

Chapter 4

The Regional Military Balance

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A traditional military balance compared states' inventories of main weapon systems – fighter aircraft, tanks, APCs, artillery pieces, armed helicopters, fighting ships, and submarines – as well as the number of fighting formations. These benchmarks were inherently problematic because they were based on quantitative data only. In an attempt to take qualitative criteria into account as well, analyses sometimes considered weapon systems' performance and parameters such as the quality of training and of personnel, which are much more difficult to gauge.

Two additional factors complicated a comparative analysis. First, with the introduction of precision guided munitions, the performance of the so-called main weapon systems became less important than the performance of the system as a whole – the integration of platforms, smart munitions, and C⁴I systems. Second, asymmetrical warfare erased the divide between the military and the civilian. The objective of the asymmetrical foe, usually a non-state actor, is not to destroy its enemy's military forces and occupy its territory, but to create a perception of victory by sheer survival and retention of the ability to exact costs from the enemy, especially its civilian population. In this kind of war, other parameters such as the low signature of fighting forces and survivability are more salient.

Analysts have commonly divided Israel's strategic environment into three concentric circles. The inner circle usually referred to the threat of terrorism from the occupied territories; the close circle considered the "conventional" threat from the Arab states bordering Israel; and the outer circle represented mainly the threat of long-range missiles, possibly armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Current evidence indicates that these traditional dividing lines have blurred.

Rockets and Asymmetric War: Two Circles Intermingled

Israel has been involved in a low-intensity conflict with Palestinian armed organizations since the 1960s. Following the 1982 war in Lebanon, Hizbollah promoted two main instruments of asymmetric warfare: suicide bombing and indirect fire, mainly rocket, aimed at civilian targets. In the second intifada these became Palestinian trademarks as well.

The Israeli security forces succeeded in developing an effective response to suicide bombings through the construction of a barrier system (the security fence), good intelligence, and freedom of action in the West Bank, all of which facilitate interception of suicide bombers before they reach their targets. Once the deployment of the barrier in the West Bank is completed, this system will presumably be even more effective.

In contrast, the use of rockets against Israeli population centers has become a major problem. When the first Qassams were fired on Israel in 2001, they were characterized by their poor performance and short shelf life. However, the Palestinians have since improved the Qassam and turned it into what is currently their most effective weapon against Israel. It causes few casualties, but it is effective as a classic weapon of terror that fosters a sustainable threat against the civilian population, making it impossible for those within range to pursue a normal routine.

The Second Lebanon War exposed the full effect of this type of asymmetric warfare. Hizbollah's strategy was to avoid direct confrontation of forces on the battleground. Its main objective was not winning, rather avoiding defeat. Hizbollah did not try to conquer any Israeli territory, but instead continued to harass the population in northern Israel with rocket fire while exacting costs from Israeli ground forces engaged in occupying the launch areas. This enabled Hizbollah to claim victory at the end of the war.

Hizbollah's tactics involved several types of rockets: heavy rockets, fired from mobile launchers; and medium and light rockets, fired from hidden, static launchers, usually prepared in advance and unmanned during the actual firing. Hizbollah was also equipped with large numbers of anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), which were used effectively by small contingents against Israeli formations armed with main battle tanks (MBTs) and armored fighting vehicles (AFVs).

The war proved to Israel that airpower can deal effectively with the higher signature medium- and long-range rockets, but the only way the more numerous, smaller, and dispersed short-range rockets can be neutralized is by occupying the launch areas. Since the war, the IDF has invested much in equipping and training adequate forces for this mission. Israel is also developing active-defense systems that will intercept and destroy the short-range rockets, but it will take several years until these systems are deployed. Even then, it remains to be seen whether they can effectively counter the threat of the short-range rockets.

The Lebanon Front

While mutual deterrence, UNSCR 1701, and Hizbollah's domestic political concerns have kept the Lebanese border relatively calm since August 2006, the organization has not sat idle. It believes that its strategy proved effective, and it is preparing for a similar – but more successful – future encounter. According to Israeli military sources, Hizbollah, assisted by Iran and Syria, has amassed about

35,000 rockets and ATGMs (triple its pre-war inventory). Most are short-range 107 mm and 122 mm Grads, but the long-range arsenal has also grown and includes Syrian-made 240 mm and 302 mm rockets as well as heavier Iranian Zelzals and more accurate Fateh 110 rockets. Hizbollah has also acquired more coastal anti-ship missiles, similar to those that struck an Israeli corvette during the war. However, it seems that Hizbollah has not yet been able to replace the trained personnel it lost in the war.

Thus, stability along the Israeli-Lebanese border prevails largely due to a mutual balance of terror. Hizbollah has renewed and improved its capability to harass the population in large sections of Israel, while Israel retains the ability to cause massive damage to Lebanon, Shiite interests in Lebanon, and Hizbollah.

