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The purpose of *Strategic Assessment* is to stimulate and enrich the public debate on issues that are, or should be, on Israel's national security agenda.

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Abstracts

Major Trends in Iranian Society
Raz Zimmt

Iranian society is complex and in flux, and since the Islamic Revolution has experienced far reaching demographic and cultural changes. An analysis of deep-seated trends in Iranian society demonstrates processes that both encourage and inhibit political change. The younger population is, for the most part, increasingly removed from the revolution's values, which poses a challenge to the conservative religious establishment. At the same time, the aging of the society strengthens the preference for gradual change and political stability. Secularization processes and the erosion of the status of the clerics challenge the continued rule of the religious establishment, but the strength of the national and cultural identity provides the regime with the ability to rally public support around national and religious symbols. The exposure to the West and modernization encourages liberal trends and individualism, but the public's opposition to external Western pressures encourages a willingness to stand shoulder to shoulder with the regime against external enemies. Thus while the socio-political processes have not ripened into a catalyst for significant political change, in the absence of serious attention to the social challenges, they could, at some point, undermine the regime's fundamental principles and its very stability, especially after the death of current Supreme Leader Khamenei.

Keywords: Iran, society and politics, regime stability

The Iranian Military Intervention in Syria: A Look to the Future
Ephraim Kam

Despite various constraints, Iran apparently intends to leave military forces in Syria indefinitely. Most of these forces will likely come from Hezbollah and the Iraqi Shiite militias and, to a lesser degree, from the Afghan and Pakistani militias, and will be led by members of the Revolutionary Guards and the Quds Force. In such a scenario, they will tighten Iran's grip on Syria, enhance Iran's regional influence, and generate new threats against Israel. However, this military involvement also incurs weaknesses for Iran,

including improved Israeli ability to attack it. Accordingly, Iran will not, in all likelihood, hurry to provoke Israel, and instead will focus on enhancing its deterrence. In any case, Israel will have to improve its deterrence against Iran; this might involve cooperation with the American administration.

Keywords: Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Shiite militias, military intervention

The Changes in Saudi Arabia: Preparing for Possible Destabilization
Amos Yadlin and Yoel Guzansky

The resilience demonstrated by Saudi Arabia over the last seven tumultuous years does not guarantee its long term stability. Indeed, not only has the risk of an outbreak of political violence not been removed, but due to circumstances and processes underway in the kingdom, the risk is greater than in the past. Furthermore, in recent years, the Middle East has seen seemingly stable regimes collapse with no prior warning signs. Given the far reaching consequences of a collapse of the regime in Riyadh, it is important to consider this potential scenario. This essay does not purport to predict a precise time at which the kingdom might become unstable, or to assess the degree to which instability in Saudi Arabia is inevitable. Rather, it seeks to warn of the possible consequences of this scenario and generate related insights.

Keywords: regime stability, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel

State Collapse in Libya: Prospects and Implications
Sarah Feuer, Ofir Winter, Ari Heistein, and Bar Loopo

This paper analyzes the causes and consequences of a further breakdown of state coherence in Libya, and considers the implications for Israel as it seeks to minimize the risks associated with greater instability in North Africa. Libya's strategic importance for Israel lies in its potential destabilizing impact on Egypt, its involvement in the regional struggle between Islamist and anti-Islamist factions, and its emergence as a conduit for Russia's growing regional influence. Israeli policymakers would do well to enhance security and political coordination with Egypt in an effort to fortify Cairo's defenses against threats emanating from Libya, while quietly urging allies in Washington not to disengage from the Libyan theater and cede additional ground to Russia.

Keywords: Libya, Egypt, Russia, Haftar, North Africa

Russia and China in the Middle East: Rapprochement and Rivalry
Galia Lavi and Sarah Fainberg

As the war in Syria appears to be drawing to a close, Russia and China are looking ahead, particularly at the business opportunities available to them. Yet despite the rapprochement between Russia and China in the international arena, the cooperation that characterized these two powers during the war in Syria is likely to give way to economic rivalry that will remind them both of the bones of contention between them. At the same time, the Russian-Chinese rapprochement in the global arena, and recently in the Middle East as well, despite its limitations and difficulties, is liable to bolster the standing of parties acting against Israel's interests in the region, while weakening the influence of the United States. Israel should monitor regional developments from the perspective of relations between the powers, while also taking into account the possibility that China and Russia will cooperate in creating a bloc against the United States.

Keywords: China, Russia, Middle East, power relations, Israel

Stabilizing Afghanistan: The Need for a Comprehensive Approach
Marta Furlan

Since NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission ended in December 2014, the security situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated immensely. Against this background, President Trump has advanced a "new Afghan strategy" that focuses on sending more troops, "killing terrorists," and eschewing "nation-building" in order to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorists. Yet with the adoption of this militarized approach, it is important to analyze the problems that have plagued Afghanistan over the past two years so as to identify the most appropriate strategy to stabilize the country. Indeed, a comprehensive approach that merges military, political, and economic measures is the only path to long term stability.

Keywords: Afghanistan; Taliban; ISIS-K; NUG; nation-building

Israel and Delegitimization in Europe: The Netherlands Case Study
Michal Hatuel-Radoshitzky and Isabel de Jong

This article addresses the amorphous phenomenon of "Israel's delegitimization in the international arena" with a qualitative and quantitative

analysis of media coverage relating to Israel in a defined region and time period. The choice for this methodology is based on literature showing that foreign news reporting affects public opinion, and in turn, the shaping and implementation of policy directives. Against this backdrop, this article considers the scope of articles relating to Israel and how Israel was framed in the local Dutch media in advance of the March 2017 general elections in the Netherlands. The study is based on a content analysis of over 350 newspaper articles in six Dutch newspapers during a 14-month period. Findings show that despite only minimal coverage of the BDS campaign that is spearheading delegitimization efforts, Israel is under a Dutch magnifying glass. An abundance of reports on other charged issues nurture negative perceptions of the state, which is primarily viewed through the prism of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Keywords: delegitimization, boycott, BDS, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, civil society

Women's Combat Service in the IDF: The Stalled Revolution
Meytal Eran-Jona and Carmit Padan

The unique status of the IDF in Israeli society and its role as "the people's army" makes it an arena for struggle between various social groups in Israel. Specifically, the revolution that began in the late 1990s in women's integration in the IDF faces resistance originating in several processes: the increasing dominance of the religious camp in Israeli society and politics, changes in the social composition of the military in general and the combat units in particular, and reinforcement of religious foundations within the military. Those leading the resistance do not encounter significant opposition from liberal circles or feminist movements. Thus, the power of those who act to preserve the military sphere as a stronghold of masculinity increases almost without hindrance. Such processes not only harm women and their right to equal and honorable service, but also pull the IDF backwards and limit its ability as an organization to enjoy gender diversity as well as religious diversity, and to express the full potential of Israeli society.

Keywords: IDF, civil-military relations, military and gender, military and religion

Major Trends in Iranian Society

Raz Zimmt

Thirty-eight years after the Islamic Revolution, Iran continues to maintain a high level of stability, even in the midst of the upheavals that have marked the region in recent years. Since the Islamic regime consolidated its power base in the early 1980s, it has not had to face any substantial threat to its survival, even during the riots that broke out after the 2009 presidential election. Iranian society too also enjoys relative stability, although it faces increasing difficulties, especially economic.

At the same time, in the last few decades, Iranian society has experienced far reaching demographic and cultural changes, including a widening gap between the public on the one hand, and the institutions of the regime and the religious establishment on the other. These are joined by secularization processes and the adoption of Western life styles that bring with them profound and complex challenges to the Islamic Republic. These deep-seated processes are underway in the midst of demographic trends, changes in the interface between society and state institutions, and rising exposure to the West and modernization. They already pose a significant challenge to the regime, because they reflect erosion in public support for the regime's institutions and the values of the revolution. Even if these processes have not necessarily ripened into a significant political change, they could, in the future, subvert the regime's fundamental principles and its very stability, especially after the death of current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

A Young but Aging Society

With the onset of the Islamic Revolution, Iran's policy on family planning underwent radical change, and after the revolution, the family planning program officially launched in the summer of 1967 to reduce the natural population growth was suspended. Although shortly after the revolution

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Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the moving force behind the revolution, ruled that there was no religious ban on birth control, the council operating the family planning program was nevertheless disbanded, most family planning clinics either closed or were downsized, and the supply of means of birth control was limited. These joined the regime's policy of strengthening the status of the family,[1] and consequently, Iran today is characterized by its young population.

At the end of the Iran-Iraq War in the late 1980s, the regime recognized that uncontrolled population growth was liable to hinder economic growth and development, and once again adopted a family planning policy, which in turn led to a sharp decline in birthrates. This policy remained in place until the summer of 2012, when the Supreme Leader ordered it reexamined, to spur a population increase and stop the aging of Iranian society. The population census of September 2016, however, showed that low birthrates persist despite the regime's efforts to encourage large families. Iran's population was close to 80 million (an increase of about 4.8 million since 2011), and the data show a consistent (though small) drop in annual population growth from 1.29 percent in 2006-2011 to 1.24 percent in 2016. And while Iran's population continues to be marked by its younger component, there is also an accelerated growth in aging: 49.1 percent of the population is under 30 (compared to 55 percent in 2011), 44.8 percent are age 30-64, and 6.1 percent are older than 65 (compared to 5.7 percent in the previous census).[2] The persistent drop in natural increase is due to the consistent rise in the average age at which people get married and to lower fertility rates as the result of greater education, secularization processes, and the desire of Iranian couples to better their economic situation.

These demographic trends pose significant challenges to the regime, both in the short and long terms. In the short term, young people represent high pressure on the job market and the state, which is incapable of creating sufficient jobs (about one million new jobs per year). In the long term, the demographic processes pose a no-less difficult challenge. The aging of the population will not enable the regime to guarantee sufficient welfare services over time; it will represent an economic burden on the state; and it will force it to allocate a significant portion of its resources for national insurance and social services for the elderly. All this will occur at a time when the workforce can be expected to shrink. The pension funds, already suffering from a severe budgetary deficit, are liable to collapse.

Less Religious, More National (even Nationalistic)

Even after the Arab conquest and the arrival of Islam in the seventh century, Iran preserved its unique culture and ethnicity. The inhabitants remained Iranian and the language remained Persian, even as it was highly influenced by Arabic. Thus the complexity of Iranian identity is connected to two primary sources: the national pre-Islamic Iranian cultural tradition that took shape after the Arab conquest of the seventh century, and the Shiite Islamic cultural tradition that took root in Iran, especially after the Safavids made the Shia the national religion in 1501. The pre-Islamic past of Iran served as a source of national and cultural pride and became the central component in the national narrative during the pre-revolutionary Pahlavi era, and the force of the Persian cultural identity was preserved even after the revolution. Despite the Islamic regime's hostility to the blatant secularism of the Pahlavis and its reservations regarding their attempts to emphasize Iran's pre-Islamic past, the Islamic Republic adopted the national narrative, though at times it has tried to clothe it in Islamic garb. The continued existence of pre-Islamic traditions in contemporary Iran, such as the Persian New Year (Nowruz) and the celebration of Charshanbe Suri, a traditional ceremony observed as a prelude to the Nowruz and meant to cleanse all evil, are evidence of the force of the national/cultural component of Iranian identity co-existing with and sometimes surpassing the religious Islamic dimension.

Moreover, in the decades since the Islamic Revolution, national Persian identity has strengthened at the expense of the Islamic stream in Iranians' cultural self-definition. As part of this trend, many Iranians, especially the young, highlight the unique Persian component of their identity over the Shiite Islamic strand. A study conducted in Iran more than a decade ago charted the relegation of religion in Iranian national identity. In 2005, 42 percent of respondents answered that they define themselves first and foremost as Iranian (compared to 34 percent in 2000), compared to 50 percent who defined themselves first and foremost as Muslim (compared to 61 percent in 2000).[3]

Iranians are proud of their historical and cultural heritage and are prepared to resist any attempt to undermine their national cultural identity. One example is the furious response in Iran in November 2010 to a YouTube video documenting a speech by Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah in which he claimed that Iran's roots are Arab rather than Persian and that there is no such thing in Iran as "Persian" or "Persian

civilization," only Islamic civilization and the Arab religion of the Prophet Mohammad. He declared that the leaders of the Islamic Revolution were also of Arab descent, and that even Supreme Leader Khamenei bears the title "seyyed" – evidence that he is a scion of the Arab dynasty of the prophet's descendants.[4] Intense Iranian national feelings were also evident in the enraged responses to President Donald Trump's speech in mid-October 2017 that presented his new strategy vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic with reference to the "Arabian Gulf" rather than the Persian Gulf; this is considered an affront to national pride.[5]

The sense of national solidarity is shared not only by Persians but also by at least some of the many ethnic communities and cultures comprising Iran. Members of minorities, such as Turkish Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis, and Turkmenis, living mostly in the hinterland, currently make up close to half of Iran's population, posing a difficult challenge to the regime. Yet despite the heterogeneity, and unlike other nation states in the Arab Middle East whose borders were shaped by Western colonial powers (mostly after World War I), Iran has existed as a separate political and cultural entity with a unique national identity for hundreds of years. Furthermore, the great differences in the historical development of the ethnic minorities, their religious affiliation (Sunni and Shiite), and their degree of integration into Iranian society greatly reduce the threat that minorities represent to Iran's national cohesiveness and the stability of the regime.

The sense of nationalism is at times translated into racism, especially against Arabs. When tensions between Iran and its Arab neighbors rise – for example, when hundreds of Iranian pilgrims died in Saudi Arabia during the Hajj, or when two Iranian teenagers returning from Mecca were sexually assaulted in Saudi Arabia in April 2015 – there are expressions of racism and incitement in Iranian traditional and social media. Such manifestations are not only a product of political disagreements between Iran and its neighbors; they are also motivated by a sense of ethnic and cultural superiority.[6]

More Secular, Greater Distance from the Clerics

While the national Persian identity grows stronger at the expense of the religious Islamic component, Iranian society is also experiencing secularization processes and an increasing sense of alienation from the clergy. The extreme politicization of religion in Iran, the regime's failure

to resolve economic and social woes, and the widespread corruption have all weakened the attractiveness of religion for the masses.[7]

In recent years, senior members of the religious establishment and Iran's institutional media have issued repeated warnings about the lowered status of the clerics[8] and the growing distance of the public from religion, manifested for example in lax observance of the Islamic dress code and meager mosque attendance. A recent commentary published on an Iranian news site warned of the poor attendance of the mosques by Iranian citizens, and linked the phenomenon to a trend of greater alienation the public at large feels toward the nation's clerics.[9]

Less Collective and Ideological, More Individualistic

Since the 1990s, it has been possible to discern the increased importance of individualism in Iranian society, especially among the revolution's second generation. The conduct of young people has sparked heated deliberations over the crisis of values felt in Iranian society. For example, the mass mourning observed by young Iranians over the death from cancer of pop singer Morteza Pashaei in November 2014 aroused much debate about deep-seated social processes. The musician's funeral became the biggest mass rally since the popular protests of 2009 and led to internal criticism of Iranian society's increasing affinity for individualism, lack of social solidarity, and political escapism, manifested in young people's disdain for political matters and their preference for devoting their time to entertainment and leisure activities.[10] Even the nature of events of an ideological stripe has changed, such as the parade celebrating the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, which from an event of a blatant political and revolutionary character has become a national holiday celebrated as a colorful carnival primarily valued for providing an opportunity for family fun and socialization at street fairs.[11]

Yet despite this trend, Iranian society continues to be characterized by a high level of collectivism, expressed in great commitment to frameworks such as the family, shared national and cultural identity, and demonstrations of solidarity, especially against an external enemy. Although at present Iranian citizens show less willingness than in the past to enlist in a collective effort in the name of ideology, the regime still preserves the ability to rally public support around national and religious symbols, such as the formative myth of the Battle of Karbala, which tells of the self-sacrifice of the first Shiite imam, Hussein Bin-Ali, in 680, against Yazid I, the Umayyad

caliph. Similar to the use of Shiite religious rhetoric during the Iran-Iraq War, the emphasis on Shiite religious symbols and the elevation of the idea of self-sacrifice for the sake of defending the sites sacred to Shia in Syria are a central motif in the regime's propaganda efforts surrounding Iran's expanded military involvement in Syria, which has taken a heavy toll of the Revolutionary Guard fighters stationed at the front. Although these efforts do not altogether stave off public criticism of Iran's military involvement in arenas far from Iran's borders, to some extent they have helped the regime enlist public support for the war effort. Public unity over national and religious symbols was manifested, for example, at the mass funeral held for a member of the Revolutionary Guards, Mohsen Hojaji, who was captured on the Iraq-Syria border by the Islamic State and beheaded in August 2017. On posters and placards, the propaganda disseminated after his death depicted the soldier alongside the figure of Shiite imam Hussein Bin-Ali, who according to tradition was similarly beheaded in the Battle of Karbala. The mass participation of citizens in his funeral in Isfahan in late September was evidence of the intensity of national feeling and social solidarity.[12]

Leaning West but Resistant to Western Pressure

Increasing modernization and exposure to the West has led many Iranians to adopt a Western life style and more liberal ways of thinking, especially among the young who feel a growing sense of alienation from the values of the revolution. This slice of the population has adopted a more permissive way of living, including consumption of Western culture, underground parties, and so on. Social and cultural processes of change are quite apparent when it comes to attitudes toward women. In recent years, public awareness of the Islamic Republic's discrimination against women has grown, as has the demand for changes in legislation in various areas discriminating against women, including women's legal status, their marriage and divorce rights, their inclusion in public and political positions, and the enforced wearing of the headscarf. Modernization processes and alienation from a traditional religious life as well as the nation's economic woes have made "the marriage crisis" – a significant rise in the average marriage age and a higher divorce rate – an acute issue in Iranian society. Although these trends are not unique to Iran, in the Islamic Republic they are seen as an expression of a preference for the West and an undermining of the religious Islamic identity of society and the sacredness of the institution of the family.[13]

The Iranian public has shown greater openness to Western companies entering Iran, especially after the sanctions were lifted with the achievement of the JCPOA. A survey conducted in August 2017 in advance of the joint economic Europe-Iran Forum indicated widespread Iranian support for the expansion of trade with Western companies. Most of the respondents viewed foreign investments, especially on the part of German, Japanese, French, Swiss, and Italian companies, as highly favorable.[14] This attitude is very much at odds with the position of the regime, which is concerned about the penetration of Western culture that would inevitably accompany economic liberalization.

