and geopolitical location give it a distinct interest in maritime security. And as Middle Eastern regional rivalries intersect increasingly with Eurasian great-power competition, the maritime element of Israeli grand strategy will grow in importance.

Assessing Israeli maritime strategy requires accomplishing four functions. First, a review is needed of Israel's broader human and physical geography, economy, grand strategy, and military doctrine, locating naval power within Israel's operationally offensive philosophy. Second, Israel's shifting strategic situation should be examined, identifying both Eurasian and regional dynamics that influence Israeli security. The third need is for an assessment of extant and future Israeli force structures against these considerations. The fourth is an inventory and description of the flash points most likely to catalyze a regional conflict.

#### THE EVOLUTION OF ISRAELI MARITIME STRATEGY

Traditionally, Israel is not considered a maritime nation. Historically, Phoenicia was the Levant's most notable maritime power, establishing colonies along the North African coastline and as far west as modern Cádiz—most notably, Carthage.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, ancient Israel was landlocked, located in Judea and Samaria, the so-called West Bank. Commercial contact did occur between Israelites and the Phoenician city-states, but biblical and historical records do not indicate that ancient Israel ever had a large-scale maritime presence.<sup>4</sup> Jewish merchants hired ships but generally were not sailors, with the notable exception of the sixteenth-century Ottoman admiral Sinan Reis.<sup>5</sup>

Twentieth-century Zionists, particularly in Ze'ev Jabotinsky's Revisionist movement, recognizing the importance of maritime power, established in Italy in 1934 the Betar Naval Academy, arguably the forerunner to Israel's modern naval academy in Haifa.<sup>6</sup> Preindependence Zionist groups relied on maritime support, initially to transport Jewish immigrants to Mandatory Palestine, then after 1946 to secure weapons for the Yishuv's paramilitaries.<sup>7</sup> Naval forces played a negligible role in the 1947–48 war. While the fledgling Israeli navy fielded only three purpose-built combat ships, the lack of Arab naval capacity precluded major engagements at sea, although Israeli commandos successfully disrupted Egyptian amphibious-assault attempts.<sup>8</sup> However, U.S. sea control in the Levantine Basin ensured that the new Israeli state received a steady supply of weapons and new immigrants throughout the conflict, ultimately allowing the better-organized Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to defeat the poorly coordinated Arab armies and their affiliated irregulars.<sup>9</sup> Thus, even from its founding, Israel has depended on the sea.

### Chronology of Israel's Wars

1947–48 War: Israel's War of Independence

1967 War: Six-Day War

1967–73 War: War of Attrition

1973 War: Yom Kippur War

1982 War: First Lebanon War

2006 War: Second Lebanon War

2014 War: Gaza War

Israel's geography and economic profile explain this dependence. Half of Israel's population lives along the Mediterranean coastline.<sup>10</sup> At the country's widest point, the distance from inland border to coast is seventy-one miles—a distance a T-72 tank could traverse in three hours. Even in 1948, a sixteen-inch naval gun's twenty-mile range would have covered nearly every major Israeli population center apart from Jerusalem, while the later development of cruise missiles brought the entirety of Israeli territory under the threat of naval bombardment.

Economically, Israel is overwhelmingly reliant on maritime commercial transport, a situation that has persisted despite increased normalization of the country's relations, including trade, with Jordan and Egypt. Hence Israel's treatment of the 1967 blockade of the Strait of Tiran as an act of war; 90 percent of Israeli oil passed through the strait, making the blockade an existential threat.<sup>11</sup> Modern Israel is far less reliant on oil, given its advances in solar and hydroelectric technology. However, the discovery of the offshore Tamar and Leviathan gas fields has renewed the Levantine Basin's importance for Israel's economic security; these deposits, if operationalized, could turn Israel into an energy exporter.<sup>12</sup>

Apart from Israel, no regional or great power—not Bourbon or Napoleonic France; not imperial or Nazi Germany; not even Soviet Russia, despite the Communist Party's protestations to the contrary—faced an extant encircling coalition from the moment it came into existence as a state. Between 1948 and 1973, a ready-made hostile coalition existed that centered on Egypt and Syria and included Jordan and Iraq. At its apex in 1973, this coalition also included every state with a North African coastline plus Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Sudan. Cuba joined in and received support from the Soviet Union, East Germany, North Korea, and Pakistan.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, until 1967 this coalition held overwhelming geographic advantages. Jordan's control of Judea and Samaria raised the prospect of an opening offensive that could cut Israel in two in mere hours. Syrian control of the Golan denied Israel the heights' superb defensive geography and allowed Syrian armored formations to begin a southward offensive from this geographic fortress. Until 1956, Egypt (and, to a lesser degree, Jordan and Syria) supported the Palestinian fedayeen (irregular forces), which mounted cross-border raids targeting Israeli civilians, to which the nascent Israeli special operations forces responded.<sup>14</sup>

Simultaneously, the great powers became increasingly unwilling to serve as Israel's benefactor. Initial Soviet goodwill vanished when it became apparent that, despite Israel's nominally socialist politics, the country would not transform into a Stalinist proxy.<sup>15</sup> The Eisenhower administration hoped to court the Arab world—most notably, postrevolutionary Egypt—and therefore reduced the initial American political support for Israel. France and the United Kingdom initially took an active interest in Israel's survival; however, the Eisenhower administration's response to Anglo-Franco-Israeli operations against Egypt catalyzed a shift in diplomatic strategy.<sup>16</sup> Increasing fear of Nasserist-style revolutions and a desire

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to maintain some political control over their former Middle Eastern clients resulted in a distinctly Arabophilic post-1956 Anglo-French policy or, in Britain's case specifically,

thorough declinist apathy.<sup>17</sup> And the Soviet Union, hoping to circumvent NATO's ability to deny it access to the Mediterranean, cultivated relationships with revolutionary regimes throughout the Arab world, even deploying air-defense forces and fighter aircraft to Egypt during the 1967–73 War of Attrition.<sup>18</sup>

Israeli planners could not generate a tactical or technical solution to overcome these disadvantages. Only after the 1967 war did the IDF field equipment that was comparable to that of its Arab adversaries.<sup>19</sup> Only after the 1973 war did American defense exports provide Israel with a qualitative military edge, in response to the Soviet Union's support for Egypt and Syria and continued British assistance to Jordan. On the personnel side, in 1948 Israel could rely on its long-term strength vis-à-vis Arab militaries.<sup>20</sup> Pre-1950s Arab armies consisted of a core of Western-trained professional units of limited size supported by irregulars such as the fedayeen. But as Arab revolutionary dictatorships institutionalized themselves, they drew from their larger populations to create modern conscript armies that outnumbered the IDF easily, given Israel's much smaller population.