The Gaza Front

The Palestinian arsenal relies on smuggling from Sinai and limited indigenous manufacturing. Thus, Palestinians do not have access to the rich inventory of weapons possessed by Hizbollah. Nonetheless, Hamas forces in Gaza have tried to emulate Hizbollah by acquiring the ability to launch large numbers of short-range and longer-range rockets at Israeli populated areas and to operate a large number of well trained small units equipped with anti-tank weapons that aim to inflict high casualties on Israeli forces.

There is an ongoing attempt to upgrade the indigenously manufactured rockets. There are also efforts to smuggle additional military-grade rockets, of the original Soviet Grad type ("Katyusha"), through Sinai to the Gaza Strip. These have extended the range of Palestinian rocket fire to Ashkelon, but as yet they are limited in number. Hamas has also adopted Hizbollah tactics, such as rocket launchers dug into the ground and concealed in advance.

Recent incidents have shown that while there is some improvement in Hamas' level of fighting, it is still far from the proficiency of similar Hizbollah forces.

Syria

Syria is the best example of the mingling of the different threat circles. In the past, it represented a typical threat of the close circle – a neighboring country with conventional forces equipped to launch a land invasion, albeit in such a dismal state that they hardly pose a serious threat to Israel.

Two developments have started to change this situation. First, in December 2005, Syria and Russia ended a longstanding dispute regarding Syria's \$13 billion debt to the former Soviet Union, and in 2006 and 2007 the Syrian military began to absorb some new weapon systems. Negotiations continue over the Syrian shopping list, though unlike during the heyday of the USSR presence in the Middle East, Russia is more cautious and probably not keen on supplying Syria with every item it hopes to acquire.

Second, the Second Lebanon War showed the regime that it is possible to stand fast against the formidable Israeli war machine by adopting a doctrine of asymmetric warfare. Syria's developing strategy is composed of three elements:

1. Reliable deterrence, which aims to deter the enemy from waging war in the first place. For some decades, Syria has based this deterrence on ballistic missiles equipped with chemical warheads, and it continues to develop and improve their capabilities. In recent years it has also gained the capacity to launch large numbers of medium- and long-range rockets at civilian targets.
2. If deterrence fails and war begins, the first line of defense would be strong, dispersed, low-signature elements, which might not be able to block an attacking force altogether but could still exact a high cost.
3. At the same time, a war of attrition against the attacker's civilian population could be conducted using massive numbers of rockets and missiles.

Syrian procurement, training, and deployment of forces are shaped by this doctrine. Thus, Syria continues to invest heavily in developing its missile force, and it seeks to strengthen its defensive capabilities

against an Israeli offensive. Syria's recent acquisitions are mainly of three categories: air defense, ATGMs, and coastal defense. There has been no real effort to procure either MBTs or attack aircraft.

- Syria acquired the Strelts air defense system, followed by the new Pantsyr S-1 air defense system; these have already been partly supplied. Both are mobile, short-range defense systems and are designed for point defense of strategic installations or combat units.
- ATGMs: Syria procured more Kornet-E missiles, similar to those it had previously acquired and transferred to Hizbollah, and also the Khryzantema systems, the newest and most advanced anti-tank system in the Russian arsenal.
- The Syrian navy, which was neglected for decades, was boosted by the acquisition from Iran of more C-802 anti-ship missiles, which can be launched from both combat vessels and coastal launchers. The Syrian navy also acquired light patrol boats, likewise from Iran.

The last major manifestation of the current Syrian strategy is the deployment of vast numbers of short- and medium-range artillery rockets. As early as mid-2007, there were reports that Syria moved thousands of rockets to its border with Israel and deployed many of them in fixed, underground positions. This method of deployment was unknown in Syria before 2006.

Overall, Israel still retains a clear advantage over the Syrian military in any direct encounter between the armed forces of the two states due to its superior airpower and its dominant RMA (revolution in military affairs) capabilities – standoff precision guided firepower combined with effective C⁴I systems. It is still unclear whether the asymmetric response Syria is developing can be an appropriate solution to Israel's military advantages, taking into account that the IDF also has better capabilities of causing damage to Syria's infrastructure and civilian population. If war becomes a competition between the two states over the capacity to damage the enemy's civilian rear, it is far from certain if Syria can weather the Israeli response.

The Familiar Close Circle – Egypt and Jordan

While Syria is evolving into a complex, asymmetric threat, there are no signs of such developments in Egypt and Jordan. Both countries have channeled substantial US aid into conventional, mostly American-made weaponry, and both countries' militaries are trained for conventional wars. In terms of equipment, the Egyptian armed forces have evolved into a large and highly sophisticated military machine. With annual aid of \$1.3 billion from the US, Egypt's main objective in arms procurements is to be on a par with Israel. Its navy is much larger than Israel's and is equipped with modern frigates from US navy drawdowns. The Egyptian armed forces lag far behind Israel's in the ability to engage in the new RMA-type of regular war, though they train frequently with other modern Western forces (first and foremost, the US). The military has continued to upgrade its large air defense component by modernizing its aging Russian-made air defense systems. In addition, Egypt continues to build its military industry, where the current focus is the ongoing project of assembling M1A1 Abrams MBTs and M88 armored recovery vehicles.