Yet along with the positive attitude to the West, the Iranian public is highly critical of any expressions of Western superiority and pressure aimed at forcing Iran to comply with Western dictates. Public opinion surveys indicate widespread opposition to concessions to any Western demands seen as harming vital national interests. The economic sanctions imposed on Iran by the West were exploited – highly successfully – by the Tehran regime to whip up anti-Western public sentiments. The West was painted as the chief culprit for Iran's worsening economic troubles. Although over the years Iranian citizens opposed the heavy price of the long-lasting sanctions, many adopted a hostile attitude to the West, which was seen as responsible for their difficult situation. A Gallup poll conducted in December 2012 showed that 47 percent of Iranians blamed their economic disaster on the United States, compared to only 10 percent that held their own government responsible.[15]

Another survey, published by the University of Maryland in July 2017, revealed that the Iranian public continues to oppose concessions to Western demands. Findings show that a clear majority support Iranian retaliation, should the United States violate the nuclear agreement. Fifty-five percent of respondents said that if the United States withdraws from the agreement, Iran should renew its nuclear program rather than simply appeal to the UN, even though an absolute majority of Iranian citizens (76 percent) continue to support the agreement. The survey also showed that most of the Iranian public opposes suspending missile testing, even in exchange for easing the sanctions. Fifty-five percent of respondents expressed support for continued missile tests, against the West's demand to stop the tests, and 63 percent of respondents felt that the demand to reduce the number of tests is totally unacceptable.[16]

The reliability of opinion surveys in Iran depends on a number of factors, such as survey methodology, sampling method, the survey administration method, and so on. In recent years, dozens of surveys of Iranian public opinion have been taken by both Iranian and international research institutions. The limits the regime places on freedom of expression are a challenge to the ability to produce a survey approximating people's real feelings, especially when it comes to issues considered sensitive. Nonetheless, a critical look at the methodology used by the survey, a cross reference of the results of several surveys, and the cumulative experience of academic research institutions that conduct polling in Iran (such as RAND, Gallup, and the University of Maryland) make it possible to learn much about the Iranian public's attitudes to different issues.

Criticism of the Regime; Preference for Incremental over Revolutionary Change

The regime's failure to provide relief to social and economic ills is not lost on the Iranian people, which continue to demand a response in the political, civic, and economic spheres. The public rage that erupted in the protest movement in the summer of 2009 again proved that the Iranian public is prepared to battle the regime when it feels its rights are trampled with impunity. While the authorities succeeded in suppressing the riots, Iranians continue to be critical and protest the infringement of their rights and failures of the regime, such as government corruption and nepotism.[17]

In recent years, Iran has seen a wave of protests that in certain cases became violent clashes between the security forces and civilians over environmental struggles, particularly the severe air pollution afflicting the country. In February 2017, in the southwestern Khuzestan Province, a series of protests broke out as the result of severe dust storms that caused extended power outages and disrupted water supply throughout the province. Thousands of citizens demonstrated for several days and at times there were violent clashes with the security figures. The demonstrators protested not only the air pollution and interrupted water and electricity supplies, but also the persistent neglect of the province and the authorities' skewed priorities leading to far too few resources provided to the province where the country's Arab minority – 2 percent of Iran's population – is concentrated.[18]

Election results for political office – whether the presidency, the parliament (Majlis), or local government – also reflect the public's demand for change, both with regard to resolving the nation's social and economic problems

and with regard to expanding political and civil liberties. The defeat of the conservative candidate Ibrahim Raisi in the May 2017 presidential election proved that the Iranian people are no longer willing to accept empty populist promises or slogans on social justice and "the resistance economy," but demand practical solutions to burning issues, in particular the unemployment crisis.

At the same time, it is clear that the Iranian public generally prefers a process of gradual change over revolution. The 2009 political crisis was a severe blow to the regime's legitimacy, but it seems that most of the public is currently prepared to acknowledge the rules of the game and is willing – at least in the short run – to make do with an improved economy and a limited and incremental reduction in the government's involvement in their private lives. The high voter turnout (more than 60 percent) in the most recent parliamentary election (2016) and in the 2017 presidential race (more than 70 percent) does not necessarily indicate support for the regime's policies, but it does indicate that Iranian citizens at this stage prefer stability to political upheavals with unpredictable results.

Will Social Changes Translate into Political Change?

The processes of change in Iranian society bear the potential for future political change in the Islamic Republic, especially after the death of current Supreme Leader Khamenei. Nonetheless, the ripening of deep-seated social trends into political change depends on many factors, among them the regime's willingness to satisfy public demands, especially in the economic sphere; the development of the interrelations between the political and military loci of power, including the Supreme Leader, the President, and the Revolutionary Guards; the effectiveness of repression aimed at expressions of protest and resistance; and developments in the regional and international arenas.

An analysis of the central trends in Iranian society reveals processes that both encourage and inhibit political change. The younger population is, for the most part, growing distant from the revolution's values and is challenging the conservative religious establishment, but the aging of the society strengthens the preference for gradual change, political stability, and economic improvements over a radical transformation. Secularization processes and the erosion of the status of the clerics challenge the clergy's traditional power, but the strength of the national and cultural identity and the sense of solidarity provide the regime with the ability to enlist

public support over national and even religious symbols. The exposure to the West and modernization encourages individualization trends and the adoption of more liberal attitudes, but the public's opposition to external Western pressures on their country and to foreign dictates encourages the willingness to rally behind the flag and stand shoulder to shoulder with the regime against external enemies.

The regime is not unaware of these processes in Iranian society. It knows full well that the gap between the public and the ruling institutions is widening and that it must respond, although there are differences of opinion at the highest ruling levels on what those responses should be. In his tenure (1997-2005), President Mohammad Khatami tried to expand individual liberties and promote civic reforms; his successor, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), worked for a more just distribution of the nation's resources and stressed the Persian cultural heritage over the Islamic stream; and currently, President Rouhani is focusing on improving the economy. The regime must acknowledge the social changes occurring in Iran if it wants to succeed in tackling the nation's domestic challenges. At the same time, in the absence of an in-depth handling of the problems and a willingness to adapt the revolution's ideology in the face of the constraints of a changing reality, the deep-seated social processes could very well threaten the stability of the regime in the long term.

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The Iranian Military Intervention in Syria: A Look to the Future

Ephraim Kam

One of the major security issues occupying the Israeli security establishment is the possibility that Iran will exploit its current involvement in the fighting in Syria to maintain a long term presence in Syria in general and along the border with Israel in particular. This presence is liable to generate new threats against Israel, especially given the possibility of a military confrontation with Iran and/or its proxies.

In his October 23, 2017 speech at the opening of the Knesset's winter session, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that the biggest challenge Israel faces "is the need to repel Iran's attempt to entrench itself militarily in Syria." This formulation suggests that from the Israeli government's perspective, confronting Iran's military intervention in Syria is, at present, no less a goal than stopping Iran's attempts to attain nuclear weapons, at least as long as the Iranian nuclear program is limited by the JCPOA.

Future Intervention in Syria: Iranian Considerations

Iran has never disclosed how long it intends to leave forces under its command in Syria. To date, it has explained its intervention by insisting on the need to confront threats to Syria stemming from the situation there, the importance of assisting the Assad regime in overcoming its enemies, and the Syrian regime's request for Iranian help. But presumably Tehran intends to leave a significant military presence in Syria for a long time, even once the Assad regime is stabilized, or at least as long as the Syrian regime

needs and/or wants it. From Iran's perspective, a long term presence of its forces in Syria serves several objectives:

a. Iran is very eager to help the Assad regime stabilize its minority rule and ensure its survival for the long term. Given that Assad does not yet control the whole country and that he has a long and bloody score to settle with some segments of his population, his survival is not guaranteed, even if his chances have improved. For Iran, it is important to keep forces in Syria to have a part in determining the arrangement over the future of the country and the regime, bind Syria to Tehran, and wield decisive influence on its decisions and conduct in case Assad's regime falls.

b. Because Iran has no assurance that the Assad regime will survive over time, it seeks to construct independent means to wield influence over Syria. To this end, an important tool has emerged in the form of the two newly established Syrian militias Iran has assembled via the Quds Force and Hezbollah: the National Defense Forces militias, numbering tens of thousands of soldiers, mostly Alawites, and a Shiite militia called the Rida Force, whose members have been recruited from Shiite villages in Syria. The goal of the Quds Force is to turn the Syrian militias into a permanent military/political force it can deploy, much like Hezbollah in Lebanon.[1]

c. A long term military presence in Syria is important to Iran in order to embed a source of influence in the heart of the Arab world and ensure a Shiite crescent from Iran to Lebanon. The severe crises in Syria and Iraq and the emergence of the Islamic State demonstrated to Iran the major instability and volatility of its strategic environment. An indefinite military presence in Syria allows Iran to expand its influence in Iraq and Lebanon, both of which have a dominant Shiite population; prevent the establishment of an independent Kurdish state liable to foment unrest within Iran's own Kurdish minority; counterbalance its enemies in the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia; and perhaps also enter the Palestinian arena. A presence in Syria will also help Iran prevent the reemergence of terrorists groups such as the Islamic State and offshoots of al-Qaeda threatening Iran's security and interests. No less important, expanded influence in the Middle East could help Iran reduce the influence of the United States in this expanse.

d. An extended military presence in Syria will help Iran aggravate the threat against Israel posed by Hezbollah and other organizations, in

part by extending the front against Israel from southern Lebanon to the Golan Heights. Such a front would be useful in establishing a land corridor for weapons and troops transport from Iran and Iraq to Syria and Lebanon and in building factories for the manufacture and assembly of high quality arms – especially rockets and precision weapons – in Syria and Lebanon.

e. Military activity in Syria, however long it may last, will help Iran improve the military capabilities of Iranian forces and their proxies. In particular, it will help Iran construct an Iranian Shiite intervention force that can enable it to promote and entrench its regional influence and, when the time comes, intervene in any country where Iran has important interests, first and foremost Iraq, Lebanon, and possibly Yemen. The continued presence of forces in Syria can, if Damascus agrees, provide Iran with naval and perhaps also aerial services and strongholds on the Mediterranean coast. This might serve as a base for future military cooperation with Russia and perhaps also military cooperation with Turkey. To strengthen its bases, Iran is already seeking to build bases for the Shiite forces associated with it in Syria.[2]

At the same time, Iran will have to consider that a long term presence in Syria entails dangers and that it may not be able to achieve its goals, fully or in part. Iran and its proxies are liable to be dragged into a military confrontation with US or Israeli forces, or with forces involved in the Syrian arena. A significant portion of the Syrian population is hostile to Assad's regime and Iran after the destruction and massacres they inflicted on Syria and will not be happy about an extended Iranian influence and presence in the country. For the Iranian regime, leaving military forces in Syria will not be easy and could turn into a heavy economic and military burden. Moreover, today, the Assad regime needs the Iranian presence to improve its position and ensure its future, but if Assad's rule stabilizes, will it be willing to be dependent on Iran over time?

The Nature of Iran's Future Involvement
Indeed, the nature of Iran's future involvement in Syria, should it last a long time, is not clear. Much will hinge on whether the crisis and fighting in Syria dwindle to a state of relative calm or continue in one form or another. The sooner the crisis ends, the more Iran will be able to divert fewer forces to active fighting and instead develop long term influence in Syria, including the construction of a united Lebanese-Syrian front against

Israel. However, will the Assad regime be interested in a long term Iranian military presence in Syria, or at a certain point will it prefer that it leave or significantly reduce its scope, so as not to overly constrain Damsacus?

Assuming an Iranian presence in Syria of indefinite length, the more probable scenario is that Iran will prefer to avoid sending large military forces of its own to Syria, and instead try to maintain the model of intervention that formed in Syria in 2014. That is, it will want to continue leading military forces stationed in Syria with commanders and elite units, especially the Revolutionary Guards and Quds Force, while the bulk of the fighting forces are drawn from the Shiite militias, especially the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi Shiite militias loyal to Iran, and at the last resort, the Afghan and Pakistani militias.

This model is more convenient for Iran in many ways than deployment of a large Iranian force. It allows Iran to deny its involvement in military operations in Syria. It reduces the risk of direct confrontation with Israel and perhaps also the United States, and leaves Iran more flexible in handling crises connected to Syria. It reduces the number of casualties Iran is liable to suffer in case of continued fighting in Syria. Maintaining a low profile of military intervention in Syria is also convenient for the Iranian regime, in face of the wave of protests in Iran in late December 2017, which included the demand to stop the Iranian fighting in Syria. This model helps create the image of a multinational Shiite force, strengthening the impact of the Shiite camp relative to the Sunni not only in Syria but elsewhere too, especially Iraq. In addition, it enables improvement of the Shiite militias' military capabilities, especially those of Hezbollah and the Iraqi militias.[3]

Nonetheless, the possibility that an Iranian force – alongside Hezbollah and perhaps other Shiite militias – will stay in Syria for the long haul is not assured. Since 2013, there have been sporadic reports that for several reasons Hezbollah intends to return its fighters to Lebanon, particularly since as part of an overall agreement, all foreign fighters may have to leave Syria. Indeed, the Turkish Foreign Minister stated explicitly in January 2017 that as part of a settlement, Hezbollah would have to withdraw forces it currently has stationed in Syria. Moreover, in Lebanon too there are those who oppose a long term Hezbollah presence in Syria, as Lebanese President Michel Aoun stated in late November 2017, adding that Hezbollah will bring its troops back to Lebanon after the fighting against the terrorists in Syria ends.[4] Even certain circles within Hezbollah are likewise leery of operating its forces in Syria as dispensable mercenaries for Iran. Hezbollah is worried

about Israeli attacks on its forces in Syria, and as this concern grows, its desire to leave Syria will as well. Hezbollah spokesmen have denied any intention to withdraw troops to Lebanon, saying they will not be brought home before they have fulfilled their missions in Syria. Furthermore, at the end of November 2017, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah announced that the organization is prepared to withdraw its forces from Iraq following the defeat of the Islamic State, but he did not refer to any withdrawal from Syria.[5] For his part, will Assad be interested in Hezbollah staying in Syria if his regime stabilizes and the fighting ceases? Above all, it will be Iran's decision whether or not to leave Hezbollah in Syria, much more than it will be the organization's own say in the matter.[6]

The placement of Iranian forces, Hezbollah fighters, and other Shiite militias in Syria came up in the three-way US-Russia-Jordan talks held in November 2017, which led to a ceasefire agreement in southern Syria. According to a US source, the agreement states that all foreign/non-Syrian forces, including Revolutionary Guards members, Hezbollah, and other militias, will be withdrawn from the buffer zones in southern Syria; by the end of the process, they will have to leave Syria altogether. This agreement was also reflected in the joint announcement issued by the United States and Russia after the agreement was signed, which speaks of the reduction of foreign forces in Syria and ultimately their full withdrawal from the region.[7]

However, the agreement is problematic. It does not include a timetable for the reductions/withdrawals, so that the process could take years. Moreover, several days after it was signed, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced that Russia did not commit itself to ensure that Iranian and Iranian-affiliated forces leave Syria and that their presence in Syria is legitimate, as they were invited there by Syria's recognized government.[8] The announcement could strengthen the impression that Iran, with Russian backing, intends to leave affiliated forces in Syria indefinitely. Third, the distance between the area where these forces will be allowed to operate and the Israeli border in the Golan Heights remains problematic for Israel: Israel demanded a distance of 50-60 km, whereas the Russians initially agreed to 5 km from the border. Afterwards, a compromise was reached, whereby the distance in most areas will be up to 20 km, though in some parts only 5 km.[9]

The Iranian Involvement in Syria: Strengths and Weaknesses

If despite the difficulties and uncertainties Iran leaves a significant Iranian/ Shiite force in Syria over the long term, this will worsen the threat posed to Israel: Iran will then have another large force near Israel's borders that comprises a new front against it, in addition to south Lebanon, to be manned by Hezbollah and/or Iraqi militias. This would provide Hezbollah with more opportunities to take action against Israeli targets and Israel's civilian front, and would let the organization disperse its assets and thereby reduce the risk to them. The corridor Iran is creating from Iraq to Syria and the arms factories it is building in Syria will make it possible to supply Hezbollah with large quantities of high quality weapons on a short timetable.[10]

This does not mean that Iran will rush to activate Hezbollah or any other forces it may station in Syria against Israel. For more than a decade, Hezbollah has, for many reasons, been deterred from significantly challenging Israel, despite its large rocket arsenal. In most cases it has not responded, even when Israel, on several occasions, attacked the organizations' arms convoys and facilities in Syria and Lebanon. Israel is suspected of having been responsible in January 2015 for an attack on a Hezbollah convoy in the Golan Heights that killed an Iranian general and member of the Revolutionary Guards, as well five other Guards and six Hezbollah members, including Jihad Mughniyeh, son of Imad Mughniyeh, who was the head of Hezbollah's military wing; they were examining the possibilities of creating a terrorist infrastructure to operate from the Golan Heights. Despite the severity of the attack, Iran did not respond. Hezbollah responded to the attack in a limited way by opening fire from Lebanon, and two IDF soldiers were killed.