Israeli strategists identified an operational solution, the two components of which still form the pillars of Israel's modern doctrine. First, Israel's lack of strategic depth compelled the IDF to fight forward, taking the operational offensive even in strategically defensive conflicts. This remains so today; if attacked, the IDF should begin any defensive ground action beyond Israel's borders. Second, Israel could gain an advantage in command and control and officer quality, enabling fluid operational actions that resembled the Wehrmacht's most successful armored offensives during the Second World War. This, combined with the IDF's superior morale—a function of Israel's democratic political structures and the existential stakes of any conflict—allowed the IDF to best numerically superior

Arab forces in 1967. Contrary to the standard assessment, Israeli tactical airpower did not provide the IDF with a decisive advantage; rather, Israel used airpower as an operational tool, in 1967 knocking out the Egyptian, Jordanian, and Syrian air forces in quick succession, and then using airpower to destroy Arab communications infrastructure, disrupt force coordination, and break the morale of retreating Arab units.<sup>21</sup>

Israel's strategic miscalculation in 1973 nearly led to its defeat; Israeli intelligence did not anticipate the Arab offensive until mere days before Egypt's Operation BADR, precluding a preemptive strike.<sup>22</sup> However, once again superior Israeli operational talent reversed the situation. The IDF's counterattack in the Sinai that split Egyptian forces in two, combined with its counteroffensive in the north that drove almost to Damascus, demonstrates the role of operational skill; by reversing Egyptian and Syrian gains so quickly, Israel spoiled the Arab coalition's political coordination.<sup>23</sup>

Maritime power played a central, if nonexplicated, role in this doctrine from the outset. As stated, no participant in the 1948 war had enough naval forces to make sea combat relevant. But in 1967, Israeli naval weakness arguably forced the country's hand. Unable to challenge Egypt's blockade, Israel instead committed to a ground invasion. Operationally, the Israeli navy provided intelligence and reconnaissance to IDF air and ground units, particularly during the later stages of the offensive toward the Suez Canal. However, no naval combat occurred. In 1968, Egypt sank an Israeli destroyer with antiship missiles.<sup>24</sup>

The 1973 war demonstrates most clearly the relevance of naval power to Israel's broader doctrine. While Israeli ground and air forces encountered a dire operational situation, the Israeli navy took the offensive. Israel's only naval reversal came on 6 October, the war's first day, when Egyptian missile boats bombarded the Sinai coast. The following day, five Israeli missile boats sank a five-boat Syrian squadron, thereby winning the first missile-to-missile naval engagement in history, while employing electronic countermeasures and taking no casualties. Two days later, six Israeli missile boats sank three of four Egyptian missile boats. From that point on, Israel had sea control of the Levantine Basin. This allowed the Israeli navy to preempt Egyptian maritime pressure, destroying a fleet of fishing boats and fast-attack craft intended to land forces on the Israeli coast.<sup>25</sup> Israeli combat victories in the Levantine Basin also provided the IDF with sea control in the Gulf of Suez, enabling the deployment of air defenses near the Suez Canal's southern outlet, thereby denying air support to the Egyptian Third Army and preventing an offensive against the southern Sinai. Egypt blockaded the Bab el Mandeb, which prevented Israel from receiving oil during the 1973 war, but Israeli control of the Gulf of Suez and Levantine Basin allowed the IDF to disrupt Egyptian-bound trade, undermining Egypt's economy.<sup>26</sup> Israeli sea control also

facilitated sabotage operations along the Egyptian coastline, and Israeli warships shelled Egyptian land positions.<sup>27</sup> This historical experience demonstrates two benefits that maritime power offers to Israeli strategists.

- Rear-area security: Israeli sea control in the Levantine Basin prevents Israel's adversaries from pressuring its coastline. This has allowed Israeli land forces to assume the operational offensive. Israeli air forces are relieved of responsibility for maritime defense, allowing a truly operational use of airpower that, in 1967 and 1973, was instrumental in Israel's victories.
- Operational flexibility: Israeli sea control facilitates intelligence gathering, limits adversary options, and allows Israel to deny its adversaries access to critical areas while providing freedom of action for its own forces. The Israeli navy is not large enough to pose an amphibious threat, but it is effective enough to keep enemy forces bottled up in port and to enable the forward-deployment of air defenses, as occurred in 1973.

Israel's strategic situation shifted after 1973. Cairo's rapprochement with Washington reduced the threat from Egypt. Even before the 1973 war, the Palestine Liberation Organization alienated Jordan—the organization attempted to overthrow the Hashemite monarchy in 1970–71, leading to its expulsion from the country and an increasing diplomatic break between Jordan and Syria.<sup>28</sup> Although an Israeli-Jordanian peace agreement was not formalized until 1994, by the early 1980s neither Jordan nor Egypt was a major Israeli adversary. The 1975–90 Lebanese Civil War was a precursor to the Middle East's contemporary factional civil wars. Lebanon's internal dissolution combined first with Syrian action and then postrevolutionary Iranian involvement to transform an internal war into a regional proxy war.<sup>29</sup> Iran's war with Iraq also shifted regional and great-power attention eastward. Naturally, the Lebanese Civil War included few naval actions, given the limited naval capabilities of all combatants. But Israel's overwhelming naval victories in the 1973 war and Syria's consequent naval impotence again provided the IDF with freedom of action in southern Lebanon.

There is an additional strategic role for Israeli naval power. Israel's nuclear capabilities technically remain unacknowledged, but it is likely that the country first developed nuclear weapons months before the 1967 war and now has a stockpile of from eighty to four hundred warheads. Israel is by far the smallest country with nuclear capabilities; the next smallest, North Korea, is 450 percent the size of Israel.<sup>30</sup> Any nuclear power, to ensure a stable military balance, must consider second-strike capabilities, usually by creating multiple delivery systems and placing weapons across its territory. Initially, Israel procured and developed air-launched, nuclear-capable cruise missiles and may have built hardened silos

that could withstand a nuclear attack.<sup>31</sup> But Israel's paucity of territory still raises the possibility that an overwhelming initial offensive would conquer the country too quickly for it to employ its full nuclear arsenal, thereby decreasing its deterrence value. Since the beginning of the century, the Israeli navy has operated an attack-submarine fleet—initially three boats, soon to be six—capable of launching nuclear-tipped cruise missiles.<sup>32</sup> This has transformed the Levantine Basin into a naval bastion, akin to the Soviet Union's use of the Barents Sea and Sea of Okhotsk during the Cold War.<sup>33</sup> Israel's naval capabilities afford it much greater strategic depth and a secure second strike.

In sum, naval power provides Israel with rear-area security, greater operational flexibility, and invaluable strategic depth.

### THE SHIFTING STRATEGIC SITUATION

The need for, and benefits of, Israeli maritime power have persisted despite the Middle East's political shifts. However, since the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Middle East has become a focal point for Eurasian competition. A review of the intersection of great-power interests and the actions of regional states and nonstate actors shows the scale of the strategic problem Israeli planners face, and the role maritime issues play under changed circumstances.