Jordan, like Egypt, has relied on American-made military equipment for many years (though it has felt free to diversify its sources. For example, Jordan has been operating Russian-made SA-8 SAMs since the 1980s). Jordan also invests considerable efforts in building up its own military industry. Since the American invasion in Iraq, Jordan became a much more important ally of the US. That has positively affected the level of US aid to Jordan, which will amount to \$202 million in 2008. Overall, the Jordanian military is a relatively well trained small military force, but it suffers from acute shortages due to lack of resources and is focused exclusively on building credible defensive capabilities.

Although Israel regards Egypt and Jordan as potential military risks, both countries have peace agreements with Israel that have proven stable since they were concluded. Moreover, both countries are not only allies of the US; they are also highly dependent on US aid. The US is committed to ensuring Israel's qualitative edge, which

makes it difficult for Egypt and Jordan to achieve clear military advantages over Israel.

The Outer Circle

While Israel tends to see the regional military balance in the framework of the Arab-Israeli conflict, some of the most important developments have occurred in the Gulf region and have little to do with the Arab-Israeli conflict or balance of forces. Indeed, most of the wars in the Middle East have taken place in this very region: the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the 1991 Gulf War, the 2003 Iraq War, and the subsequent American occupation. The role of the Gulf region as a main source of oil, inherent instability, and the growing threat of Iran make the military balance in the Gulf a significant issue.

Reaction to Iranian Buildup

Iran has been building up its military force since the war with Iraq ended in 1988, and it has slowly evolved as a contender for regional hegemony. Its conventional military forces are large, though equipped mostly with outdated equipment or relatively small numbers of modern equipment pieces procured in China, North Korea, and Russia. What primarily bother the other states in the region (as well as Israel) are Iran's efforts to acquire military nuclear capability, as well as its ballistic missile force buildup. Added to that is Iran's military assistance to various insurgent forces in the region.

Most of the other states in the Gulf reacted with a major military buildup of their own. An earlier wave of military procurement in the late 1990s was followed by a few years of limited procurement, as militaries in the region were absorbing their newly acquired systems and as oil prices fell. Recently – and with the surge in revenues from rising oil prices – the military shopping spree has resumed.

The two most prominent purchasers were Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Both invested billions in new acquisitions, primarily for their air forces and navies, the military arms most

relevant for warfare in the region. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have also labored to build up their indigenous military industries, often through technology transfer and offset agreements that accompany any new arms procurement deal.

Another important aspect is the fierce competition between arms suppliers to the region, which gives countries in the region considerable leverage. Saudi Arabia, for example, whose navy traditionally relied on French systems and whose air defense is a mix of US and French systems, has connected with the UK in the Typhoon deal. Another contender in the Gulf arms market is Russia, which sold IFVs and air defense systems in the region.

Numbers of weapon systems and their performances indicate that the Arab Gulf states enjoy a clear advantage over Iran in the critical areas of air and naval power. The most important related question is the quality of these wealthy, well equipped militaries. All the Arab countries in the region suffer from a shortage of qualified manpower, and wealthy citizens rarely see their future in military service. Some of the militaries in the region still rely heavily on foreigners for different jobs, and how these foreigners would function in wartime remains an open question. It is also not clear how cohesive and motivated these militaries would be in a clash with the highly motivated, ideologically driven Iranian forces.

US military forces remain deployed in Iraq and some of the smaller Arab Gulf states. There is also a major US naval presence and pre-positioned equipment for additional units, meaning that the US presence can be increased rapidly. The US military serves as the most important counterbalance to Iran.

Conclusion

Over the years, the IDF has developed superior capabilities in comparison to its potential rivals in two areas geared mostly toward conventional warfare: the capacity to operate large maneuvering formations and the massive use of long-range standoff precision fire. Although the Second Lebanon War exposed a weakness in the

maneuvering elements, the IDF has since invested in correcting this lapse and these forces are presumably regaining their proficiency. Thus, the IDF still retains its advantages over any probable combination of Arab states engaged in a regular war against Israel.

Threats from the “outer circle,” mostly by medium-range ballistic missiles, have preoccupied Israeli planners for almost two decades, and Israel has achieved significant capability to mitigate these threats (by acquiring long-range attack capabilities and by ballistic missile defense systems like the Arrow).

Israel remains beset by a threat of asymmetrical warfare from the close circle. The basic problems are how to win a war against a non-state actor whose main purpose is to survive and retain some fighting capabilities, and how to prevent harassment of the population by enemy rockets. The IDF lacks a good solution for short-range rocket attacks other than occupation of the densely populated launch areas.

In the Gulf region, the US, with its Arab allies, maintains a balance of force with Iran that deters the latter from taking any military steps other than giving clandestine aid to the Iraqi insurgency. The region’s main concern is the possibility of a future US disengagement from Iraq that may weaken US resolve in deterring Iran.