Furthermore, Iran has never had a direct military confrontation with Israel, most probably due to awareness of its limitations: despite Iran's military might, centered on its large and improving missile system, it suffers from weaknesses in its military and strategic balance with Israel. Iran's conventional military capabilities rely on outdated equipment, especially its aerial power; its air force is based on 30- and 40-year-old US, Russian, and Chinese planes. Iran must also consider that a military conflict with Israel is liable to create an opportunity and pretext for Israel, perhaps with US backing, to attack its nuclear facilities.

While Iran builds capabilities that will allow it to operate militarily in Iraq, Syria, and perhaps also Lebanon, involvement in those countries entails facing enemies and difficulties hundreds of kilometers from home and, in Syria and Lebanon, in sites far from Iran's borders. Moreover,

while the proximity of Iranian forces and its Shiite militia allies creates an increased threat to Israel, it also provides Israel with advantages and opportunities. Israel can exploit the Iranian/Shiite deployment to attack weapons convoys advancing through the corridor from Iraq to Syria and Lebanon, disrupt passage, and harm Iran's ability to strengthen Hezbollah, including by damaging the weapons factories Iran is building for the organization. Israel has already demonstrated to Iran and Hezbollah that it has excellent intelligence that enables it to strike with great precision at targets in Syria and Lebanon. Operating the Shiite militias as the foundation for constructing an Iranian presence and influence also allows Israel to attack the militias that pose a threat while reducing the risks of a harsh response, given that Iran has to date avoided reacting to Israeli attacks on Hezbollah. Israel has also usually avoided attacking Iranian elements, except for some isolated incidents, but has learned it has relative freedom of action to attack Hezbollah without incurring a response.

In addition, there is US deterrence. Since the early 1990s, the United States has been perceived by Iran as a strategic threat of the highest order. The Iranians view the Trump administration as particularly dangerous, given the President's assessment of Iran's conduct and promise to stop it. While the Trump administration, at least for now, threatens more than it acts, Iran cannot ignore the possibility that at some point the United States will take steps against it – particularly in a scenario in which Iran tries to harm Israel – whether by imposing draconian sanctions or by taking military action. Clearly Iran would want to avoid a military conflict with the United States at all costs.

Nonetheless, despite Iran's perception of the US threat, it is hard to imagine the United States taking substantive action against Iran for its operations in Syria. The Trump administration may have explicitly defined Iran's intervention in other nations as an important part of the Iranian threat to the United States and its allies, but in practice it has so far not made the effort to stop Iranian involvement in Syria, other than perhaps the imposition of further sanctions, which would probably be without

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European participation. The administration may also have begun to understand that it has no effective way to reduce Iran's presence and influence either in Syria or Iraq. The Unites States may take limited, local

military steps against Iran, and even more so against the Shiite militias, such as limited fire or the downing of UAVs. But in all likelihood, only a particularly blatant Iranian move is likely to move the administration to act in a significant scope against Iranian forces.

Regarding the Russian factor, Russia is not an Iranian ally and has different interests, but it does cooperate with Iran in providing massive help to Assad's regime and its stabilization. Russia too apparently intends to keep limited forces in Syria, perhaps for an extended period, to ensure the stability of the Syrian regime and safeguard the naval and aerial services in Syria that benefit it. During his visit to Syria in December 2017 President Putin said that he ordered most of the Russian forces in Syria to withdraw after they, together with the Syrian army, defeat terrorism,[11] and the Russian chief of staff has said that he would greatly reduce the Russian forces in Syria beginning by late 2017.[12]

Yet it seems this step stems from tactical reasons alone: Russia does not maintain significant ground forces in Syria and, as the fighting there has diminished, it can afford to withdraw some of the forces, as it announced already in January 2017. Furthermore, the chief of staff announced that the Russian forces would continue to maintain two military bases in Syria and the units needed to safeguard the situation in Syria. Russia is thereby preserving the option of beefing up its forces in Syria as needed, and will continue to receive services at Hmeimim air base and Tartus naval base. Moreover, the Russian Defense Minister announced that Russia and Syria have started to build a permanent military presence in both bases. Another senior Russian official announced that Russia and Syria concluded an agreement for 49 years, whereby the services given to Russian ships in Tartus will be expanded, and the Russian air force will be allowed to use Hmeimim air base without limitations.[13]

Thus as long as the fighting in Syria persists, Russia will likely support the continued presence of Iranian forces, Hezbollah, and the other Shiite militias in the country, or will at least not oppose it, as the Russian Foreign Minister announced. But one must not discount the possibility that Russia will favor the withdrawal of at least some of these forces should a stable calm and/or a comprehensive settlement be achieved. Russia also has no interest in an Israeli-Iranian conflict and may serve as a moderating force and mediator to prevent such an occurrence.

Implications for Israel and the United States

The indefinite military presence of Iran and its proxies in Syria creates a significant future threat to Israel. This presence helps create territorial contiguity as a base for Iranian actions and influence from Iran to Syria and Lebanon, enabling Iran to move forces and weapons along this route. It forms a foundation for attacks on Israel in the future whenever Iran sees fit, especially via Hezbollah and Shiite militias, and along an even longer front, from Lebanon to the Golan Heights. The idea of a broad front is not new to Iran and Hezbollah, and for many years they have worked to set this infrastructure in place via the Quds Force. But in a situation in which Iranian-affiliated forces are stationed in Syria for the long term, and when Hezbollah can readily receive higher quality arms than ever before – through the territorial corridor and from weapons factories in Syria and Lebanon – Iran can heighten the severity of its threat against Israel.

At the same time, given the weaknesses inherent in Iran's involvement in Syria, it is more likely that at least for now, Iran does not want to provoke Israel and confront it on the battlefield. At this time, its main regional interest lies in stabilizing the Syrian and Iraqi regimes and expanding its influence over them. A conflict with Israel might harm Iran more than Israel, would divert its attention from its major regional objective, and might put it on a dangerous collision course with the United States. Therefore, at present, the main purpose of Iranian involvement in Syrian and Lebanon in the Israeli context is presumably to improve Iran's deterrence vis-à-vis Israel, especially by strengthening the Shiite militias in Syria, in particular Hezbollah, rather than reach a military confrontation with Israel. This assumption is supported by the fact that since 2015, Hezbollah has avoided provoking Israel.

> The extended military presence of Iran and its proxies in Syria is a significant future threat to Israel, yet it is more likely that for now, Iran does not want to confront Israel on the battlefield. At this time, Iran's main regional interest lies in stabilizing the Syrian and Iraqi regimes and expanding its influence over them.

There is no guarantee that Iran will succeed in leaving a significant presence in Syria indefinitely comprising the Revolutionary Guards forces and Shiite militias, especially on the Golan Heights. If the situation in Syria stabilizes, it may be that a settlement will demand that foreign forces evacuate Syria, and in a state approaching the end of fighting and relative calm, the Assad regime may want them to leave. But even then,

the existence of a land corridor from Iraq to Syria and Lebanon will make it possible for Iran to transport forces and weapons to Hezbollah. On the other hand, if Iran succeeds in leaving forces in Syria, it is obvious that of all the Shiite militias – which will in all probability be the core among the foreign forces in Syria – Hezbollah will constitute the major threat against Israel: it is the best militia and the one most closely associated with Iran; it has much experience in fighting Israel; it knows the area better than the other militias; and, above all, it possesses a large rocket arsenal, allowing it to represent a real challenge to Israel.

The very fact of proximity between Israeli and Iranian military forces offers Israel new possibilities for attacking Iranian targets, should it become necessary, such as disrupting the use of the corridor. At the same time, this proximity of Iranian forces, or Hezbollah and the militias, increases the risk of a confrontation with Israel, either a proactive or unplanned clash resulting from deterioration on the ground. It is therefore necessary to consider that even if Iran and Hezbollah have usually avoided responding to IDF attacks, there is no guarantee they will be similarly restrained in the future. Iran and Hezbollah did not make a military move against Israel after the aerial attack on an Iranian military base near Damascus in early December 2017. The attack was attributed to Israel as a message to Iran not to cross the red line of placing Iranian/Shiite forces near the Israeli border. Yet the more the IDF engages in such attacks, the more Iran and Hezbollah will want to respond to deter Israel from continuing the practice. Therefore, at a certain point Hezbollah, with Iranian backing, might respond with countermoves.

Over the years, and especially after the Second Lebanon War, Israel managed to create fairly credible deterrence vis-à-vis Hezbollah. Now Israel will have to strengthen this deterrence, as several factors could tilt the balance in Hezbollah's favor: Hezbollah fighters in Syria; Iranian forces and other Shiite militias in Syria with important fighting experience, which might boost Hezbollah's self-confidence and prompt it to respond to Israeli attacks; and Iran's improving ability to transport rapidly high quality arms manufactured in the weapons factories it has built in Syria and in Iran via the land corridor from Iraq. Several steps beyond those taken to date may strengthen Israel's deterrence: an unambiguous clarification of Israel's red lines on activities by Hezbollah and the other forces associated with Iran; disruption of movement through the corridor; continued attacks on arms convoys and weapons factories without assuming responsibility

for them; and US military action against Shiite militia targets should the Trump administration conclude this is needed to strengthen its credibility.

The possibility that Iranian and Shiite forces will stay in Syria indefinitely, and move into or near the Golan Heights, requires discussion and cooperation with the US administration. The fact that Trump adopted harsh words and a threatening attitude toward Iran, both on the nuclear question and on Iran's regional conduct, but has not yet formulated ways to curb Iran's influence in other countries is a problem. The lack of a response by the administration to Russia's support for Iran's intervention in Syria – perhaps stemming from the administration's desire for a closer US-Russia partnership – does not help deter Iran. Under such conditions, the Trump administration is to a large extent abandoning the Syrian arena to Russia and Iran, and the passivity shown by the United States is not offset by any regional element willing or able to stop Iran's penetration into Syria.

For precisely this reason, a credible clarification from the administration that it will take harsher steps against Iran and Hezbollah if they continue to challenge the United States and its allies is needed. The Trump administration could take several steps to stop a long term Iranian penetration of Syria. In negotiations over Syria's future, the administration can hold talks with Russia and Turkey on withdrawing foreign forces from Syria according to a well defined timetable as part of a comprehensive settlement, as determined by the November 2017 agreement. Turkey has already expressed its support for such a step, and Russia too might favor it, perhaps in exchange for some US gesture. The administration can impose further sanctions on Iran for its military intervention in Syria, and can consider taking limited military action to impede Iran's use of the land corridor to transport troops and arms.

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The Changes in Saudi Arabia: Preparing for Possible Destabilization

Amos Yadlin and Yoel Guzansky

Pessimistic assessments about political stability in Saudi Arabia are not new, especially since the upheaval that began in the Middle East in late 2010, and they have become more frequent with the steep drop in oil prices.[1] While as of the writing of this essay the kingdom faces no severe and immediate risk to its stability, current challenges make this risk greater than it has been in the past. Furthermore, in recent years, the Middle East has seen seemingly stable regimes collapsing with no prior warning signs. Given the far reaching consequences of a collapse of the regime in Riyadh, it is important to consider this potential scenario.

Saudi Arabia is undergoing a historic process of accelerated change that, if successful, will position Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) as the kingdom's unchallenged leader and pioneer of modernization. This top-down revolution, however, could also culminate in the destabilization of the kingdom. This essay reviews the main challenges facing the kingdom, and proposes initial directions for thought in the event that the developing processes result in destabilization. It looks at various crisis scenarios in the kingdom, their possible consequences, and the risks they generate. The combination of internal political crises and external conflicts requires careful monitoring of developments that are liable to undermine the kingdom's stability. While destabilization in Saudi Arabia is neither imminent nor unavoidable, in view of the kingdom's economic, religious, and political importance, the possible consequences of destabilization should be assessed.

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Internal Challenges

Socioeconomic Pressures

Political stability in the kingdom is tied directly to the population's high standard of living. The high oil prices of 2011-2014 will likely not recur any time soon, and Saudi Arabia is therefore preparing for a continuation of the current price level (of which the kingdom was one of the main causes), while attempting to achieve agreements on a cut in production in order to bring about a rise in prices. The royal house is aware of the need for reform, including weaning the kingdom from its dependence on oil, and proclaims at home and abroad that it possesses the means to achieve this. Paradoxically, the process of the reforms, while necessary in itself, is liable to trigger destabilization in the kingdom. Due to this concern, the International Monetary Fund has warned the kingdom's leaders against carrying out reforms and austerity measures too quickly.[2]

What to cut is as much of a political issue as an economic one, and can be regarded as one of the key challenges facing the kingdom. Furthermore, it would be overly optimistic to assume that the kingdom currently has all the resources, and especially the capabilities, required to achieve the goal it has set for itself of eliminating its dependence on oil profits.[3] Doubts have also increased recently about the ability to implement the main reform (Vision 2030) at the rate and to the extent declared by MBS, given the reports about significant changes in the plan and the postponement of several of its objectives. Meanwhile, frustration has grown among the public, which has been accustomed to oil-based abundance, as salaries fall and the cost of living rises (for example, with a 5 percent VAT on a broad range of goods and services) due to cuts in subsidies (and in January 2018, the price of gasoline doubled). Against this background, the September 15, 2017 movement was launched on the social networks, calling for Saudi citizens to protest the increasing poverty, housing crisis, and unemployment among young people.[4]

In general, Saudis regard the arrangements and benefits paid for by oil profits as the basis of the social order that rewards them for their loyalty to the royal house. According to this equation, an erosion of their welfare is liable to undermine their loyalty, or lead them to demand to be significantly involved in the kingdom's political order. Social unrest may also erupt if the public becomes convinced that the princes have not curbed the royal house's ostentatious lifestyle. In 2006, despite the austerity measures and the call for citizens to tighten their belts, Mohammad bin Salman himself

reportedly purchased a luxury yacht at a cost of over $500 million, an estate for $300 million, and a painting for $500 million.[5] In a proactive attempt to prevent criticism on this matter, the "Supreme Committee to Investigate Public Corruption" was established on November 4, 2017, headed by MBS, with the authority to investigate, arrest, and imprison suspects; ban them from leaving the country; and freeze their assets. In addition to an alleged war on corruption, the committee seems to be replenishing the dwindling public treasury and neutralizing political opponents.[6]

Accelerated Political Change and Struggles in the Palace

The Supreme Committee to Investigate Public Corruption began its activity with an unprecedented wave of arrests. Some 200 senior figures were apprehended, including 11 princes of the ruling family, four serving government ministers, former ministers, and businessmen. Most of those arrested have been released, following the nationalization of some of their property and wealth – compromise arrangements that added a great deal of money to the royal treasury.[7] The most important development in the framework of MBS's recent measures, however, concerns his takeover of another portion of the security establishment – in addition to the regular army, which was already under his control – with the ousting of National Guard commander Mutaib bin Abdullah. The National Guard is a trained and well-equipped force based on tribal loyalty, whose original function was maintaining the regime's stability (guarding senior members of the royal house and security in the main palaces) and balancing the power of the 200,000-man regular army. The National Guard (comprising 100,000 troops) began procuring Blackhawk and Apache helicopters, assisting in the fighting in Yemen, and deploying in Riyadh and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina (and in Bahrain since 2011).