China's Middle East policy is a major component of its grand strategy. Its regional approach is inextricably linked to its grand-strategic goals. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has two main targets: Israel and Turkey. The latter provides a land bridge to Europe, allowing China to link its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure to its investments in Greece, elsewhere in the Balkans, and in Hungary.<sup>34</sup> But the former is far more important. China operates the civilian portion of Haifa Port, collocated close to the Israeli navy's headquarters and primary base.<sup>35</sup> Much as with Piraeus Port in Greece, China hopes to use its interests in Haifa to monopolize Levantine Basin trade.<sup>36</sup>

More relevant is China's investment in Israel's high-technology sector. Notwithstanding its propaganda claims, the CCP understands that China's political economy is brittle. Yes, direct or indirect party control of major economic entities allows the CCP to preempt any independent domestic faction; but the party becomes tied to the country's major economic actors and is obligated to rescue them during crises—crises that China's hybrid (central planning / market) economic system creates.

Innovation in China is extremely difficult, owing to the lack of legitimate intellectual-property protections. The Israeli economy offers a solution. Its start-up ecosystem is an innovative paradise, and Chinese firms are willing to provide ample investment. Israeli military technology is also appealing. The CCP has identified Israel as a potential military supplier since the Tiananmen Square incident

in 1989; with China under a punitive embargo, Israel became one of the few countries with a Western-style defense-industrial establishment able to do business with China.<sup>37</sup> While the United States blocked high-profile arms transfers—most notably, the attempted sale of an airborne-early-warning aircraft to China at the beginning of this century—in the 1990s Israel and China developed a robust defense-technology relationship, indicating the possibility of future cooperation.<sup>38</sup>

Chinese activity in the Middle East often intersects with Russian interests and actions. Israeli strategists conceive of their country as a critical, if relatively small, piece in the broader Eurasian competition. Still, Israel's engagement with China and Russia is risky. Neither of the two would be willing to provide Jerusalem with the same freedom of action as does Washington, given Beijing's desire to preserve Arab and Iranian oil imports and Moscow's taste for cultivating links with multiple parties in any conflict. Russia has acquiesced to Israeli action in Syria and Iraq; however, before 2018 it simply may have been too focused on maintaining its tactical position to resist Israeli demands, and after 2018 too engaged in Libya to consider Middle East policy proper. Moreover, during Hamas's attacks on Israel in May 2021 and the concurrent rioting in Israel's Arab communities, Chinese state media explicitly supported Palestinian unrest, criticizing Israel as a supposed apartheid state.<sup>39</sup> Given that Israel is a small power, it is reasonable for Israeli policy makers to cultivate relationships with major actors beyond the United States, but too great a reliance on Chinese and Russian cooperation leaves Israel vulnerable to political isolation.

The difficulty is the ambiguous U.S. relationship to Israel and the Middle East more broadly. The Biden administration has signaled its intention to return to the Middle East policy that President Obama practiced from 2009 to 2017.<sup>40</sup> It rests on two uncertain paradigms. The first is that a U.S.-Iran rapprochement is possible, either as the beginning of a wholesale regional realignment or simply to reduce U.S. commitments outside the Indo-Pacific. The second is that most Middle Eastern political disputes can be traced directly to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thus, the JCPOA and the Roadmap for Peace process are two complementary initiatives; the former disengages the United States from a region that is declining in relevance because of the weight the Asia-Pacific exerts in the Sino-American antagonism, while the latter reduces regional tensions by addressing the "root cause" of regional tension.

Neither of these concepts fits with strategic reality. The Palestine question never has been relevant to the broad balance of power among the Middle East's major players, initially Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and Syria, then the Gulf monarchies and Iraq, and increasingly Iran. Iranian goals are bluntly hegemonic and fit far more reasonably with Russian and Chinese interests than with American objectives. Moreover, the Middle East is not a peripheral region diverting resources

from more-relevant conflicts in the Indo-Pacific but a central region in a broader competition for Eurasian dominance. Nevertheless, despite the strategic irrationality of this paradigm, a small power such as Israel must hedge its bets; hence its cooperation with Russia to gain a free hand in Syria and Iraq against Iran and its increasing economic links with China.

It is evident that China and Russia have multiple intersecting regional interests, making them at most equally responsive to Israeli, Iranian, Saudi, and perhaps Turkish and Emirati demands. Since the late 1960s, the United States has recognized the strategic benefits an assertive Israel provides it. In return for American diplomatic support and maritime security, Israel acts decisively against states and nonstate actors that threaten American and Israeli interests in equal measure. Indeed, Israel is one of the few U.S. allies that no American soldier has died defending, unlike even the United Kingdom. America's withdrawal from Afghanistan, potential pressuring of the Israeli government, and desire to reengage with Iran all undermine Israeli *and* American security. But without a sufficiently robust military—in particular, a naval force powerful enough to secure sea control independently—Israel risks being boxed in during a future crisis.

#### *Intraregional Rivalries: Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Turkey*

The Middle East may be a critical pivot point for Eurasian competition, owing to the role it plays in Chinese and Russian strategy, but the region also has its own dynamics and antagonisms that influence Israeli interests and impact Israeli grand strategy and maritime policy. Much as Sino-American antagonism defines Eurasian politics more broadly, Iranian-Arab and Iranian-Israeli enmities shape the structure of Middle Eastern conflict. However, relationships among actors are fluid, necessitating an explication of multiple major players' interests as they relate to maritime power.

Iran's political ambitions and shifts in relative power make it the focal point of regional rivalries. Even before the Islamic Republic was founded, Iran played an odd role in regional politics. It served as an American ally, but an inactive one; Iran was not expected to intervene in Middle Eastern conflicts but instead to preserve oil flows from the Persian Gulf. Imperial Iran's military power and history, however, increased Arab-Iranian enmity. Iran and Israel saw each other as useful partners even before the United States became Israel's great-power benefactor. Iran benefited from Israeli technical skill and military expertise and in return became Israel's primary energy supplier.<sup>41</sup> This relationship never became a formal alliance; nevertheless, Israeli policy makers viewed their relationship with Iran as central to Middle Eastern stability. Arab nationalist revolutions simply intensified existing enmity between Israel and its Arab neighbors; U.S.-aligned, Shia, Persian Iran served as a useful counterweight to anti-Israeli Arab coordination, alongside Israel's historical links with Turkey and support for the Kurds.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile,

throughout the 1970s Iran's shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi became more assertive, increasingly hinting at an Iranian desire for regional power.<sup>43</sup> The 1979 revolution destroyed the shah's regime, but had the shah survived, and had Pakistan and India developed nuclear capabilities more rapidly, imperial Iran well might have attempted a nuclear breakout.