The change in the political balance of power pursued by MBS began in 2015, when his father appointed him deputy crown prince and Minister of Defense, and put him in charge of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs. In June 2017, MBS was promoted to crown prince, and with his father's support has continued to fortify his position since. The rivalry between the leading princes in the struggle for succession, Mohammad bin Salman and Mohammad bin Nayef, has caused concern since 2015 that a struggle within the palace could jeopardize stability.[8] Meanwhile, Mohammad bin Nayef, who held the authority over the kingdom's internal security forces, was dismissed from his position as crown prince and minister of the interior

in June 2017, and was reportedly under house arrest. It is possible that these measures by MBS indicate growing anxiety about the emergence of opposition to his rule and a sense of urgency to inherit the throne before his father dies. In view of MBS's increased power in recent years, senior princes in the kingdom issued a public call for a change, while expressing lack of confidence in the prince and his ailing father.[9]

Unity among the senior princes in the royal house has always been a source of stability. Power struggles arose more than once between the sons of Ibd Saud by different mothers. This was the background to the emergence of different political factions determined by family relationships. These struggles, however, took place behind closed doors, and there was an effective balance of power in the royal family, with the king functioning as the first among equals. It was clear to all the princes that their power was grounded in unity. Over the years, in order to preserve the balance between the branches of the family, the kings divided the senior positions among the factions, including control over the security forces. MBS now controls the three main security arms: the regular army, the internal security forces, and the National Guard.[10]

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To a great extent, the government in Riyadh has slowly become the rule of one man with no significant achievements to his credit so far, but who has concentrated on fortifying his standing and power. MBS, who seeks to make essential changes in all spheres of life in the kingdom, and at an accelerated and forced pace, has abandoned the tradition of collective decision making for this purpose, and in the process is confronting the religious establishment by diminishing its authority and the power of the social and economic elites, who will not necessarily bow to his authority. This process incurs quite a few risks. In this context, the American defense and diplomatic establishment has expressed growing concern about "bin Salman's impulsive behavior" which is potentially "liable to jeopardize American interests."[11]

External Pressures
Increasing Tension with Iran
The external challenges facing the kingdom are related to its struggle against Iran, which constitutes the main external threat to the kingdom. In

response, Riyadh has adopted an assertive policy to push back Iran. This policy has even aroused concern among Western intelligence agencies due to the risks it incurs to the kingdom's stability, and the contrast to the traditional Saudi policy of restraint and caution.[12] Saudi senior officials, headed by MBS, have escalated their statements against Iran, and MBS has even threatened that Saudi Arabia would fight a war against Iran in Iran, hinting at support for a change of regime there.[13] In a number of cases, above all in the war in Yemen, the escalation of the conflict against Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the political and economic siege of Qatar, MBS has taken a controversial line with uncharacteristic risks, in comparison to the way the kingdom formerly conducted its foreign policy. Furthermore, it appears that the price of this policy not infrequently outweighs its achievements. Saudi Arabia's regional status has declined, due to Iran's achievements through the nuclear agreement and the difficulty encountered by the kingdom in influencing the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

The War in Yemen

In March 2015, upon entering the war in Yemen (Operation Decisive Storm), MBS promised a quick and crushing victory over the Houthis and the Iranians. Thus far, Saudi Arabia has exposed the limitations of its power and its difficulties in defeating a determined enemy on its doorstep. The expensive military campaign in Yemen, even though it initially led to certain achievements, has come to a standstill, and is far from victory, even though Saudi Arabia possesses some of the world's most advanced weapons and its defense budget is the fourth largest in the world, after the United States, China, and Russia.[14] Over nearly three years, it has achieved no satisfactory results in the fighting, while costing Saudi Arabia an estimated $5 billion a month. Despite the kingdom's huge investment in defense, it is liable to give the appearance of a paper tiger. The military campaign has become a burden on the public treasury, and the Houthis are shooting ground-to-ground missiles – some of them Iranian-made – at Saudi territory, while the kingdom is having difficulty intercepting them with its air defense capabilities. Furthermore, in addition to the international criticism of Saudi Arabia (of exacerbating the humanitarian situation in Yemen and causing extensive collateral damage and harm to civilians), there is also internal criticism of how the war is conducted.

The Crisis with Qatar

Since June 2017, the kingdom has led a diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar, while posing very severe demands: a downgrading of relations with Iran, closure of the al-Jazeera broadcasting network, withdrawal of Turkish forces from Qatar, and termination of support for the Muslim Brotherhood and for terror. Qatar is paying a considerable price, mainly economic, because of the boycott. However, Saudi Arabia is also paying a rising price. The image of its power is affected, if only because of its inability to date to subject a small (and "recalcitrant") country like Qatar to its dictates. Saudi Arabia's relations with important Muslim allies, from Pakistan to Morocco, are tense because of their "neutral" position in the crisis. For its part, since the crisis began, Qatar, has upgraded its relations with Iran and Turkey, both of which are helping it overcome the boycott. Here too the kingdom's foreign policy posture has led to considerable internal criticism. A wave of arrests began in September 2017, including of senior clerics, among them Salman al-Ouda (a known critic of the royal house who has 14 million Twitter followers), academics, and journalists.[15] Common to those arrested was their criticism of the royal house's policy in initiating the crisis with Qatar, which aggravated the rift between the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council and did not bring about any substantial change in Qatar's policy.[16]

Possible Scenarios

Political shockwaves are possible for many reasons and are difficult to predict precisely. The future scenarios can come from a wide spectrum of possibilities: a quiet palace coup by a competing branch of the al-Saud tribe, a seizure of power by an Islamic organization hostile to the West, accelerated civil unrest, or a combination of these scenarios. The results of these shocks could range from a prolonged low intensity crisis simmering beneath the surface to a power struggle between two or three emerging factions to the loss of state control and absolute chaos. Each one of these scenarios in various magnitudes can naturally lead to different political and strategic results, and pose a variety of challenges of varying intensity.

A Military Coup and Power Struggle within the Palace

There is currently little likelihood of a military coup in Saudi Arabia, even if it is less unlikely than in the past. The most recent coup attempt occurred in 1969, with no known similar attempts since. One of the reasons for the

difficulty in staging a military coup in the kingdom was that until now, the internal armed forces were not under a single command; they were loyal to different parties in the royal house. All of the loci of power in the kingdom have now been concentrated under MBS, which reduces the likelihood of a military clash between the respective power bases and their leaders. However, the ousted princes and those loyal to them were well rooted in the organizations that they headed, and constitute a potential source for feelings of revenge, which could be expressed in attempts at a coup. Perhaps MBS's fear of criticism, possibly even of a military coup, was what caused him to order the arrest of 16 senior retired officers of the Ministry of Defense and the National Guard on accusations of corruption, as reported in November 2017.[17] Another threat is liable to come from a quiet palace coup by a competing branch of the al-Saud tribe that feels that it has been pushed aside.[18] In such a case, the kingdom would manage to survive the crisis and maintain stability in the long term only if a broad consensus is achieved among the senior princes about who the future king will be, as was the prevailing practice before MBS emerged as the dominant player.

A Takeover by Extremist Islamist Groups

Until now, the presence of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Saudi Arabia has ostensibly been more of a tactical nuisance (albeit a painful one) than a strategic threat. After decades of Salafi-Wahhabi indoctrination, however, in the event of a political crisis, liberals might suffer defeat by Islamic extremists. A takeover by Islamic elements hostile to the West will also be dangerous because these elements are liable to use the kingdom's ample resources against Western interests. It is likely that the elimination of the royal house as a party operating largely according to realpolitik will culminate in an aggressive anti-Western foreign policy. For this scenario to materialize, however, no "caliphate" movement is necessary; it is enough for the influence of the Wahhabi establishment on the royal house to become stronger, as has occurred in the past. Nevertheless, the kingdom's confrontation with Salafi extremism in the form of the Islamic State organization, which rejects Saudi Arabia's legitimacy and religious validity, potentially poses a material threat. The Islamic State has proven its ability to challenge the kingdom's security despite, and perhaps because of, its territorial failures in Iraq and Syria. The most recent attempt at a terrorist attack was in October 2017, when the Peace Palace in Jeddah was attacked (although it is unclear whether the organization was involved). In July 2016, there was an attempt

to blow up the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina, where Muslims believe that the Prophet Mohammad was buried. Even in the event of internal chaos in Saudi Arabia, the establishment of a caliphate-like state requires the appearance of a charismatic figure capable of inspiring the masses, combined with the strengthening of the existing Wahhabi establishment (even if Saudi clerics question the legitimacy of a particular king or the entire royal house, this does not undermine the legitimacy of the existing belief in the king ruling with the help of religious advisors).

External Subversion and Shiite Unrest

A scenario is possible in which the kingdom is paralyzed as a result of internal struggles, while Iran takes advantage of the instability to bring about an effective revolt in the Shiite area. At the same time, although it is capable of inciting groups in the Shiite population in the kingdom against the royal family, it is highly doubtful whether Iran is capable of directly causing the overthrow of the Saudi royal house. Furthermore, the Saudi Shiites, who comprise approximately 15 percent of the kingdom's population, are for the most part ideologically detached from the Iranian religious establishment, and so far have not posed a significant threat to the regime in Riyadh. However, unrest incited by forces with a different agenda seeking a change could occur. In an extreme case scenario, widespread unrest is liable to lead to chaos and dissolution of the kingdom into separate provinces and regions, the most important of which will be Nejd, home to Riyadh and the government institutions; Hejaz, where the holy places of Islam are located; and the eastern province, which contains most of the oil reserves and where most of the kingdom's Shiite population lives.

Significance and Risks

Crisis in the Oil Markets

A severe internal crisis will almost certainly lead to a sharp rise in oil prices. Such a rise could be moderated, especially if the oil markets continue to feature excess supply and (relatively) low prices, by the ability of other suppliers, headed by the United States, to compensate for the missing supply. A prolonged absolute halt in production will damage mainly (although not exclusively) the economies of the Far East, especially China, the principal importer of Saudi oil. At the same time, such a development will undoubtedly benefit the oil economies of Iran and Russia, the kingdom's competitors in the oil market. A rise in prices could also propel further development

of the shale oil industry and, in the long term, could help free the world of its dependence on Middle East oil.

If one Saudi group controls the oil, it will be able to attain a significant advantage over its rivals. If a number of groups control the oil fields, the main beneficiaries are likely to be the importers of Saudi oil, given the market competition. As in the case of Libya, however, the rivalry between the various power groups in the country is liable to paralyze oil production and exports. In any case, it is clear that loss of the oil fields will be a severe blow to the Saudi royal family or any other group replacing it, given the great importance of this sector in the national economy.

Strengthening of Iran

Iran is likely to improve its strategic position under each of the scenarios, and exploit possible shocks in the kingdom in order to expand its regional dominance. In the event of a significant political crisis in the kingdom, the Houthis will gain the upper hand in Yemen, and Iran will encounter less resistance in maintaining its supremacy in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. If the Saudi royal house encounters serious difficulties, it is uncertain whether Iran will use force to help achieve Shiite independence in the eastern province of the kingdom and escalate destabilization in Bahrain. One clear result of a prolonged civil war along the lines of events in Iraq and Syria will be damage to Saudi Arabia's ability to retain control of its borders and any parties crossing them in either direction. Thus along with which internal groups might participate in the fighting in its early stages, at issue is which external groups are likely to be active in Saudi Arabia in more advanced stages of a civil war.

Loss of Control and Dispersion of Advanced Weapon Systems

Another risk is future control of the kingdom's advanced Western weapon systems if stability is undermined. In the event of total instability in the kingdom, the weapon systems are liable to fall into the "wrong hands," as happened to less sophisticated weapon systems in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. At the same time, terrorist organizations will find it difficult to operate advanced weapons and "heavy" systems. Furthermore, it is possible that there are American-British shelf plans for neutralizing or taking control of essential systems in a crisis.

External Involvement and Security in the Islamic Holy Places

It is unclear whether the major powers will take action to restore stability in the kingdom in the event of instability there. A positive answer is likely to reduce the risks incurred in the scenarios portrayed above. It is very doubtful, however, whether any of the major powers has the motivation and/or ability to undertake additional significant intervention in the Middle East. Furthermore, intervention by the major powers might well escalate the crisis, as happened in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq. Possible external intervention depends on a number of secondary questions: the divisions between the contending forces in Saudi Arabia, their political orientation and territorial distribution, the balance of power between them, and the possibility that a specific group will achieve hegemony over the others. The actions of regional and international players, whom they will support, and whether a divided kingdom will be in their interest, should also be considered.

If general chaos prevails in the kingdom, Iran is likely to use the pretext of "saving the holy cities" (or the excuse of protecting the Shiite population) to augment its subversion and indirect pressure on the kingdom, and possibly also direct pressure. The National Guard is responsible for defending Mecca and Medina, but in an extreme case scenario, the kingdom might call for help from external Muslim forces. Pakistan has the world's largest Muslim army, and is the only Muslim country with nuclear capability (obtained to a large extent with financial help from Saudi Arabia), and Riyadh regards it as a force multiplier for support in a crisis. However, it is doubtful whether Pakistan will be willing to side with the kingdom in a crisis as it did in the past, when it extended aid in freeing the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 and stationed military forces in Saudi territory.

The Israeli Context

Riyadh's internal and regional difficulties are liable to cool Israel's enthusiasm for the "regional approach," whereby Israel works with Saudi Arabia, the core of the Sunni axis opposing Iran and perhaps a party that can offer material assistance in achieving a breakthrough in the political process with the Palestinians. All of the scenarios for destabilization of the Saudi regime are negative for Israel, due to the possibility that the kingdom will become a failing state or one controlled by a hostile regime. This in turn would damage the standing of the United States in the region, while advanced weaponry might fall into hostile and terrorist hands liable to use it against

Israel. Beyond the possible damage to the limited cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia, instability in the kingdom will cause shockwaves that might upset regimes important to Israel, headed by Jordan and Egypt. To the extent that the kingdom is internally vulnerable, it will be less able to cooperate with Israel, if only because of its desire to appease various sectors that can challenge its stability and that are critical of its relations with Israel. Under a scenario of an internal coup in the kingdom, where the kingdom is presumably still controlled by a regime operating according to realpolitik, it is likely that the objective interest in cooperation with Israel will remain. Some in Israel favor Saudi activism, which is aimed mainly against the Iranian interests in the Middle East in general, and in the Gulf region in particular. Israel and the Western countries should therefore examine the best way to help the royal house maintain stability, and what should be done on the day when Saudi Arabia is weakened and becomes a less central figure in the camp opposing Iran.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia has enjoyed relative stability since the beginning of the regional upheaval, even if its power and influence may at times have been overestimated. The kingdom, which has substituted a proactive policy for its traditional cautious and conservative strategy, is challenged in almost every dimension, while its acting ruler, MBS, has launched important historic processes that may cause instability in the kingdom. Opposition groups may take advantage of this instability to undermine the regime, and regional and international forces may take the opportunity to challenge the kingdom. In face of the potential instability in the kingdom, events must be monitored and emergency plans prepared for scenarios of destabilization. Those formulating such plans should consider how to make sure that Iran does not take advantage of instability in the kingdom to enhance its regional hold, how to deal with the shocks in the oil market, how to safeguard advance weapon systems, how to safeguard the holy places of Islam, and what the consequences of instability in Saudi Arabia will be for its neighbors, some of whom face similar challenges.

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Doubts of the kingdom's stability have proven erroneous in the past,[19] but the resilience demonstrated by the kingdom over the last seven tumultuous years does not guarantee its long term stability. The risk of an outbreak of political violence exists. In order to preserve its stability, the kingdom will have to meet the expectations of a young and well-educated generation accustomed to abundance, and find new ways of including it in the management of the state's affairs; pass critical reforms, even if they are in themselves hazardous; cope differently and more successfully with Iran in the regional theater; and restore some of former features of internal political management that contribute to stability.

It is clearly impossible to determine whether and when several of the elements of the threat reviewed above will emerge to a degree sufficient to destabilize the kingdom, nor can all of the possible consequences of those elements be envisioned. This essay, therefore, does not aim to predict a precise time at which the kingdom might become unstable, or assess the degree to which instability in Saudi Arabia is inevitable. Rather, it seeks to warn of the possible consequences of this scenario and generate related insights, including outside the intelligence agencies. The countries that will be affected by possible destabilization in Saudi Arabia, including Israel, should recognize the historic changes underway in the kingdom, and should make preparations for possible difficult scenarios, whose likelihood is now greater than before.

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State Collapse in Libya: Prospects and Implications

Sarah Feuer, Ofir Winter, Ari Heistein, and Bar Loopo

Home to the world's ninth largest oil reserves, Libya has received relatively little attention in Israel since the NATO intervention of 2011 helped bring down the regime of longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi. But in the last seven years, the North African country's downward spiral into chaos and violence has affected wide-ranging matters, such as the world oil market, the global war on terror, the flow of migrants to Europe, and the regional clash between supporters and opponents of political Islam. Although Israel is not directly implicated in the fighting, events in Libya over the past seven years have undermined the region's stability. As such, Israeli policymakers should keep a close watch on Libyan developments in the near term, as a failure on the part of the relevant stakeholders to resolve the conflict could bring about complete state collapse,[1] sparking an escalation of violence and further destabilizing Egypt, a key Israeli ally.

This paper examines the central actors involved in the Libyan conflict, reviews the sequence of events that produced the current state of affairs, considers the implications of Libya's trajectory for its neighbors and for great power relations, and presents policy options for Israel as it seeks both to minimize the risks associated with greater instability in North Africa and to identify and maximize potential opportunities.

Libya's Domestic Turmoil

The current impasse in Libya dates back to the 2011 uprising that broke out amidst the wave of Arab Spring revolts then sweeping the region. Libya's revolutionaries succeeded in dismantling the regime of longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi, who was killed in the process, and throughout late

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2011 and early 2012 there were hopeful signs that a democratic alternative might emerge. However, by mid-2012 the political transition began buckling under the weight of tribal, regional, ideological, and religious divisions that Qaddafi's system had managed to contain. Since then, Libya has seen five interim governments in as many years, an unchecked proliferation of weapons, a civil war from 2014-2015 between two broad coalitions of rival militias, ongoing clashes over control of the country's substantial hydrocarbon sector (which before 2011 yielded 92 percent of the state's revenues),[2] the emergence of the largest province of the Islamic State (ISIS) outside its core territory in Syria and Iraq between 2015 and 2016, and growing shortages of electricity, water, and medicine for the country's six million inhabitants.

In the absence of a consensual national identity or state institutions around which any such identity could coalesce, three rival governments vie for legitimacy in Libya today. In Tripoli, a Government of National Accord (GNA) under the leadership of Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj has been in place since 2015, when the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) brokered what came to be known as the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA). The LPA created a set of structures incorporating most of the country's transitional governing bodies up to that point, but the GNA it produced has struggled to assert control over key institutions like the Central Bank and the National Oil Corporation.[3] Nonetheless, the LPA reduced the violence of the civil war, and the GNA remains the only internationally recognized government in Libya. In addition, the GNA's antecedent body under the leadership of Abdullah al-Thinni and a self-proclaimed government under Khalifa Ghwell, who served in one of the Tripoli-based interim administrations, continue to claim legitimacy.

Alongside these rival governments, two broad military formations currently compete for dominance. In the west, groups of Misrata-based militias and affiliated Islamist groups formerly involved in Operation Dawn in 2014-2015 have loosely allied themselves with Sarraj's GNA. In the east, the main factions involved in Operation Dignity throughout the civil war have merged under the banner of a Libyan National Army (LNA), led by General Khalifa Haftar. Haftar, who initially launched Operation Dignity with the stated goal of defeating violent Islamist groups in Benghazi and elsewhere, has continued to present himself as a bulwark against political Islam, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. In the last two years, he has increasingly allied himself with Salafists who similarly seek to weaken the

Brotherhood in Libya. Salafists feature prominently among the military units under Haftar's command, and one of Haftar's sons is rumored to be a follower of Madkhali Salafism (named for Rabia bin Hadi al-Madkhali, the Saudi cleric leading the movement), which generally advocates unquestioned loyalty to the regime – even if such a regime is secular in orientation – and opposes jihadi groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.[4]

Politically, Haftar is allied with the Tobruk-based House of Representatives elected in 2014, which signed onto the LPA but rejected key provisions that would have brought the LNA under civilian control. UNSMIL spent most of 2016 and early 2017 trying to compel Haftar and his allies in the House of Representatives to approve Sarraj's cabinet picks and accept the LPA in its entirety. In July 2017 there appeared to be a breakthrough when French President Emmanuel Macron hosted Haftar and Sarraj for a meeting in Paris, which produced an agreement calling for a ceasefire between the parties, disarmament of rogue militias and consolidation of armed forces into a unified military, cooperation between the rival factions in countering terrorism, and elections in 2018. In September 2017, UN Special Envoy Ghassan Salamé announced a new "Action Plan for Libya" calling for revisions to the LPA, a streamlining of the main governing bodies, and a national conference that would lay the groundwork for a new constitution and national elections.[5] For his part, on December 17 Haftar announced the expiration of the LPA (in keeping with some interpretations of its original mandate),[6] calling into question the viability of Salamé's efforts. Still, as of this writing, negotiations are ongoing.

But for the continued functioning of the National Oil Corporation and the Central Bank (which together have managed the receipt and distribution of rents from the sale of Libyan oil), and the provision of rudimentary services on the part of some municipal councils, Libya today would warrant the label of a completely failed state. For the time being, the continued flow of oil is the only element keeping what remains of the Libyan economy from collapsing. In the event Salamé's negotiations break down, or an unforeseen development causes the oil to stop flowing, or Haftar launches a military operation aimed at conquering Tripoli, the persistent but relatively low level fighting between rival militias characterizing the last two years would likely intensify and Libya could once again descend into a civil war. Unless Salamé manages to break the intransigence of the political elites charged with completing Libya's transition, or the prospect of an economic collapse compels the parties to reach consensus on a roadmap moving forward,

UNSMIL's latest initiative is unlikely to succeed, and the dire situation for many Libyans will continue to deteriorate.

Libya in the Regional Context

The broader regional conflict between regimes supporting and opposing Islamist movements, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, has fueled external interference in the Libyan theater. Although moderate Islamic strains, such as Sufi orders, and ultra-conservative but politically quietist strains of Salafism were tolerated under the Qaddafi regime, politically oriented Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood were banned. The 2011 uprising opened a space for Islamist groups to operate and receive assistance from regional actors. In this vein, since 2011 Qatar has funded and channeled weapons to its Islamist allies within Libya, reportedly in coordination with Turkish authorities, and a UN panel concluded that Turkish companies had delivered weapons to groups comprising Operation Dawn.[7] On the anti-Islamist side, the United Arab Emirates has reportedly delivered weapons to both Haftar and allied militias in the city-state of Zintan.[8] The most substantial support for Haftar's anti-Brotherhood bloc has come from Egypt, reflecting Cairo's broader goal of countering political Islam throughout the region.

Indeed, Egypt has emerged as the nation most threatened by the instability in Libya, with which it shares a border of more than 1,000 kilometers. After the fall of Qaddafi, the Libyan army's weapons depots were looted, and the ensuing emergence of smuggling networks turned the country into a major arms provider for terrorists in Egypt, Sinai, and ultimately the Gaza Strip.[9] More recently, the weakening of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has led to an increased presence of jihadi Salafists finding refuge in Libya, estimated at somewhere between 500 and several thousand fighters.[10] Some of the worst terrorist attacks perpetrated in Egypt in 2017 – including the attack on Egyptian Copts in the Minya district south of Cairo, which killed 29, and the attack in the al-Wahat region in October that, according to unofficial reports, resulted in the deaths of more than 50 Egyptian policemen – have been attributed to terrorists originating in Libya.[11] Russian-made Kornet missiles, one of which was used in the attempted assassination of Egypt's defense and interior ministers during their visit to el-Arish in December 2017, were also reportedly smuggled out of Libya.[12] Such incidents have undermined the Egyptian regime's promise to provide security and stability to its citizens, damaged the country's tourism sector, slowed the

rehabilitation of the economy, and, more generally, eroded public support for Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Consequently, Egypt views the Libyan crisis as a direct threat to its national security.

In recent years, Cairo has taken steps to contend with the threat. In the military realm, Egypt has tightened security on its border with Libya, attacked convoys of vehicles smuggling weapons and explosives into Egypt, and executed retaliatory strikes against terrorist factions within Libya following attacks on Egyptian soil. The Muhammad Naguib military base in al-Hamam serves as the hub of Egyptian military activity in Libya, and Cairo has provided intelligence to Haftar and to European states on terrorist activities in eastern Libya.[13] Egypt also reportedly allows Russian forces to use its bases near the Libyan border to assist Haftar, though Cairo denies doing so.[14]

On the diplomatic front, Egypt has pressed the United States and the European Union to lift the UN weapons embargo in place since 2011 that ostensibly hampers the arming of Haftar's LNA.[15] As a member of the Anti-Terror Quartet (which also includes Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain), Egypt has demanded that Qatar cease its alleged funding of terrorist groups within Libya.[16] Cairo seeks a political resolution to the Libyan conflict that would retain the country's territorial integrity and see Haftar emerge in a dominant position, calculating that he would help his eastern neighbor reduce the terrorist threat emanating from Libya. As such, Cairo has hosted several rounds of talks between Libya's warring factions, including summits in June 2016, February 2017, and August 2017.[17] Egypt's role as a mediator has also turned Cairo into a leading destination for nations seeking to promote their interests in Libya. To wit: Italy, France, and Germany have increasingly turned to Egypt for help in reducing the flow of migrants from Libya to the continent, and Russia views Egypt as an asset in its efforts to promote its economic ties to a future Libyan government.[18]

Egypt is not the only regional power severely affected by the collapse of the Libyan state. Tunisia and Algeria have also sought to mitigate the spread of instability across their borders and facilitate a resolution to Libya's political impasse.[19] Spillover from the conflict has been especially acute in neighboring Tunisia, arguably the only Arab country to emerge from the tumult of 2011 on a recognizable, if tenuous, path to democracy. In 2015 and early 2016 Tunisia was wracked by two mass-casualty terrorist attacks in and around the capital, and an attempted insurgency in the

southern town of Ben Guerdane. In all three cases, the perpetrators had spent time in terrorist training camps across the border in Libya. Many of the estimated 6,000 Tunisians who left their country between 2011 and 2016 to join the Islamic State and other terrorist groups traveled through Libya to Iraq and Syria. And since the outbreak of Libya's civil war, Tunisia has taken in nearly one million Libyan migrants fleeing the conflict, placing additional strains on an already frail Tunisian economy.

In addition, the chaos and security vacuum in Libya have facilitated an unchecked flow of migrants from Africa into southern Europe. In 2010, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency registered 4,500 migrants seeking to enter the continent through Libya and Egypt. By the following year, that number had spiked to 64,000.[20] In 2016 an estimated 180,000 migrants, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa, arrived in Italy after passing through the maritime route from Libya.[21] Meanwhile, the International Organization for Migration estimates that 770,000 migrants and asylum seekers remain in Libya, where they are exposed to human trafficking, organized crime networks, and extremist groups preying on vulnerable populations.[22]

Libya in the Global Order

The ongoing strife in Libya has also affected great power relations. The 2011 NATO intervention and aftermath became a bone of contention between the United States and Russia, as Moscow, which tacitly permitted the intervention by abstaining from the relevant UN Security Council resolution, later argued that NATO had distorted the UN mandate for a no-fly zone in order to promote regime change. For its part, the EU – which played a key role in helping to broker the LPA – has otherwise struggled to present a unified, coherent approach to the Libyan crisis. Whereas Italy has tended to support the GNA, France has indicated a growing willingness to back Haftar in his bid to extend the LNA's territorial reach, while the United Kingdom remains preoccupied with Brexit. Such divisions within the EU, combined with America's reluctance to broaden its engagement beyond the realm of counter-terrorism, have provided Moscow with an opening to position itself as an engaged mediator and as a regional power broker on issues ranging from oil production to migration to terrorism.

Thus far, Russia has directed the bulk of its military, economic, and political support to Haftar. Putin has reportedly shipped weapons to the LNA via Egypt in order to circumvent the UN arms embargo, and has sent

several dozen soldiers from Special Forces units to the Libya-Egypt border to assist with Haftar's security operations.[23] There is speculation that the LNA will offer Russia permanent access to a naval base on the Libyan coast, which would magnify the Russian Navy's ability to project power in a traditionally European sphere of influence. In the realm of economic assistance, Moscow provided Haftar with financial aid by printing money (the equivalent of nearly $3 billion in Libyan currency) and transferring it to a bank under his control.[24] Furthermore, Russia has hosted Haftar three times in a bid to bestow political legitimacy upon him, including one very public appearance on the Russian aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov*. Still, Moscow continues to engage the GNA and Sarraj, aware that no single actor has emerged in full control of Libya, and likely eager to present itself as an alternative peacemaker to the UN.

In addition to these geopolitical interests, Russia seeks to gain financially from its presence in Libya. With the fall of Qaddafı, Russia lost $5-10 billion in military and infrastructure contracts,[25] which it has already begun to recoup. For example, in early 2017 Rosneft signed a crude oil purchasing agreement with Libya's National Oil Corporation, and this past July the Russian state oil giant began purchasing Libyan oil. An eventual lifting of the UN embargo on weapons sales and the ultimate need for reconstruction inside Libya would present additional opportunities for Russia in the fields of security and infrastructure development.

Russia's involvement in the North African state has enabled Moscow to embellish the narrative that whereas the US and the West generally create problems, Russia solves them. The Kremlin has also turned Libya into a bargaining chip with the EU, as European representatives are increasingly convinced that a resolution to the Libyan predicament will require coordination with Russia. In light of Putin's desire to see Ukraine-related EU sanctions lifted and the EU's efforts to stanch the flow of immigrants

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through Libya, Russia may try to leverage its influence in Libya to its advantage. Furthermore, if Russia decides to increase the pressure on Europe, it could resort to its mode of action in Syria and bolster Haftar's military campaigns with air support that would spark a new wave of refugees and intensify the migrant crisis.

The Libyan theater also reflects Russia's deepening strategic alignment with traditional US allies in the Middle East at Washington's expense. Moscow's cooperation with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates in support of Haftar reflects the affinity all three have for military strongmen, as well as their distaste for the Muslim Brotherhood. But this cooperation also highlights a certain dissonance between the White House and its traditional allies in Cairo and Abu Dhabi, for the US remains relatively disengaged from Libya, prioritizing the fight against the Islamic State and continuing to lend rhetorical support to the UNSMIL process – a process that enjoys little credibility or support within Libya – as the preferred alternative to a heavy-handed figure like Haftar emerging in a dominant position. Absent a more assertive and unified posture on the part of Europe and the US, Russia's influence in Libya is likely to grow in the coming years.

Policy Implications and Recommendations for Israel

For Israel, Libya's strategic importance lies principally in its impact on Egypt's stability (which Israeli intelligence sources predict will continue to be threatened from the Sinai throughout 2018),[26] its role in the broader regional struggle between Islamist and anti-Islamist factions, and its emergence as a vehicle of growing Russian influence in the Mediterranean. The first two matters provide Israel with an opportunity for enhanced cooperation with its southern neighbor, while the third constitutes an area of potential cooperation with its American allies.

> Improved security and political coordination between Israel and Egypt as it pertains to the Libyan crisis is a worthy goal, and could serve as a complementary layer to the productive military cooperation already in place between the two nations concerning the Sinai Peninsula.

Jerusalem shares Cairo's goal of reducing, if not eliminating, the spread of jihadist groups in Libya that could threaten not only Egyptian but regional stability. Israel, like Egypt, is eager to stop the smuggling of weapons from Libya to Sinai, as these could ultimately make their way into Gaza. Furthermore, Israel and Egypt share an interest in preventing Libya from falling to the regional Islamist axis inspired by the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood and supported by Qatar and Turkey. Translating such mutual Israeli-Egyptian interests into policy requires direct dialogue between the leadership of the two nations. Jerusalem should consider offering Cairo various forms of cooperation on Libya, including technological and intelligence assistance to the Egyptian army to tighten

surveillance of the Egyptian-Libyan border and prevent the smuggling of arms and fighters, and support for increased international aid to Egypt that would be earmarked for counterterrorism efforts. Jerusalem should also weigh the risks and potential benefits of endorsing Egypt's demand to lift the UN arms embargo. Improved security and political coordination between Israel and Egypt as it pertains to the Libyan crisis is a worthy goal in and of itself, and could serve as a complementary layer to the productive military cooperation already in place between the two nations concerning the Sinai Peninsula.

Regarding the extent to which state collapse in Libya would provide Russia with a foothold in the Mediterranean, Israeli policymakers should consider quietly urging their allies in Washington to enhance America's engagement in the Libyan arena. Given the low credibility UNSMIL and the international community currently enjoy in Libya, America's absence risks paving the way for greater Russian influence, an outcome that serves neither American nor Israeli interests. Greater American engagement need not translate into a greater military commitment, which Washington is unlikely to support at present. However, the Trump administration could be induced to encourage its European allies toward a more assertive and unified position on Libya, which in turn would serve as a counterweight to Russian encroachment. Furthermore, the Trump White House would likely welcome ideas on incentivizing greater American commercial engagement with Libya's business and energy sectors. In this regard, the Libyan National Oil Corporation's recent decision to open an office in Houston, Texas presents an opportunity for American energy companies that the Trump administration would do well to seize.

> The Trump administration could be induced to encourage its European allies toward a more assertive and unified position on Libya, which in turn would serve as a counterweight to Russian encroachment.

Notes

1   This paper employs the terms "state collapse" and "state failure" interchangeably to refer to instances in which a state is no longer able to maintain a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, extract and distribute resources from and to the population through taxation or collection of rents, and provide security and a modicum of services to citizens through binding governing mechanisms. For a recent scholarly treatment of these concepts, see Daniel Lambach, Eva Johais, and Markus Bayer, "Conceptualising State Collapse: An Institutionalist Approach," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no.

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Russia and China in the Middle East: Rapprochement and Rivalry

Galia Lavi and Sarah Fainberg

In late November 2017, the Syrian ambassador in Beijing stated that his country was interested in having "countries like Russia, China, India, and Iran take part in reconstruction" after the war, which the World Bank estimated will cost some $250 billion.[1] As the war in Syria appears to be drawing to a close, Russia and China are preparing for the future, and looking at the potential business opportunities available to them. The economic capabilities of China, the world's second largest economy, are incomparably greater than those of Russia, whose economy is far from robust. Thus despite the rapprochement between Russia and China in the international theater, the cooperation between these two powers during the war in Syria is likely to give way to economic rivalry that will remind both of them of the points of dispute between them.