The 1979 revolution in Iran was the culmination of a broader Middle Eastern political shift. The 1973 war and Egypt's realignment with the United States undermined a Syrian-Egyptian, Arab-nationalist coalition. Syrian aggression in Lebanon also alienated the Gulf monarchies, who increasingly turned to the United States for protection. Saddam's consolidation of power in 1979 and Iraq's

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invasion of Iran in 1980 therefore produced a catalytic moment. The Gulf monarchies viewed Saddam's Iraq as a bulwark against Shia-Iranian imperialism, fearing the Islamic

Republic's unique combination of revolutionary socialism, theological politics, and de jure democratic representation.<sup>44</sup> By contrast, Israel hoped to court the new Iran, despite its explicitly revolutionary Islamist and anti-Zionist character, primarily because of the dangers Iraqi expansionism posed. Throughout the 1980s, Israel found itself covertly supporting Iran against Iraq with military technology, even as it was fighting Iranian-backed groups in Lebanon.<sup>45</sup>

Iran's regime is neither irrational nor apocalyptically inclined. Ruholla Khomeini, the Islamic Republic of Iran's founding leader, cannot be understood as a Shia Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, fixated on unleashing sectarian violence to usher in the eschaton. However, the Iranian regime's religious character shapes its worldview and regional ambitions. The Islamic Republic is not simply a Shia entity; it does not understand Shia Islam in purely sectarian terms. Rather, the regime conceives of Shiism as a critical aspect of *Islamic* identity and sees its revolutionary role as encompassing the entire Islamic world. Iran is the descendant of an ancient empire worthy of respect—respect that the Ottoman Turks and European powers denied it. Persian states constituted the Middle East's political center of gravity until the seventh-century Arab conquests. And apart from the Umayyad dynasty, Persians and Persian culture dominated the Levantine Islamic world, first during the so-called Iranian intermezzo, then with the development under the Seljuks of a Turko-Persian identity. It thus is unsurprising that modern Iran would consider itself the rightful leader of the Islamic world in general rather than the guardian of Shia sectarians alone. Ironically, despite Iraqi military incompetence, Saddam grasped this fact better than any other regional actors in 1979—hence his preemptive strike against the still-consolidating

revolutionary Iranian regime.<sup>46</sup> It was Iraqi power that constrained Iranian ambition until America's 2003 invasion.

Nevertheless, the outlines of Iranian strategy reach back to the mid-1980s, as seen in Iran's support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and its explicit religious-ideological challenges to Saudi legitimacy. Iran's general strategic framework has two long-term goals. First, gaining ideological and religious leadership of the Islamic world requires controlling Islamic holy sites, specifically Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. Therefore Iran hopes to undermine the Saudi and Israeli states, either bringing Saudi Arabia into an Iranian-led alliance system or toppling the house of Saud, and ultimately destroying Israel. Second, Iran seeks access to global oil markets, given its economy's reliance on oil production. Thus, maritime power is a critical interest to Iran, both in its littorals and regionally.

Pursuing this strategy requires five steps. First, Iran must build a proxy network providing it control of a corridor running from its borders to the Levantine Basin. It already has achieved this goal. Hezbollah has co-opted the Lebanese state, as its conflicts with Israel have undermined the country's physical infrastructure and civil capacity. Syria remains partly beholden to Russia, but Iran's support for Assad before 2015—and the manpower the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Iranian proxies still provide to the regime—gives it thorough influence over the country.<sup>47</sup> Iran created a proxy network in Iraq to combat the United States, then co-opted the government upon American withdrawal in 2011. Iran capitalized on the Islamic State's (IS's) offensive in 2014, solidifying its control of Iraqi state institutions. What King Abdullah termed the "Shia Crescent" now exists.<sup>48</sup> One must note, however, that Iran's allies are not exclusively Shia; in Iraq in particular, Iranian-backed militia leaders have begun to integrate non-Shia units into their command structure, while these militias increasingly are integrated into the Iraqi state.<sup>49</sup>

Second, having created this proxy network, Iran must pressure Saudi Arabia and Israel. All Iran's nonstate allies in the Middle East's littorals now field naval capabilities. Lebanon is Iran's primary pressure point against Israel, owing to Hezbollah's history and Lebanon's Mediterranean coastline. The 2006 Lebanon war is illustrative. Hezbollah assumed the tactical and operational defensive in southern Lebanon, drawing Israeli forces into close-quarters urban combat. This shielded Hezbollah's mobile missile launchers, which were used to bombard Israeli population centers, undermining political will for the long-term operations necessary to destroy the group's military capacity. Hezbollah's strategy will be identical in the next conflict.<sup>50</sup> During that war, Hezbollah also pressured Israel at sea, damaging INS *Hanit* during its blockade of the Lebanese coastline.<sup>51</sup> Hezbollah used a Chinese-produced C-802 missile and likely received technical support from the IRGC. Israel's ability to blockade Lebanon

during a conflict provides it with a critical advantage; while its air force can interdict supplies overland, its navy denies Iran or other countries that would support Israel's enemies the ability to resupply Hezbollah. Iran is now Hamas's primary benefactor, despite the supposed theological divide between the Shia Islamic Republic and the Sunni Palestinian terrorist group. Israel's blockade of Gaza and Egyptian cooperation have prevented Iran from supplying Hamas with sophisticated weapons, but Hamas has established naval commando units for wartime sabotage. Farther south, in Yemen, Iran's Houthi allies have used antiship missiles against American and Saudi warships. Land-directed measures remain prominent in Iranian strategy, as its 2019 Abqaiq-Khuras attack on Saudi Arabia from Iraqi territory demonstrates; nevertheless, maritime pressure is equally critical.<sup>52</sup>

Third, Iran must disrupt any regional coalition against it. The Islamic Republic's identity and interests make Saudi Arabia and Israel its major targets; however, they are not the only significant regional actors. Until the 1990s, Saudi Arabia led a relatively coherent Gulf Arab coalition. But the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar developed independent links with the United States, allowing them to expand their military capabilities. This enabled a broader regional struggle during the Arab Spring, which led to Qatar's public break with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.<sup>53</sup> In Syria, Qatar carved out its own proxy network of more-radical Islamists.<sup>54</sup> In Libya, it opposed Saudi Arabia and the broader Arab coalition.<sup>55</sup> The UAE, another small state with tactical flexibility, generally aligned with Saudi Arabia but acted independently in Libya during the second civil war. More recently, Egypt has regained some foreign-policy independence after having served as a Saudi client since Abdel el-Sisi's 2013 coup. Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq have signed an agreement for a "New Middle East," authorizing Jordan to transport Iraqi oil to Egypt and offering citizens of all three countries visa-free travel access.<sup>56</sup> Iraq's ties with Iran suggest that this may signal a shift in Iran's policy toward Jordan and Egypt. Moreover, Saudi Arabia views the UAE as an economic competitor; Mohammed bin Salman plans to shift Saudi state media companies from Dubai to Riyadh to improve the kingdom's competitiveness.<sup>57</sup> Recent events also are relevant. The UAE has been far more engaged in Afghanistan than was Saudi Arabia, even hosting former Afghan president Ashraf Ghani after the Taliban captured Kabul.<sup>58</sup> Iran thus has significant political space to maneuver among the Middle East's major powers and will exploit it as necessary to disrupt alliance formation.

Fourth, Iran must maintain good relations with great and middle powers other than the United States to ensure it can export oil. As noted, the Iranian economy is tied wholly to oil exports. The Iranian regime has attempted to diversify the country's economic profile, but this diversification occurs overwhelmingly

through the *bonyad* system. Nominally charitable Islamic trusts, the *bonyads* in fact serve as a link between the regime and the black market, facilitating Iranian arms and technology transfers and even selling narcotics and other illicit substances. The IRGC controls major *bonyads*, while former and active IRGC officers run both Iran's Petroleum Ministry and its nuclear program, preventing a pivot away from petrochemical dependence.<sup>59</sup> Hence it is critical for Iran to develop links with oil-dependent great and middle powers. Since the 2015 JCPOA, Iran has increased its exports to China, to which it now exports 51 percent of its crude oil; signed a comprehensive development framework with India; and, as of mid-2021, planned to expand exports to Europe as well. A greater international petrochemical presence will allow Iran to hamper any U.S.-led sanctions efforts, especially if it can establish a foothold in European markets. Moreover, 10 percent of Iran's crude oil exports travel to the UAE, so a more robust Iran-UAE partnership is possible because of divisions between Saudi and Emirati objectives.<sup>60</sup>

Fifth, Iran hopes to use the above four policy measures to isolate the United States and ultimately to eject it from the Middle East. The United States is the only great power that has been willing to confront Iran's expansion and is a necessary participant in any formal anti-Iranian Arab-Israeli alliance system. If Iran can pressure the United States and its allies militarily through its proxies, maintain links with other great-power benefactors, and increase its economic ties with China, India, and America's European allies, it can undermine the American political and diplomatic role in the Middle East. Ideally (in Iran's view), it would use the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan as a lever to increase pressure on the United States in Iraq while increasingly cooperating with its Arab rivals as the U.S. presence declines.

Iran is the most significant regional actor for general strategic purposes, but Turkey is equally relevant in a maritime context. Contemporary Turkey should not be confused with its twentieth-century predecessor. Until the 1990s, Turkish leaders subordinated any regional ambitions to bolstering the country's engagement with Europe and the U.S.-led alliance system. Turkey hemmed in Russian action in the eastern Mediterranean and was the cornerstone of NATO's southern maritime defenses.<sup>61</sup> Turkey was aggressive at times, particularly against Greece, but American senior military officers and diplomats managed Turko-Greek tensions well enough to prevent an intra-NATO conflict.<sup>62</sup>

This state of affairs has shifted since the first years of the twenty-first century. Turkish fixation on the Kurdish question resulted in its opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq—Ankara denied Washington the ability to use its military bases to attack Iraq from the northwest.<sup>63</sup> The U.S. presence in Iraq until 2011 did mitigate tensions, but the Syrian civil war and IS's emergence brought the

Kurdish question to the fore again, resulting in Turkey's military incursions into Syria and tensions with Russia.

Of equal importance is Turkey's internal political realignment. Initially, Recep T. Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party retained its Europhilic tilt despite the party's nominal religious identification. But since the early 2010s—most notably, after the 2016 alleged coup—Erdoğan has solidified his personal control over Turkish politics and increasingly has escalated Turkish international adven-

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*As the United States pivots away from the Middle East and Europe, . . . Israel must be prepared to use its navy independently to secure the Levantine Basin for its own purposes.*

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turism.<sup>64</sup> Turkey was the most active foreign participant in the 2014–20 Libyan civil war, intervening on the Tripoli government's behalf—thereby opposing Russia, NATO ally

France, and U.S. partners Egypt and the UAE.<sup>65</sup> Turkey also supported Azerbaijan in its 2020 war with Armenia, again bringing it into confrontation with Russia.<sup>66</sup> Turkey's relationship with Russia, however, is complex; despite their policy disagreements, Turkey has purchased air defenses from Russia, resulting in its ejection from America's F-35 program.<sup>67</sup>

Turkey's actions indicate its self-perception. Erdoğan believes he directs a potential great power and has attempted to accumulate strategic influence in the Levant, North Africa, and Caucasus that will give Turkey political leverage over Russia, the European powers, and Iran. Turkey's actions in Afghanistan reinforce this view. It is the only NATO member to maintain an embassy in the country and is in discussion with the Taliban and Qatar to take responsibility for the Kabul airport, in return for economic and political access in Afghanistan.<sup>68</sup> As noted, Turkey also supports China's BRI and has been bribed into silence on the CCP's Xinjiang genocide.

Turkish naval expansion also is a major factor. Turkey's first big-deck amphibious assault ship, *Anadolu*, can be converted into a light carrier, while the Turkish navy plans to refit its extant fleet with new navigation, propulsion, and weapons technology, overwhelmingly produced by Turkish firms.<sup>69</sup> The Turkish navy has deployed to Libya's coastline, causing friction during the 2014–20 civil war.<sup>70</sup> If Turkey's current procurement efforts are successful, the Turkish navy will become a significant regional force. Moreover, even with procurement roadblocks, Turkey still fields a dozen German-built submarines and sixteen small surface combatants—a fleet larger than Israel's, albeit less technologically sophisticated.

Turkey's naval expansion, presence in Syria, and foothold in Libya indicate a long-term strategy to monopolize the Levantine Basin, “box out” Israel, and emerge as the primary developer of the eastern Mediterranean natural gas deposits.

Clearly, Israel faces a volatile interstate regional situation. Israeli policy makers must consider Iran's attempts to disrupt a potential Arab-Israeli coalition against it, account for Turkish adventurism in the eastern Mediterranean, and consider the costs of Turko-Israeli confrontation.

### *Nonstate Actors*

The Middle East is not the only region saturated with nonstate armed groups; however, unlike in Africa, where nonstate actors drive regional politics no less than states do, in the Middle East nonstate actors should be conceived of as enabling forces. Three are most important for Israel to consider.

***Iranian Proxies.*** Proxies are Iran's primary tools to pressure Israel and the United States. Iran's most-developed proxies are in Iraq and Lebanon: in the former, the groups considered "Popular Mobilization Forces"; in the latter, Hezbollah. Iran also supports other groups, for instance serving as the Yemeni Houthis' and Hamas's primary international benefactor.