This essay examines the intricate relations between China and Russia, from their historical roots to their common interests in the various theaters around the world to the points of dispute and rivalry between the two countries. The Russian-Chinese rapprochement in the global sphere, and lately also in the Middle East, despite its limitations and difficulties, is liable to bolster the standing of parties acting against Israel's interests in the Middle East. Israel should therefore assess its relations with each of these two powers not only from a bilateral standpoint, but also from a multi-power perspective, focusing on the China-Russia-Israel triangle, and even the quadrilateral that includes the United States.

From Rift to Honeymoon

Recent relations between China and Russia, which have known ups and downs over the years, can be divided into three main periods: the gradual thaw in the 1990s; the economic tension surrounding military trade starting in 2006; and the honeymoon that began in 2013.

Gradual Thaw

Following years of estrangement and rivalry during the Mao Zedong era, Russia and China began cautiously and gradually to grow closer to each other. The ice was broken in 1982 with a speech by General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party Leonid Brezhnev, who proposed repairing the poor state of relations between the Soviet Union and China, and stated that the Soviet Union recognized Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan. Nevertheless, it was only after seven years that a milestone was reached in relations between the two countries when President Mikhail Gorbachev visited Beijing.

At this stage, the positive relations were reflected mostly in weapons trade. The Chinese army in the post-Mao era was equipped with outmoded Soviet systems, and the Chinese weapons industry was underdeveloped in comparison with the advanced technologies of the West. In order to overcome the gap and make its army more advanced and effective, China needed foreign suppliers of advanced weapon systems, but the Tiananmen Square events in 1989 and the sanctions against it imposed by Europe and the US deprived China of the opportunity of these resources. Meantime, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian weapons industry faced a dramatic fall in sales to the domestic market, and sought new international markets. In China, it found a large market with a major budget and a great desire for large scale procurement. As a result of these shared interests, China became one of Russia's biggest weapons customers, and its leading customer in 1999-2000; in 2005 Russian arms sales to China reached a peak of 60 percent of all Russian weapons exports.[2]

During those years, the relationship between the countries was given symbolic expression with definitions like "a partnership of good neighbors and fruitful mutual cooperation" and "a partnership of strategic coordination based on equality and mutual benefit oriented to the 21st century," that was also reflected in political cooperation. China and Russia voted against the United States in the UN Security Council on three occasions: in 1998, they voted against the US bombardment in Iraq, and did so in a similar vote

in 2003. The third occasion was in 1999, when they criticized the US for military aggression in Yugoslavia.

In the early years of the 21st century, cooperation between China and Russia reached new heights with the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the regular joint bilateral military maneuvers in the framework of this organization. Another indication of the improvement in relations could be seen in the 2004 agreement between China and Russia on border arrangements.

Economic Tension Surrounding Military Trade

Despite China's desire to continue buying advanced weapon systems from Russia, Moscow began to fear that the Chinese were copying the Russian models and becoming Russian competitors. This concern arose when Russia noticed that China was buying far more parts than ready systems, and when there was a clear resemblance to the weapon systems that China began exporting, which appeared to be based on the Russian models. For example, the Chinese Shenyang J-11 aircraft was very similar to the Russian Sukhoi Su-27, and Chinese ground-to-air missiles looked like the Russian S-300.[3] Chinese submarines also included elements similar to those of Russian submarines. As a result, starting in 2006, Russia reduced the volume of its arms exports to China. While China was Russia's biggest customer in 1999-2006, accounting for 34-60 percent of Russia's annual exports of its main weapons, the rate fell to 25 percent in 2007-2009, and dropped further to 10 percent in 2010.[4]

Despite the diminishing arms trade, however, the two countries continued to hold joint military maneuvers, and even increased their frequency and complexity. Two joint military exercises took place in 2007: one bilateral and one under the SCO framework. In 2009, six military exercises took place: two bilateral, three in the SCO framework, and one naval exercise by the two countries in the Gulf of Aden, which simulated activity against pirates. One symbolic expression of the good relations between the two countries, despite the economic tension, was the upgrading of relations between them in 2011 to a "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination."

In the non-military sphere, broad economic activity continued. For example, China's need for energy led it to sign contracts with Russia for a supply of natural gas and oil. In 2009, a deal was concluded whereby China was to invest $25 billion in building an oil pipeline from Russia to China in exchange for a future supply of oil for 20 years. Additional energy

deals related to the development of two gas fields in eastern Siberia and agreements for laying two gas pipelines to transport a total of 68 billion cubic meters of gas a year from Russia to China.[5] Despite China's desire to make progress on energy deals, however, Russia was concerned about the enhancement of China's geopolitical position, and therefore did not want the Chinese economy to advance too quickly. For this reason, Russia delayed deals for laying the gas pipeline until the 2008 global crisis, when it had to proceed with these deals for the sake of its own economy.

Honeymoon

Under Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin, relations between the two countries have seen even higher levels of cooperation. The warm relations are reflected in the many meetings between the leaders: Xi has visited Russia six times since the beginning of his term, and has met with his Russian colleague a total of 21 times. In addition to the personal connection between the two leaders, their countries also have shared interests. In the economic sphere, with the decline in global oil prices and the drop in the volume of weapons sales to China, Russia has found itself in great need of financial resources. For this reason, after many years of refusal, Russia agreed in 2013 to sell China components of its most advanced systems – 24 Sukhoi-35 (Su-35) aircraft and four S-400 ground-to-air missile defense systems for a total of $7 billion.[6] Russia's economic dependence on China became even greater following Russia's takeover of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, when in contrast to Europe and the US, which imposed painful sanctions against Russia, China turned a blind eye to Russia's hostile action, and continued economic relations with Russia as usual. Trade between the two countries reached $95 billion in 2015.

Military cooperation between the two countries has also grown. Since 2012, Russia and China have conducted annual naval maneuvers, in addition to land-based military exercises, both bilateral and within the SCO framework. The various maneuvers enable the armies to practice battle tactics, coordination and logistics, and fighting on foreign territory. Since the decision to deploy the American THAAD anti-missile defense system in South Korea, the exercises have also included defense against missiles. Apart from the military practice, the two countries see additional purposes in their joint exercises. First, the exercises provide an opportunity for them to display their advanced systems and market them for export. In addition, the joint exercises enable them to demonstrate a united front

against the US and the West, and serve internal purposes by reinforcing national sentiments. In the framework of the naval exercises, China and Russia also conducted two exercises in remote waters not in either country's territory. In May 2015, a joint exercise took place in the Mediterranean Sea, and in July 2017, a joint exercise was held in the Baltic Sea. This latter exercise aroused much concern among NATO countries, which prompted President Putin to deliver a conciliatory message, claiming that the exercises were "a stabilizing factor for the entire world. No third country should feel threatened. We are not creating a bloc or a military alliance."[7]

Common Interests and Cooperation

In addition to their joint activity in military and security matters, China and Russia share geopolitical interests. First, both countries oppose the American strategy that seeks to "contain" them. This opposition is a key factor in the united front presented by China and Russia against the US in UN institutions, especially with respect to regional disputes, such as in North Korea and Syria. In this context, the Middle East provides a favorable area for action taken by the two powers against US hegemony. The perception of an American withdrawal from the Middle East is already leveraged by Moscow and Beijing, and both countries are taking action to fill the perceived vacuum and strengthen their trade and diplomatic ties with regional actors that are concerned by the relative US withdrawal. The two powers also advocate a balance of power in the Middle East at the expense of US hegemony. They oppose regime changes and consider (at different levels) American involvement as the catalyst for the Arab Spring and the rise of the Islamic State. Both portray themselves as supporters of international law, maintain an official policy of non-intervention, and offer to serve as mediators or neutral intermediaries.

In addition, for China and Russia the Middle East represents an external arena remote from their direct spheres of influence that can serve as a pressure point against the US for the purpose of obtaining American concessions in the two powers' immediate fields of strategic interest: Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet area for Russia, and the Asian-Pacific and the South China Sea for China. Furthermore, Russian-Chinese cooperation in the Middle East serves Moscow and Beijing by assisting cooperation between them in other theaters. Russia won Chinese support through abstention or use of its UN Security Council veto on matters pertaining to Ukraine, Syria, and elsewhere. Russia returned the favor by supporting

Chinese actions in the South China Sea and opposing the deployment of THAAD anti-missile missiles in the Korean peninsula.

Both countries have immediate interests in achieving relative stability in the North African, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian regions. They seek to contain the spread of radical Islam in their countries (especially in the northern Caucasus in Russia and Xinjiang Province in China), and prefer a geopolitically favorable environment in order to expand the volume of their trade and energy-related projects. Russia in particular seeks to enhance its trading and military presence, together with energy-related projects in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Eastern Mediterranean. China, for its part, seeks to promote its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and regards the Middle East as critical for implementing this initiative. At the same time, Russia and China's dependence on the Middle East differ substantially. As an oil and gas exporter, the Russian economy is not dependent on energy resources in the Middle East, but on upheavals in oil prices. China, on the other hand, has become the largest importer of oil from the Middle East, and has become increasingly dependent on energy imports from the region. This dependence has prompted a Saudi-Chinese rapprochement, based on increased energy imports by China and better chances for Chinese investments in the Saudi energy sector. One expression of this is the important transaction where China seeks to buy 5 percent of the Saudi oil company Aramco.[8]

The overlapping interests of the two powers have led to mutual cooperation. Both have usually acted as coordinated partners on the Iranian nuclear program and the civil war in Syria. Russia and China supported the Iranian positions during the negotiations on the nuclear agreement and opposed sanctions. They also both supported the inclusion of Iran in international institutions and support Iran's request for full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

On Syria, Beijing provided diplomatic support for Moscow's military intervention in Syria. Together with Russia, China vetoed six of the seven resolutions proposed in the UN Security Council that attempted to condemn Syria for the use of chemical weapons against its citizens. The seventh vote took place in April 2017, after a meeting between Presidents Trump and Xi Jinping, in which the US sought to condemn Syria for using chemical weapons against the rebels. China abstained in this vote, while Russia opposed it, and eventually vetoed the resolution. Thus Chinese policy does

not automatically side with Russia, but it is determined in accordance with China's relations with the US.

On the level of public diplomacy, China has been able to justify Russia's military attacks by arguing that they are legitimate anti-terrorist actions in compliance with international law. Beijing also took several essentially military-related actions: it trained forces from Assad's army in Syria in 2016,[9] reported the sending of military advisors to Assad in April 2016 and early 2017,[10] and declared its intention numerous times to deploy military and humanitarian aid to assist Russia in Syria. In March 2016, China appointed a special envoy to Syria,[11] and said that it aimed to cooperate closely with Russia in working toward a political solution. While China's military and humanitarian presence is minimal in comparison with Russia's involvement, it nevertheless indicates a change in China's traditional policy of non-intervention. These measures, which signal China's willingness to send soldiers abroad, were portrayed in Russia as a development proving the legitimacy of Russian intervention, and as aid in building a Russian-Iranian-Chinese axis in Syria.

Suspicion and Rivalry

Yet their fruitful cooperation and close relations notwithstanding, there is no close alliance between the two powers, and both are suspicious and cautious toward one another. The rising power of China, and especially its growing economic relations with Central Asian countries, generates geopolitical tension, with Russia regarding the rise of China as a threat and trying to preserve its power in the region. The BRI, and the commitments by various countries in the region for infrastructure projects in cooperation with the Chinese, is perceived as competition and undesirable penetration into Russia's historical sphere of influence. In order to avoid leaving the stage to China, Russia has "extended its sponsorship" to the Chinese initiative, and signed a cooperation agreement for connecting the Chinese BRI with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), founded by Russia. This agreement laid the political foundations for China's continued cooperation with countries of northern Europe and Asia, and provided China with easy access for continued implementation of its infrastructure programs in Asia, as well as for follow-up discussions about trade matters. On the Russian side, the agreement made it possible to position Russia as an important interested party in the BRI. Another aspect of this initiative, which has a strong economic dimension for Russia, is cooperation between China

and Russia on the Arctic Circle, through the joint construction of the Silk Road on Ice (SRI). This shortcut is likely to reduce the cruising time to Europe by a third.

Another reason for Russian anxiety is its demographic issue on its border with China. Although the longstanding border dispute between the two countries was settled in 2008, the agricultural areas along the border attract Chinese farmers, who rent the land for long periods. Russia fears that China will take over its territory with the help of Chinese relocated to these regions, which are sparsely settled by Russian citizens. In actuality, the number of Chinese who have crossed the border from China to Russia amounts to only 0.5 percent of the Russian population in the region, because the Chinese themselves have no interest in moving to Russia, where wages are lower than in China. Furthermore, China is encouraging its citizens to settle in unoccupied regions in China itself.

There is also a clash between the countries' respective approaches to the Middle East. Russia's main geopolitical lever in the Middle East is the use of historical alliances and proactive diplomacy to create and manage crises. China, in contrast, is still officially proclaiming its position of non-intervention and neutrality. In addition, Russia previously paid attention solely to American hegemony in the region, but is now competing with China's new economic hold, mainly in weapons trade, investment projects, and reconstruction in Iran and Syria.

Where the arms trade is concerned, Russia still has the upper hand. In 2016, Russia was second to the US among the world's leading arms exporters, while China ranked in fifth place.[12] At the same time, the rapid increase in China's weapons sales in the Middle East is a cause for concern in Moscow, even though Russia's arms exports continue to grow throughout the region, in part due to the demonstration of the operational capability of Russia's advanced and sophisticated arms on the Syrian front. For example, the weapons portfolio of Rosoboronexport for Arab countries (23 countries in the Middle East and North Africa) totals $8 billion, constituting approximately 20 percent of the company's exports.[13] Russia's arms sales have also expanded geographically: Russia is a major supplier of weapons to Algeria, Egypt, Iran, and Iraq, as

> Whereas Russia previously paid attention solely to American hegemony in the Middle East, it is now competing with China's new economic hold, mainly in weapons trade, investment projects, and reconstruction in Iran and Syria.

well as to the Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates) and other North African countries (Morocco, Tunisia). Russia has also made itself a leading supplier of warplanes and air defense systems throughout the region, with its S-400 air defense system in demand in the Gulf states and Morocco. This system has enabled Russia to enter unexpected markets, and in September 2017, Russia agreed to sell the S-400 to Turkey, a NATO member. At the same time, China is emerging as an economic competitor, not merely to the United States, but also to Russia, and has increased its weapons sales to countries in the region. China supplied Saudi Arabia and Iraq with unarmed and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs),[14] and in March 2017 announced a breakthrough deal in which it will build a factory to manufacture UAVs in Saudi Arabia.[15] For countries refusing or unable to buy weapons from the United States, the Chinese equipment is perceived as a cheap solution of adequate quality, and China ranks after Russia among the three top suppliers of arms to Iran, Syria, and Algeria.

In investments, the Russian economy has difficulty competing with China. The latter has the ability to supervise and finance gigantic construction projects and integrate them into the BRI, its flagship economic program, which is a model for international cooperation. It also launched a broad program of accelerated economic cooperation with Middle East countries: over the next 10 years, China hopes to increase its bilateral trade with Arab countries from $240 billion to $600 billion, and to expedite the negotiations for establishing a free trade zone between China and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).[16]

The BRI fits in well with China's plans to play a key role in the reconstruction of Syria when the fighting ends there. Russia has also prepared for this stage, and together with China and Iran, is well-positioned to lead the reconstruction projects and infrastructure investments. In April 2016, Russia signed contracts worth almost $1 billion for reconstruction in Syria.[17] According to official Russian sources, in November 2016, Syria gave Russia preference in reconstruction projects with good terms.[18] Russian companies began doing business in Syrian oil, gas, and mining resources using field work by the Russian army in communications networks and mines in Syria, as well as in construction of new power stations in Aleppo and Homs.[19] China's investment capabilities, which surpass those of Russia and Iran, have not escaped the eyes of the Syrians, and the Syrian ambassador in Beijing said that his country would be willing to provide China with oil in exchange for loans, and that it was willing to make these

deals in yuan.[20] China's proven capabilities in infrastructure and its great economic power are likely to make it a leader in the enormous reconstruction projects in Syria.

Conclusion

Relations between China and Russia are complex; they have known ups and downs over the years, but cooperation has now been established, based on a confluence of interests. The most dominant interest in the drive to cooperate may well be the desire to contain the power and influence of the US. China and Russia have joined forces for this purpose and are active in the Middle East theater, with Russia providing the active involvement and China the support from behind.

The rapprochement and cooperation between these two powers is liable to have a negative influence on Israel's strategic interests, since the two countries strengthen Iran diplomatically and militarily, empower the regime of Bashar al-Assad, and back the Palestinians' demands and views in international forums. Furthermore, the Chinese-Russian rapprochement and cooperation in the Middle East underline the relative retreat of the US, and constitute a threat to its continued hegemony in the region. Due to its special relationship with the US, Israel has something to lose from the rapprochement between the two major rivals of its ally.

While relations between China and Russia have known ups and downs over the years, cooperation has now been established, based on a confluence of interests – not least of which is the desire to contain the power and influence of the US.

The relationship between China and Russia is not perfect; it is replete with difficulties and constraints. While Russia regards cooperation with China as a supreme value, China is leveraging its cooperation with Russia based on its sense of the value of the partnership, combined with a cautious attitude toward the US. In the Middle East arena as well, a conflict of interests is liable to complicate continued cooperation between the two powers: for historical reasons, Russian has a larger presence and leverage in the Middle East than China, especially with respect to diplomacy, military presence, weapons trade, and energy cooperation. China, however, has much greater economic might than Russia, and is positioning itself as a rising power in trade and investments. The BRI, which provides an ambitious long term vision, is an attraction for the countries of the region hungering for

foreign investments. Now that the winds of war are waning, the pendulum is swinging in the direction of economics, in which China has a clear advantage, and the rivalry between the two powers is therefore likely to be sharpened.

Despite the points of dispute and rivalry between the two powers, however, it appears that there are still further mutual advantages to the cooperation, and this rapprochement poses a challenge to Israel. The Israeli government should therefore conduct a strategic dialogue with representatives of the US administration and external experts to assess the new picture from a multi-power perspective, and formulate a comprehensive policy suitable for the emerging situation in the world in general, and in Syria in particular.

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Stabilizing Afghanistan: The Need for a Comprehensive Approach

Marta Furlan

A Farsighted "New Strategy" for Afghanistan?

On Monday, August 21, 2017, in a speech at the Fort Myer military base in Arlington, Virginia, President Donald Trump disclosed a revised vision for the American war in Afghanistan.[1] Reconsidering his initial "instinct" to withdraw troops from a war that has become America's longest (it began in October 2001, after the dramatic events of 9/11) and costliest (it has cost American taxpayers more than $100 billion), Trump announced a "new strategy" for Afghanistan that is rooted in "principled realism."

The first pillar of Trump's "new strategy" is the decision to increase the number of American troops in Afghanistan. Claiming to learn from the experience in Iraq – when in 2011 American forces withdrew prematurely and left behind a vacuum that was promptly exploited by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) to gain terrain and supporters, the President welcomed the recommendations[2] coming from the Commander of the US Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A) and NATO's Resolute Support Mission, General John W. Nicholson, and from Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and decided to add more American troops to the 11,000 already deployed in Afghanistan.[3] Linked to this decision is the second pillar of the "new" strategy: while the core aims of American troops in Afghanistan will remain training Afghan forces and conducting counter-terrorism operations, the rules of engagement will be loosened and more flexibility in responding to security threats will be allowed. The third pillar is that decisions will no longer be taken on the basis of predetermined deadlines, but exclusively on the basis of the actual conditions on the ground, in the attempt to

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contradict the Taliban's argument that "Americans have all the watches but we have all the time."[4] Finally, but perhaps most importantly, the American engagement will fulfil the promise made by Trump since the earliest days of his electoral campaign: prioritize American national interests vis-à-vis the interests of foreign countries. In fact, despite arguing that the "new strategy" will witness an integration of all the military, economic, and diplomatic instruments of American power, Trump has made no mention of non-military measures and has rather emphasized that the United States in Afghanistan will eschew any effort at "nation-building" and will limit its involvement to "killing terrorists."

According to Trump, this "strategy" will succeed in achieving victory. However, as far as "victory" is concerned, the definition provided by the President has remained fairly vague: "attacking our enemies, obliterating ISIS, crushing al-Qaeda, preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan and stopping mass terror attacks against America before they emerge." From this phrasing, it seems that the US end-goal is to stabilize Afghanistan so as to prevent the country from again becoming a safe haven for terrorist groups, as it was throughout the 1990s when the Taliban government offered sanctuary to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda.[5] However, is the militaristic approach adopted by Trump an effective "strategy" to solve the problems that have afflicted Afghanistan over the past two years and bring stability to the country?

Afghanistan: Trapped between Volatile Security, Fragile Politics, and a Bleak Economy

Since the end of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in December 2014 and its replacement with the more modest Resolute Support Mission, Afghanistan has witnessed a deteriorating security situation, as the reduction of international forces deployed on the ground has created considerable opportunities for both old and new violent groups. Already in the early 1990s, when they took their first steps from the Deobandi madrasas of Pakistan where they had received their indoctrination to the Pashtun southern regions of Afghanistan, the Taliban proved able to exploit a deteriorating security environment, state inefficiencies, and the disaffection of the people from the central government.[6] They launched military attacks against local warlords; referred to a shared identity and system of values based on a peculiar fusion between the Pashtun tribal code (*Pashtunwali*) and Sunni Islam; and replaced Kabul as the source of

public services by building schools, mosques, roads, clinics, and *sharia* courts. In this way, the Taliban managed to garner both territorial control and popular support in the southern part of the country.[7] From there, they expanded toward the north through a brutal military campaign, and in 1996 proclaimed their Taliban emirate over approximately 90 percent of the country.[8] However, the Taliban emirate was a shortlived experiment of jihadi state-building that ended in 2001, when the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) defeated the Taliban and prompted the remnants of the group's leadership to relocate in the Pashtun tribal area between Afghanistan and Pakistan. In this new haven in the AfPak area, the group reorganized and prepared for a renaissance when new opportunities for action in Afghanistan would emerge.[9]

Those opportunities presented themselves in 2015, with the reduction of the international commitment in Afghanistan. Consequently, since 2015, Afghanistan has become the theater of an impressive Taliban resurgence that has seen the group achieve its most significant military successes and territorial gains since 2001. By means of their renewed military campaign, in fact, the Taliban have succeeded in bringing an increasingly large portion of Afghan territory under their control or influence. According to the movement's official site, *Voice of Jihad,* the Taliban today enjoy "full control" over 34 districts and "partial control" over 167, and have a "significant" presence in 52 others. These figures are not far from those reported by other sources such as SIGAR, which reports "full" Taliban control over 33 districts and "partial" control over 116 districts.[10]

In these areas, the Taliban have not only imposed their presence by using force and sowing fear, but have also drawn on their past experience to win the hearts and minds of the people by providing the security and the public services that Kabul is not always able to guarantee. Indeed, the introduction of structures of "shadow governance" has enabled the Taliban to consolidate and legitimize their presence and reap discrete levels of popular acceptance, especially in the southern Pashtun tribal belt that is the group's traditional stronghold, and in those rural and isolated areas that the governing arm of Kabul struggles hardest to reach.[11]

This resurgence on the part of the Taliban has been accompanied by a parallel resurgence of the al-Qaeda threat. The bonds linking al-Qaeda and Afghanistan date back to the establishment of the group at the time of the Afghan-Soviet conflict; it was after his military experience alongside the Afghan mujahidin and the exposure to the politico-religious narrative

promoted in that context by fundamentalist ideologue Abdullah Yusuf Azzam that bin Laden founded al-Qaeda in 1988. Yet it was not until 1996, when the Taliban emirate opened its doors to bin Laden, exiled from the Sudan of al-Turabi and al-Bashir, that the linkage between al-Qaeda and Afghanistan was solidified to the point that it could not be severed, even by the US-led OEF.[12] This "special relationship" is still evident in the al-Qaeda presence in the de facto ungoverned area stretching across Afghanistan and Pakistan, where bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri succeeded in relocating al-Qaeda after the defeat of 2001, due to the weakness of Kabul and the connivance of Islamabad. From there, al-Qaeda has continued to project its power over the Afghan militancy and influence the Afghan insurgency. More recently, exploiting the reduction of the international military presence and the subsequent Taliban resurgence, al-Qaeda has managed to reconstitute a physical presence in Afghanistan by means of opening new training camps in the country's southeast.[13]

Besides the resurgence of the Taliban and the physical reappearance of al-Qaeda, the security of Afghanistan has been negatively affected by the emergence of ISIS-Khorasan as new terrorist group active in the theater. At the apex of its expansion and power in early 2015, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) decided to expand to Afghanistan in order to gain a *wilayat* of high strategic value and stretch the borders of its self-proclaimed caliphate.[14] Moved by this intent, in January 2015 ISIS proclaimed the creation of its Afghan branch under the name ISIS-Khorasan (a reference to an ancient name used to designate the easternmost region of the Persian Sassanid Empire) and established its safe haven in the northeastern province of Nangarhar. From there, the group carried out its first attacks with the aim of expanding its influence over Afghanistan.

Interestingly, at the onset of its Afghan experience, ISIS-K saw its capacity of penetration impaired by two obstacles: first, the fight waged against it by a Taliban group determined to preserve its credibility as leader of the Afghan insurgency and unwilling to share territory and influence with a parvenu group; second, the resistance of the Afghan population that regards ISIS-K as an entity alien to the Afghan reality that promotes a purist Salafi interpretation of Islam incompatible with the Hanafi doctrine prevailing in Afghanistan and does not understand or respect the country's

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complex tribal and ethnic mosaic. Notwithstanding these obstacles, however, ISIS-K has displayed an impressive capability to perpetrate large scale terrorist attacks.[15] This was especially true over the past year, as the loss of territory in the traditional Jazira region[16] has encouraged ISIS to invest ever more resources and efforts in the preservation and growth of its Afghan province.[17]

In addition, the group proved able to exploit the aura of brutality gained in the Syrian-Iraqi arena to attract to its ranks some of the most radical members of Tariq-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), who were frustrated by years of unsuccessful jihad and fascinated by the unprecedented military accomplishments of ISIS.[18] Even more relevant, though, was ISIS-K's ability to coopt into its ranks disappointed Taliban who defected from the group in the spring of 2015, when the death of the founding father Mullah Omar was disclosed and the leadership was transferred to Mansour among several controversies and bitter discussions.[19]

With the resurgence of old terrorist groups and the emergence of new ones, Afghanistan is today a country characterized by an ever-deteriorating security environment that has seen a dramatic rise in fighting between the insurgents and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), the number of terrorist attacks, and the number of casualties. As reported by the UN Secretary General, in fact, from November 18, 2016 to May 31, 2017 there have been a total of 11,412 security incidents, including armed clashes, improvised explosive devices, targeted killings, abductions, suicide attacks, criminal acts, and intimidations.[20] In the same vein, the United Nations Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported that from January 1, 2017 until June 30 there were 5,234 civilian casualties, constituting a 1 percent increase over the same period last year.[21] Of these casualties, UNAMA attributed 43 percent to the Taliban, 19 percent to unidentified anti-government elements, and 5 percent to ISIS-K.[22]

Moreover, the revived insurgency mounted by the Taliban and the arrival of ISIS-K has led the government to suffer a growing loss of territorial control; as reported by USFOR-A, as of May 2017, 45 districts in 15 provinces were under insurgent control (11 districts) or influence (34 districts), a 2.2 percent increase over the same period last year. The number of contested districts, however, has remained unchanged. Consequently, today 3 million Afghans live under insurgent control or influence and another 8.2 million live in contested areas.[23]

This bleak situation underscores that the NATO and American missions operating in Afghanistan for sixteen years were not able to cancel the threat posed by terrorism, and that the ANSF are still not trained and equipped adequately to fight against insurgents. Called to deal with problems such as the lack of access to the most advanced weapons and other military technologies; the absence of a national strategic culture capable of joining all the different components of the Afghan social texture into the ranks of the army; and the necessity to leave several areas outside of Kabul's protective umbrella in order to concentrate forces in the major urban centers and in the regions where the threat to security is most serious, the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP) have often revealed their inadequacy and their dependency on external military support.[24]

The limited competency and autonomy of the Afghan security forces are further exacerbated by endemic corruption in the upper ranks of the military establishment, which impedes the efficient and rapid transfer of weapons, food, and munitions from one outpost to the other; the widespread phenomenon of the so-called ghost soldiers who figure in the government's payroll but do not actually serve in the army; the high number of defections and the consequent climate of mutual suspicion within the army's ranks; and the threat of infiltration on the part of individuals linked to terrorist groups, who penetrate the army to conduct their attacks against military targets.[25] These factors not only hinder the efficiency of the ANSF but also compromise their credibility in the eyes of the local population, thus creating a worrying climate of distrust.[26]

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Besides the deteriorating security environment, Afghanistan's stability is undermined by the weakness of the central government in Kabul and the fragility of Afghanistan's democratic experiment. When in September 2014 the National Unity Government (NUG) was formed[27] with the Pashtun Ashraf Ghani acting as President and the Tajik Abdullah Abdullah acting as Chief Executive Officer (CEO), it seemed that the country was transitioning toward full democracy and stability. However, such hopes were soon dashed: the patronage, corruption, nepotism, and factionalism that have historically characterized the country's politics and that find their roots in the predominance of tribal and ethnic associations over

national identity, have not spared the NUG[28] and have fostered within Ghani's government ethnic-tribal frictions and personal rivalries that often paralyzed policymaking. Hindered by these problems, the government failed on many occasions to implement the reforms promised on time, hold the overdue parliamentary elections, fill the vacant governmental posts, and deliver public services consistently and uniformly across the country.[29]

More specifically, the rural areas are beyond the government's reach and have either descended into de facto anarchy or fallen victim to the political games, abuses of power, and personal interests of corrupt local governors over whom Kabul has no effective monitoring system.[30] Similarly, the governing performance of the NUG has been extremely disappointing in the northern regions, where warlords like Abdul Rashid Dostum, Ahmad Zia Massoud, and Atta Muhammad Noor[31] exercise their power undisturbed, thanks to historical clan bonds, as well as in the southern and eastern regions where insurgent groups have managed to assert their territorial control and influence.

Against this background, it is not surprising that according to the latest poll conducted by the Asia Foundation,[32] Afghan perceptions of the performance of governmental institutions have reached historical lows; in 2016, only 49.1 percent felt the NUG was doing a good job. Satisfaction rates are also low for provincial governments (52.9 percent), municipal governments in urban areas (42.4 percent), and district governments in rural areas (50.7 percent).

Finally, Afghanistan's internal instability is also linked to the weakness of the country's economy. According to the World Bank,[33] from 2015 to 2016 the country's GDP increased only 0.4 percent due to a decline in the industrial and manufacturing activities that offset the rise in agricultural production. Furthermore, over the same period, the population grew by 3 percent, which led to an inevitable decline of the overall per capita income. In this context of increasing poverty, domestic demand and private investments have declined; business sentiment remains largely suppressed; no new firms were registered, and unemployment has remained high at 24 percent, leaving many young people with no other or better option than joining insurgent groups and criminal networks. Also, the collection of domestic revenues on the part of the government has declined by 25 percent in the past year, leaving the country dependent on foreign aid to finance its public expenditures and balance its budget.

Similarly, the IMF has underlined how poor infrastructures, inadequate development of the country's human capital, a weak trade performance due to the temporary border closing with Pakistan, rampant corruption, and the thriving of the illicit narcotics sector are some of the main obstacles to the country's economic development.[34]

The Need to Look Beyond the Military

It is thus clear that Afghanistan's instability is linked not only to security, but to political and economic factors as well. Given this complexity, the militarized approach adopted by President Trump appears profoundly inadequate to stabilize the country: while the increase in the number of troops is to be welcomed because it can strengthen the military capabilities of the ANSF and reduce the military threat posed by insurgent groups, a strategy that eschews "nation-building" and does not couple military measures with political and economic measures will fail to bring lasting stability to Afghanistan.

On the political level, it is necessary to address the low legitimacy that impairs the government of Kabul and has driven many Afghans to support the alternative structures of "shadow governance" established by tribal leaders, warlords, and insurgents. This can be done by ensuring a more balanced division of powers through the introduction of a quota system whereby the appointment of governmental officials and institutional figures guarantees a proportionate and fair degree of direct representation to all of the country's diverse ethnic groups. Doing so is crucial to encourage all Afghans to trust the national government regardless of their subnational ethnic identities. Second, it is necessary to fight the corruption, nepotism, and patronage that are eroding the credibility of the Afghan political system. This requires establishing clear requirements of transparency for all the nominations to official positions through ad hoc regulations and creating anti-corruption agencies in charge of ensuring that those requirements are respected and that punitive measures are enforced in case they are violated. Finally, it is crucial to pursue reconciliation between Kabul and those many powerbrokers and insurgents that act outside of the legitimate institutions of the state and whose military and

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proto-governance activities pose a serious challenge to the credibility of the central government. Following the precedent set in 2015 by the Quadrilateral Coordination Group composed of the Unites States, China, Russia, and Pakistan,[35] efforts should continue to help Kabul identify potential partners of dialogue among its current opponents and initiate negotiations with them.

On the economic level, a crucial measure is the launch of development projects aimed at modernizing agricultural production and incentivizing industrial activities in order to stimulate economic growth and create new jobs. Equally important is the promotion of trade between Afghanistan and regional as well as international partners. This can be done by lowering the current regulatory and operational barriers and investing in the improvement of Afghanistan's infrastructure. Finally, it is necessary to upset the narcotics industry by resorting to a mixture of interdiction (prevention of narcotics reaching their destination) and eradication (physical destruction of the illicit crops). On the one hand, Afghan law enforcement agencies and police must be trained, equipped, and provided with technical support to detect and seize the shipments of illicit drugs; on the other hand, the Afghan state must offer material incentives for the abandonment of poppy cultivation and develop economic projects that can offer legal and profitable alternatives to farmers.