However, no substate partner can be considered fully subordinate to Iranian control. Indeed, the January 2020 assassination of Qassem Soleimani undermined Iran's power over local proxies, most notably in Iraq, where these groups mounted independent attacks on the United States.<sup>71</sup> Over time, this may trigger spiraling escalation, as Iran may feel compelled to intervene in a growing conflict between the United States or Israel and an Iranian affiliate acting independently.

Hezbollah and the Yemeni Houthis field the greatest naval capabilities at present. However, one can expect Iran to supply relevant Iraqi militias with antiship missiles if Persian Gulf escalation seems likely.<sup>72</sup>

***Palestinian Terror Groups.*** Currently, Hamas is the only relevant Palestinian group, given Fatah's contemporary political impotence and Palestinian Islamic Jihad's small size. Palestinian Authority corruption has increased Hamas's standing in Judea and Samaria, although the latter organization's primary focus is Gaza. As with Hezbollah's, the core of Hamas's strategy relies on attacks against Israeli civilians, either by using large numbers of unsophisticated rockets and mortars or by mounting terrorist attacks.<sup>73</sup> Ambition to achieve such attacks underlies Hamas's attempts to tunnel under Israeli defensive barriers and deploy operatives in Israel.

Hamas has limited naval capabilities, given Israel's long-term blockade of Gaza and Egypt's equal hostility toward the organization. But Hamas's naval commando units have mounted suicide attacks against the IDF in the past and can be expected to do so in the future whenever tensions with Israel escalate.<sup>74</sup>

***Salafi-Jihadist Organizations.*** Typically, Israel is not non-Palestinian jihadist organizations' primary target. However, there are indications that al-Qaeda has attempted to expand in Gaza and the West Bank and has planned operations in

Israel in the past.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, jihadist power provides Iran, Russia, and Turkey with greater freedom of action by creating a political pretext for regional action.

None of these groups has a major naval presence. Nevertheless, Israeli strategists must keep in mind the impact they can have on the regional balance of power.

### THE ROLE OF ISRAELI MARITIME POWER

Given this strategic situation, Israeli naval power must achieve two tasks: securing the Levantine Basin, and increasing its own ability to operate in Indian Ocean littorals.

By securing the Levantine Basin, the Israeli navy fulfills the following five strategic priorities:

- **Great-power independence.** As the United States pivots away from the Middle East and Europe, American sea control in the eastern Mediterranean will diminish. Indeed, insufficient American presence in the Levantine Basin allowed Russia to act with impunity in Syria, supporting its ground forces with surface combatants and carrier-based aviation. There is no guarantee that Russia—or China, if it establishes a major military presence in the Middle East—will provide Israel with the same sea-control benefits as the United States has heretofore. Thus, Israel must be prepared to use its navy independently to secure the Levantine Basin for its own purposes, possibly in concert with regional partners such as Egypt and Greece. This entails not necessarily defeating Russian forces but at a minimum establishing robust enough capabilities to jeopardize Russian sea control in the Levantine Basin.
- **Economic security.** A maritime footprint allows Israel to secure its claims to the Leviathan gas fields. This will increase in importance as Leviathan's deposits are developed; for the entire Levantine Basin, the U.S. Geological Survey puts the amount of recoverable oil at 1.7 billion barrels and recoverable natural gas at over 100 trillion cubic feet.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, other regional actors, particularly Turkey, have taken an interest in the Leviathan gas fields. The Israeli navy must be able to assert Israel's claims against Turkey's, and thus must be able to control the eastern Mediterranean out to and beyond Cyprus.
- **Regional deterrence.** Israeli sea control in the eastern Mediterranean denies Israel's adversaries the ability to pressure its coastline. In a future conflict between Israel and Iran, Hezbollah is likely to harass Israeli warships, as it did in 2006; but beyond that, an amphibious movement, even if intended only to spread terror, would be disastrous.<sup>77</sup> Conventionally, Turkey also poses a threat, owing to the size of its naval forces and its increasing hostility toward Israel. The Israeli navy must be able to deter and, if needed, defeat Turkish operations.

- Second-strike maintenance. Israel's second-strike capability rests on access to the Levantine Basin. In lieu of American sea control, the Israeli navy's surface forces must be able to ensure that Israeli submarines can operate in the eastern Mediterranean without detection. It is here that great-power dynamics gain clear importance. An Iran confident in Russia's ability to limit Israeli naval action, even absent Russian engagement as a cobelligerent, would be much more adventurous, since it would know that ground- and air-launched missiles posed the only second-strike threat.
- Restraint of terrorist organizations. Israel's blockade of Gaza and functional blockade of the Lebanese coastline prevent terrorist organizations from receiving supplies by sea. Absent this advantage, Hezbollah and Hamas would become much greater threats.

These five tasks are central to Israeli strategy. But they are defensive, providing the IDF with rear-area security robust enough to allow the assumption of the operational offensive on land; they do not put pressure on Israel's state-based adversaries. Thus, a second set of missions can be identified that involve operating in the Indian Ocean's littorals.

- Anti-Iranian war-fighting capability. While the Levantine Basin is Israel's maritime center of gravity, Israeli sea control in the eastern Mediterranean does not impact Iranian war-fighting capabilities directly. Israel finds it difficult to operate in the Indian Ocean because of the natural choke points that hem in any Elat-based naval forces. If Israel developed and deployed surface warships or submarines (most likely the latter) that were capable of remaining on station for months, it could maintain a permanent presence in the Indian Ocean, thereby increasing its ability to pressure Iran directly. Moreover, if Israel can solidify its potential partnership with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, it can use its naval forces as a diplomatic bargaining chip. No Arab navy can project power beyond the Arabian Peninsula's littorals, nor do any of the Gulf Arab nations operate submarines. Israel could turn to the Gulf Arabs for logistical support, likely covertly, to enable long-term operations in the western Indian Ocean.
- Sea denial in the Bab el Mandeb. The 1967 and 1973 wars demonstrate the importance the Bab el Mandeb holds for Israel and the dangers of pressure against it. Elat is a poor home port for submarines, but—barring large-scale Chinese force deployments to Djibouti—Israel could deploy a naval presence to Elat large enough to counter an Iranian blockade. This might involve both striking targets in Yemen and countering Iranian warships that threaten Israeli-bound merchant traffic.

## THE FUTURE OF ISRAELI NAVAL FORCES

This review of great-power activity in the Middle East and regional Middle Eastern dynamics indicates the scope of the problem that Israeli policy makers face. Extraregional and regional actors all hope to seek leverage over the Middle East's maritime littorals. Thus, maritime power is central to Israel's interests.

Israel's current force structure is sufficient for immediate political conditions. However, as analysis of broader strategic shifts has demonstrated, an Israel less certain of U.S. naval support must consider expanding its naval presence and shifting its strategy accordingly. Additionally, Israel must take into account several potential maritime flash points that could spark a broader conflict. Insufficient naval power will invite pressure on these flash points.

### *Force Structure and Acquisitions*

Today's Israeli navy's force structure matches the IDF's historical operational requirements. Israel has no ship or submarine displacing over 2,200 tons and no surface combatant larger than 1,900 tons. Three classes of ships comprise the current fleet.<sup>78</sup>

The backbone of the IDF's combat capabilities is provided by its five (soon to be six, with the delivery of INS *Drakon*) German-built *Dolphin*-class submarines.<sup>79</sup> The *Dolphin* boats are relatively similar in size and capability, despite their division into two classes. The *Dolphin 2* hulls are about three hundred tons heavier, but their armament appears identical to that of the *Dolphin 1*s. The greatest difference is propulsion. All the *Dolphin 2* boats, and presumably the future *Dakar*-class hulls, are equipped with air-independent propulsion (AIP), making them much quieter than the *Dolphin 1*s.<sup>80</sup> The AIP requirement likely came from the IDF's nuclear needs. In lieu of constructing much larger, more expensive nuclear-powered fast-attack submarines with nuclear-tipped cruise missiles, the IDF has opted to field smaller, quieter, conventional submarines in numbers great enough to conduct deterrence patrols.

Israel combines these *Dolphin* boats with a handful of extremely capable small surface combatants, designated corvettes. All Israeli corvettes are under two thousand tons and have a standard ship's complement of sixty to seventy officers and sailors. But the Sa'ar 5- and Sa'ar 6-class ships have two thirty-two-cell vertical-launching-system units, dedicated antiship missile launchers, and a helicopter deck. The larger Sa'ar 6s are equipped with the same air-defense system that Israel's Iron Dome uses, giving it potent anti-air capabilities—a necessity that grows out of the IDF's attention to offensive counter-air and nonmaritime battle-field air-interdiction missions.<sup>81</sup>

Missile boats and fast-attack craft comprise the remainder of the Israeli fleet. It fields eight larger (all under five hundred tons) missile boats equipped with a

mix of antiship and anti-air missiles. Like their larger Sa'ar 5 and 6 cousins, the Sa'ar 4.5 missile boats are designed for independent operation despite the threat of air attack. Additionally, Israel has about three to four dozen fast-attack craft designed for littoral operations, supplemented with an increasingly capable fleet of unmanned surface vehicles.

Notwithstanding Israel's small size and the funding imbalance among the Israeli navy, ground forces, and air forces, the Israeli navy's ships are well built and extremely capable. It is remarkable, for example, that surface combatants and missile boats as small as 440 tons have relatively robust air defenses.

Nevertheless, three factors hamper the Israeli navy's force structure. First, a lack of submarine capacity limits the IDF's ability to maintain a presence in the

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western Indian Ocean. As noted, the Israeli navy possesses five boats, with a sixth likely to be delivered in 2022. If the IDF reserves its three *Dolphin 2s* for deterrence pa-

trols of the Levantine Basin, only three *Dolphin 1s* are left for non-Mediterranean deployments. There are no plans to expand the Israeli submarine fleet; when the navy receives the first *Dakar* in 2027, it will begin phasing out the *Dolphin 1s* hull for hull. Thus, as effective as the *Dolphin* class may be in a conventional context, Israel lacks the capacity to use its fleet of diesel-electric attack submarines offensively outside the eastern Mediterranean.

Second, while Israel has a proportionally large defense-industrial base, the country is dependent on foreign suppliers for its larger hulls. The largest domestic ships Israel has constructed are its Sa'ar 4.5-class missile boats, all under five hundred tons. Israel's future Sa'ar 72-class "corvette"—in fact a missile boat, with an eight-hundred-ton displacement—will be produced in Israeli yards. But Israel relies on foreign yards for its higher-end naval combatants.<sup>82</sup> The United States constructed Israel's Sa'ar 5 class; Germany, the Sa'ar 6 class and Israel's *Dolphin*-class submarines. This leaves Israel vulnerable to foreign production shortages, or to international pressure during a crisis if the United States no longer maintains a presence in the Middle East or a core political interest in European politics.

Third, as capable as Israel's small surface combatants and missile boats may be, geographic realities make it difficult for the Israeli navy to deploy surface combatants to the western Indian Ocean. Elat's naval facilities are slightly too small to host submarines regularly, while the Strait of Tiran and the Bab el Mandeb hem in any ships deployed from Israel's Red Sea coastline.<sup>83</sup> Since the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, Egypt has allowed Israel to move warships through the Suez Canal.

But the Chinese presence in the Horn of Africa and Iranian leverage through the Yemeni Houthis could limit Israel's access to the Indian Ocean even if Egypt and Israel remain on good terms.

Future acquisitions will bolster the Israeli navy's combat capacity. Even if the IDF retires the first three *Dolphins* once it receives the *Dakar*-class replacements, the new boats will be more advanced than nearly any other regional submarine, despite Turkish and Greek contracts with German suppliers. Additionally, Israel could export domestically produced warships, as it has done with small coastal craft in the past, to improve relationships with regional powers. Nevertheless, Israel will face challenges to its maritime security and must consider whether its current fleet architecture is sufficient to meet new threats.

### *Six Potential Contingencies*

These force-structure questions are compounded when the potential maritime flash points that could spark a regional conflict are reviewed. Six are most relevant for Israel's context.

***Conflict over the Leviathan Gas Fields.*** Since the discovery of the Leviathan gas fields, multiple eastern Mediterranean actors have attempted to assert their claims. Currently, Israel, Cyprus, and Greece have agreed to coordinate resource extraction in the Levantine Basin, with Egyptian and Italian support.<sup>84</sup>

Turkey, however, has used Northern Cyprus as a pretext for claims to the Leviathan deposits. Initially, Lebanon also claimed that the gas fields were within its exclusive economic zone. Lebanon, Syria, and perhaps even Hamas are likely to make similar claims, particularly if Turkey can coordinate more effectively with Iran.<sup>85</sup> A Greek-Turkish confrontation over Levantine Basin resource extraction would necessitate Israeli involvement, in light of the economic and strategic implications of a Turkish-dominated Mediterranean.

***A Third Lebanon War.*** It is remarkable that since 2006 Israel has been able to avoid another offensive against Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. This indicates the degree of Hezbollah's and Iran's involvement in the Syrian civil war; neither proxy nor patron could pressure Israel directly, given the resources and bandwidth needed to prop up the Assad regime.<sup>86</sup> However, now that Assad has consolidated control of the country, and as the United States seems to consider a broader withdrawal from the Middle East and rapprochement with Iran, a new Lebanon war has become increasingly likely.<sup>87</sup>

Hezbollah's strategy will rely on ground-attack missiles. Although Iron Dome will provide some protection, it is unclear whether it will perform as well against advanced Iranian-supplied weapons as it did against Hezbollah's and Hamas's

improvised rockets. This will demand an Israeli ground invasion and the long-term urban combat that entails.

Hezbollah can inflict additional punishment on Israel by attacking ships that Iranian intelligence identifies as Israel bound and by harassing Israeli warships deployed to enforce a blockade of Lebanon. Moreover, while Turkey and Iran were at odds in Syria, a political thaw is conceivable, considering their mutual opposition to Israel and Turkey's thorough tactical flexibility vis-à-vis Russia. Thus, a naval contingency that grows out of a Hezbollah-Israel conflict could broaden a local war into a regional crisis—absent sufficient Israeli sea control.

*Iranian Escalation in the Strait of Hormuz.* Iran's view of the Strait of Hormuz is badly misunderstood. An Iranian blockade of the strait would undermine the country's economy. But, as with British strategy during the First World War, Iranian policy makers could calculate that the damage caused to American allies would accumulate far more quickly than Iranian internal pressures—the regime's public-security forces are brutally efficient.<sup>88</sup>

More important, however, are Iran's attempts to integrate into China's BRI. A natural-gas pipeline running from northeastern Iran to Xinjiang via Central Asia is under construction; Iran has the world's second-largest proven natural-gas reserves after Russia, making this a significant buffer to Iranian economic difficulties. Iran also has invested in three alternative transportation routes that bypass the Strait of Hormuz. First, it has constructed a pipeline for Iranian oil to the port of Jask on the Gulf of Oman, beyond the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>89</sup> Iran hopes to link this pipeline to a broader network running through Central Asia and to Russia, increasing its leverage over Moscow during a Hormuz-related contingency. Second, a natural-gas pipeline between Iran and Pakistan is under construction, in concert with both India and China, providing another export outlet. U.S. sanctions delayed the pipeline, but a Pakistani realignment or Biden-driven sanctions shift might enable its completion.<sup>90</sup> Third, China has proposed two pipelines, one to transport Iranian oil through Central Asia alongside existing natural-gas routes, the other to move oil to Pakistan, then onward to Chinese transportation infrastructure linked to Xinjiang.

As these overland transportation networks develop in the next decade—and as China becomes a major Iranian oil-export partner, rather than India or, historically, Japan—it becomes more reasonable for Iran to close the Strait of Hormuz to constrict Saudi exports and punish U.S. allies. The potential this would raise for increased Iranian aggression is of obvious importance to Israel. Absent significant American support, the UAE and Saudi Arabia would find it difficult to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, thereby hamstringing Saudi oil exports and preventing any Emirati sales. Support from Israel would be critical if it and its Gulf

Arab cobelligerents wish to avoid greater escalation—a central concern if Iran fields nuclear weapons.

*Iranian Harassment in the Indian Ocean.* In late July 2021, off Oman's coast, Iran used a drone to attack a tanker operated by an Israeli-led company, killing two.<sup>91</sup> This attack followed four others since February 2021, each of which targeted ships owned or previously owned by Israeli companies.<sup>92</sup> None of Iran's attacks has done significant damage; the worst attack, in February, required the targeted tanker to dock in Dubai for repairs.<sup>93</sup> Iran's attacks also seem to be retaliatory, in keeping with the sort of low-level harassment it uses to keep Israel on edge in between serious crises.

Nevertheless, Iran's attacks on Israeli-connected ships in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Oman raise the prospect of more-frequent maritime pressure. Israel can defend shipping in the Levantine Basin and expect a reasonably secure environment once tankers pass the Bab el Mandeb, but farther east no Arab partner of Israel can guarantee the security of Israeli ships. Without leverage in the Indian Ocean, pressure against Israeli-owned or Israeli-bound shipping, whether brought by Iran directly or through a proxy, would force Israel to escalate during its response. And a major cyber attack may not be sufficient to block Iranian pressure, depending on Tehran's calculations. Thus, Israel could find itself planning major first strikes to preclude a broader crisis rather than preventing Iran from attacking Israel-bound merchant traffic.

*Regional Eastern Mediterranean Conflict.* A Turkish-Israeli conflict is possible, particularly if Turkey increases its support for Hamas or escalates a dispute over the Levantine Basin's energy deposits. Equally relevant is the likelihood of a broader Mediterranean contingency that pits Turkey against some combination of Greece, Egypt, Russia, and perhaps even France. A conflict in which Turkey and France were openly hostile to each other would shatter NATO. And regardless of the precise configuration of forces, a regional realignment likely would follow any of these scenarios. Russia and Turkey would be presented with an opportunity to establish sea control over the eastern Mediterranean. Both cases would impinge directly on Israeli interests.

The danger for Israel is that an entirely unrelated conflict will spill over into the Levantine Basin. Libya is a likely catalyst. French, Russian, Turkish, and Egyptian hostility, along with the again-delayed Libyan presidential elections, makes a renewed political crisis likely.<sup>94</sup> Less likely but still relevant would be a Caucasus conflict, akin to the October 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. In that event, fighting was restricted to the specific contested regions, reducing the likelihood of open Turkish or Russian belligerence; however, a war with more expansive Azerbaijani

or Armenian political aims could trigger mutual intervention, which likely would spill over into the Levantine Basin.<sup>95</sup>

If Israel does not have the naval capabilities to secure its coastline, it could find itself squeezed between great or regional powers or forced to escalate to contain a broader conflict.

***A Broader Eurasian Confrontation.*** Middle Eastern politics set against a broader Eurasian backdrop demonstrates the region's centrality to China's long-term ambitions. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is constructing a fleet capable of projecting power beyond the first island chain.<sup>96</sup> The base access China has created in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Djibouti raises the possibility that the PLA will deploy a full strike group to the Indian Ocean once it has completed its Type 003 carrier.<sup>97</sup> This would expand the physical theater of Sino-American confrontation beyond the East and South China Seas, forcing the United States to redeploy naval forces to protect shipping and allies outside the western Pacific. China's partnership with Pakistan also could develop into a more formal alliance, particularly if the American withdrawal from Afghanistan prompts a broader crisis in U.S.-Pakistani relations.

Thus, it is entirely conceivable that, in the next half decade, the Middle East may become a region of military confrontation directly relevant to a Sino-American conflict.

Even if the Indian Ocean is more relevant to this conflict, Israel must be aware that regional actors such as Iran and Turkey will be tempted to capitalize on American weakness. The dangers of a long war for the CCP demand that Beijing welcome any allies or cobelligerents it can identify. This creates a clear incentive for regional escalation. Moreover, maritime escalation would be most beneficial to the CCP, as it would redirect valuable U.S. naval forces away from defending the first island chain. Hence Israel may become an unwilling participant in a much broader Eurasian confrontation—a situation it faced seriously only during the 1973 war.

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