Notwithstanding President Trump's position, engaging in such measures of nation-building is not "dictating" to Afghans how to live, but rather helping them to govern themselves effectively. However, moving from the theoretical definition to the actual implementation of these measures is especially problematic, since Kabul lacks the capacity, Washington lacks the willingness, and the European Union lacks both. As was the case in other nation-building projects from Kosovo to East Timor,[36] the only way ahead for a long term stabilization of Afghanistan seems to lie in the cooperation among a variety of actors that have a shared interest in making the "heart of Asia" a safe, prosperous, and self-sufficient country. This multiplicity of actors includes regional states such as India, China, and Russia; international powers such as the United States and the European Union; Afghan officials and experts; transnational organizations such as the United Nations, NATO, and the World Bank; aid and development agencies such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP); and international and regional NGOs. Until multilateral and multidimensional

cooperation in nation-building is achieved, the hopes that war in Afghanistan will end remain an illusion.

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Israel and Delegitimization in Europe: The Netherlands Case Study

Michal Hatuel-Radoshitzky and Isabel de Jong

Delegitimization is defined as the categorization of groups into highly negative social categories, which excludes them from the sphere of human groups acting within the limits of acceptable norms and values.[1] Delegitimization in practice occurs in a variety of methods, including dehumanization, outcasting, trait characterization, political labeling, moral exclusion, infrahumanization, and demonization. What seems to unify common delegitimizing techniques is the role they play in freeing human beings from their normative and moral restraints, thus justifying participation in violence.[2]

The phenomenon of Israel's delegitimization in the international arena is well known: across Europe, demonstrations against Israel equate Israel and Zionism with colonialism, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, genocide, and other evil activity. The ongoing coupling of Israel with such anathemas creates an intellectual environment in which physically ridding the world of Israel would be considered desirable or even noble.[3] This sentiment is at times reinforced by the mainstream European media, which has been noted occasionally to question Israel's very right to exist.[4] While the campaign to vilify Israel is led by a movement that defines itself as non-violent, in practice protests against Israel have regularly featured violent incidents obliging police forces to monitor, tone down, and at times even disperse such events.[5]

Strategic thinkers working to assess and quantify the amorphous phenomenon of Israel's delegitimization are faced with a double challenge.

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On the one hand, if importance is assigned to every manifestation of a heated, or even borderline anti-Semitic debate relating to Israel, the result stands to be loss of sight of the larger picture, conflating legitimate criticism with delegitimizing rhetoric, and over-estimating the campaign's intensity and impact. On the other hand, assessing the phenomenon based solely on tangible benchmarks such as severed diplomatic and corporate ties between Israel and Western states poses a high threshold that if reached will result in devastating diplomatic damage for Israel.

This article addresses this double challenge by seeking to unravel processes relating to Israel's standing and potential delegitimization, as reflected in local newspaper articles covering Israel in a specific region and during a defined timeframe. The choice for this methodology is based on literature showing that foreign news reporting impacts on public opinion, and in turn, the shaping and implementation of policy directives.[6] In considering this, it becomes evident that highlighting some news stories over others can have far reaching consequences.[7] Naturally, this carries particular importance for countries engaged in conflicts, as international support may well alter their outcome.[8]

The context chosen for this article's analysis is the general elections in the Netherlands in March 2017. With this event the first major political event after Brexit and the election of US President Donald Trump, the Netherlands elections were perceived as a litmus test for populism in Europe. This paradigm was reinforced by the growing public support for controversial candidate Geert Wilders, whose right wing Party for Freedom (PVV) – known for its nativist, anti-establishment, anti-Muslim, and anti-EU rhetoric – grew significantly stronger in the run-up to the elections, eventually coming in second place. Following the elections, the pro-immigrant party DENK, whose leader refused to shake hands with PM Benjamin Netanyahu during Netanyahu's visit to The Hague in 2016,[9] won parliament representation for the first time. Furthermore, in the coalition agreement of the new Dutch government, announced in late 2017, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the only international conflict mentioned.[10] Against this backdrop, this article considers the scope of articles relating to Israel, and how Israel was framed in the local Dutch media in the run-up to the March 2017 general elections in the Netherlands.

Even though the Netherlands is an integral part of Europe and certain trends characterize most European states,[11] Europe does not behave as a monolithic bloc. Thus, while findings regarding the Netherlands cannot be

assumed to represent larger parts of Europe, this research has two primary contributions: first, it reduces the abstract, amorphous phenomenon of Israel's delegitimization in the international arena to a concrete, tangible, and measurable parameter. Second, it invites similar studies in other states (in and outside of Europe), which thereby, piece by piece, can create a more comprehensive, global understanding regarding Israel's international standing both in general and vis-à-vis particular issues.

Methodology

To assess empirically the scope and framing of Israel in the Netherlands, the current research analyzes the following six largest distribution daily Dutch newspapers (available on and offline), from January 2016 to February 2017, i.e., a 14-month period culminating in the Netherlands' general elections:

a. *Het Algemeen Dagblad*: the largest Dutch newspaper, which profiles itself as a neutral publication, without political or religious binding and with an outreach of 9.2 percent of the Dutch population.[12]

b. *De Telegraaf*: the second largest Dutch daily, with one of the biggest news websites in the Netherlands and an outreach of 9 percent.

c. *Metro*: the largest free daily in the Netherlands, distributed in the national railway and metro stations, post offices, libraries, universities, and schools, with an outreach of 7.5 percent.

d. *De Volkskrant*: a medium sized centrist compact daily, largely considered a quality newspaper targeting the higher educated and progressive Dutch population, with an outreach of 5.2 percent.

e. *NRC Handelsblad*: a liberal oriented Dutch daily, traditionally linked to research journalism, with a highly educated target audience. It is the fourth largest selling Dutch newspaper, with an outreach of 2.5 percent.

f. *Trouw*: considered to be a quality daily, with features from the religious and philosophical realms and an outreach of 2.4 percent.

As part of the research, over 350 articles from all sections of each daily were accessed through the online newspapers, using a spectrum of search terms pertaining to Israel, ranging from positive (e.g., "Israel and technology," "Israel and start-up," and "Israel and innovation"), through neutral terms (e.g., "Israel and democracy," "Jewish state"), to terms with a negative connotation (e.g., "Israel and apartheid," "Israel and boycott," and "Israel and occupation").[13]

Findings

Although the interest of Dutch media in Israel varies, Israel is featured regularly in all six newspapers, with most articles focusing on events related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.[14] In keeping with the research aim, articles reporting on civil society efforts geared toward delegitimizing Israel, and articles covering Israel on issues detached from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have been aggregated into categories in order to learn about their issue areas, and not because the quantitative analysis justifies their inclusion.

Israeli Settlements

All six newspapers deal with Israeli settlements in a total of 221 articles, with *NRC Handelsblad* featuring the highest number of articles (n=103 items) and *Metro* featuring the lowest number of articles on this issue (n=5 items). Articles refer to settlements as a central obstacle to peace (e.g., "the great obstacle to talks…is the construction of settlements by Israel"),[15] and illegality is mentioned in 66 articles, with a range of phrases to describe their status: from "unlawful"[16] and having "no legal validity";[17] through "in conflict with international law"[18] and "a flagrant breach of international law";[19] to asserting that Israeli settlements in the West Bank are nothing less than a "war crime."[20]

Particularly in two newspapers (*NRC Handelsblad* and *Trouw*) residents of the settlements are stereotyped as "sandal-wearing,"[21] "religious right wing,"[22] and "trigger-happy,"[23] and their conduct is generally reduced to burning their Palestinian neighbors' olive trees[24] and chanting "this land is ours…death to the Palestinians."[25] Settlements are often documented in the context of violent incidents, provoked either by their Jewish residents (e.g., "volunteers have to protect Palestinians from attacks by colonists"),[26] or by security forces in and around settlements (e.g., "Palestinians were killed near the Gush Etzion settlement, where many [security] incidents have taken place").[27]

While not directly delegitimizing Israel, the abundance of reports on charged issues can certainly be expected to nurture negative perceptions of the state.

Articles in this category testify to a gaping divide between the international community's perception of Israeli settlements, and Israel's perception of the same issue. This is apparent, for example, in ascertaining that "pretty much the entire world – aside from Israel"[28] perceives the settlements

as illegal; that "international opinion perceives the two-state solution to be endangered with the expansion of settlements";[29] that on the issue of settlements "Israel and the international community are moving away from each other";[30] and that "the disparity between Israeli politics and the international arena is becoming increasingly clear."[31] While part of the coverage relating to the divide deals with the international community as a monolithic entity, there is also coverage relating to specific leaders who are quoted as criticizing Israel's settlement policies. These include then-US Secretary of State John Kerry; then-US Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes; then-UN Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon; United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nikolay Mladenov, and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte.

Israel's Democratic Character
All six newspapers deal with Israel's democratic character in a total of 56 articles, with *NRC Handelsblad* featuring the highest number of articles (n=36 items) and *Het Algemeen Dagblad* and *Metro* featuring the lowest number of articles (n=1 item each).

A recurring issue is Israel's treatment of civil society organizations, both international (e.g., "Israel is now taking firm action against international organizations")[32] and Israeli (e.g., "Activists are put away as traitors and a fifth column, threatened with death and physically attacked. This is part of a broader anti-democratic pattern").[33] Such reports are reinforced by articles dealing with legislative initiatives designed to hamper civil society work (e.g., "the Israeli ultra-right party 'Jewish Home' filed a bill to ban the non-governmental organization 'Breaking the Silence'"),[34] and can even refer to Israel's regime as a "modern autocracy," akin to the regimes in Russia and China where "it is important to silence the opposition... and restrict civil society organizations as much as possible."[35]

Articles in this category also imply that Israel's democratic character is in a perpetual tug-of-war between the left and right sectors of Israeli society (e.g., "The left has...irritated so many people. Now it is time for us to take democracy back into our own hands"),[36] with each side having completely opposing perceptions of preferred state policies (e.g., "Supporters of the bill call it a victory for transparency...those who oppose it see it as proof that Israel increasingly looks like a dictatorship").[37] The differing viewpoints are at times substantiated by a generational shift (e.g., "The old Israeli elite are left, secular, and live in Tel Aviv. Nowadays, the rulers are more

right wing, religious, and are likely to live in an illegal settlement"),[38] with Israel's youth occasionally depicted as at the forefront of undemocratic forces (e.g., "The Israeli Supreme Court ruled that the illegal outpost of Amona has to be evacuated…but Jewish youth travel to Amona in the hope of protecting it");[39] and with large swaths of the Israeli public depicted as undemocratic in other articles (e.g., "One in four Jews in Israel would like to exchange democracy for a theocracy").[40]

Transformations in Israel's democratic character are commented on bluntly (e.g., "Israel was once a country where a soldier would be arrested and tried…Israel is no longer that kind of country…a majority of the Israeli population supports the shooting soldier…is this a sign of the moral rot in Israeli society?");[41] and are at times insinuated, for example in reports on the death of Israeli leader Shimon Peres, who is said to "represent a time in which …Israel was still a different country."[42]

Articles covering policy steps of Israeli decision makers (e.g., "Justice Minister Shaked wants stricter rules for NGOs")[43] contribute to the general anti-democratic sentiment, with Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman most commonly criticized for his stances on Arab citizens of Israel (e.g., that Israel should "decapitate disloyal Arab Israeli citizens").[44] Of note is the perception of his appointment as "bad for Israel's image, which is already steadily eroding."[45]

Not all is negative, however, and a minority of articles explain that "athletes from every religion and form participate in Israel's national competitions… Muslim, Druze, and Christian,"[46] that Israel "is the only democracy in the region,"[47] and that as opposed to some European democracies "in Israel you won't hear anyone calling for a burkini-ban."[48]

Israel's International Delegitimization

A total of 35 items relating to civil society efforts to delegitimize Israel appeared in all six newspapers, with most articles appearing in *NRC Handelsblad* (n= 10 items) and with the smallest number published in *Metro* (n=2 items).

Reports in this category cover initiatives to boycott Israel on the individual level (e.g., "Airbnb has definitively removed a person renting accommodation… because she refused four Israelis");[49] the corporate level (e.g.,"Haskoning and Vitens ended activities in Israel, due to the settlement policy");[50] and the organizational level (e.g., "An American church is boycotting five Israeli banks").[51] They cover a spectrum of opinions,

including condemning the boycott (e.g., "Europe…needs to aim at trust-building: not by disinvesting but by investing, not through boycotts but through cooperation");[52] criticizing Israeli policy and boycotting the state alike (e.g., "I completely agree with them with respect to the injustice inflicted on Palestinians. I disagree with the idea that a boycott will help"),[53] and other articles that suggest that nothing less than a full boycott of Israel should be implemented (e.g., "You…wouldn't place a stolen bicycle in a store with a sign that it is a stolen bicycle" – in relation to the EU policy to label products manufactured in the West Bank).[54]

Another dimension reported in this category is efforts countering Israel's delegitimization and the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement spearheading the campaign. Such articles deal with sanctions that international corporations (from the United States, Britain, France, and Canada) imposed on Dutch companies that divested from Israel;[55] on Israeli officials' comparison between the EU labeling policy and "wearing the Jewish star,"[56] along with the common Israeli perception that "BDS is an anti-Semitic attempt to harm Israel."[57] The struggle against BDS is also noted for its complexity in that "the BDS movement benefits from Israeli opposition," and "the initiators prefer to receive a strong attack by Prime Minister Netanyahu: guaranteed attention."[58]

Israel Detached from the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict
A total of 23 items surfaced in multiple searches coupling Israel with positive words (e.g. "innovation," "tech," "start-up") detached from the conflict. Most articles in this category appear in *Het Algemeen Dagblad* (n= 8 items), with only one article in *De Volkskrant* (n=1 item). Among other issues, articles in this category reported on success stories of individual Israelis (e.g., "Israeli photographer Adi Barkan conducted a global campaign against anorexia in the fashion world");[59] Israeli culinary developments (e.g., "even in the largest restaurant chains in Israel, vegan meals are completely normal");[60] and Israeli culture (e.g., "for the first time Israel submits an Arabic-speaking film to the American film awards).[61]

Discussion
Quantitative research findings show that Israel is under a Dutch magnifying glass, with over 350 articles in the space of 14 months, i.e., an average of more than 25 Dutch articles, covering different aspects relating to Israel, published per month. While the data refer to the period prior to the March

elections, the fact that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the only conflict mentioned in the newly-established Dutch government's platform reinforces the validity of this finding in the post-election period. The fact that Israel is engaged in a conflict – whose outcome is likely to be affected by international perceptions – presents Israel with a public opinion challenge, where the state is reduced to the controversial conduct perceived as marring its democracy.

In considering the qualitative analysis, the most prominent issue in the Dutch press vis-à-vis Israel is settlements, with Israel's democratic character also frequently deliberated. The other two categories – efforts to delegitimize Israel and subject matter relating to Israel detached from the conflict – were specifically sought and are far smaller in scope. This is particularly true of reports on issues detached from the conflict, substantiating the conclusion that the numerous articles dealing with Israel led Dutch minds to perceive the state as synonymous with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nevertheless, coverage on active efforts to delegitimize Israel remains relatively minimal and appears to be varied, including a range of opinions about the BDS campaign and reporting on strategy and developments, as well as on pushback efforts from opposing forces. As such, it is safe to conclude that at this stage, while the Dutch press reports on specific developments regarding the BDS campaign, it does not play an active role in promoting it or inflaming the phenomenon.

While not directly delegitimizing Israel, the abundance of reports on charged issues can certainly be expected to nurture negative perceptions of the state, which claims to be a liberal democracy. The dominant media framing can be understood to indirectly legitimize, if not directly incentivize and catalyze civil society action designed to play on the gap between Israel's conduct and international norms. While these findings apply to the Netherlands alone, it can be argued that the traditional international perception of Europe as a leading liberal normative power[62] will lead to similar depictions of Israel in other European countries. On the other hand, growing nationalism and anti-liberal trends that have recently led to an increase in the power of right wing forces in Europe[63] may result in other emphases in European press coverage of the Jewish state. These alternatives should be explored in future research by replicating this study's methodology in other European states and elsewhere. Such research can potentially contribute to a clarification of the amorphous phenomenon dubbed "Israel's international delegitimization" by processing cumulative findings along regional and chronological axes.

The findings beg two policy directives. First, methodologically, in assessing, reporting, and evaluating Israel's international standing, zooming-in exclusively on civil society efforts to delegitimize Israel yields a very partial picture. In other words, a limited approach focusing on the small portion of Dutch articles relating to BDS, without the balanced and comprehensive outlook that articles in this specific category provide, would have yielded a completely different set of conclusions. Thus, strategists working to grasp the phenomenon of Israel's delegitimization should steer away from devoting too much attention to too many details and, alongside more focused attention to specific events, should aim to broaden the scope of analyses designed to unearth trends in activities and fluctuations in public opinion on relevant issues.

Second, while traditional thinking advocates keeping activities aimed at countering Israel's delegitimization away from the limelight, this paradigm should be revisited with the necessary caution. This stems from findings that demonstrate that public discourse regarding Israel abounds, and that media coverage of pushback against efforts to delegitimize Israel is central to the balancing of reports dealing with this phenomenon. Above and beyond their ability to successfully counter specific attempts to smear Israel, such counter-efforts are constructive in their ability to balance the coverage of this phenomenon with opposing narratives.

Third, Israeli efforts to actively promote a more substantive process aimed at resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would bolster its international stature. The absence of a political process, amplified by extensive media coverage of controversial developments on the ground, does not serve Israel in the long run. As long as the conflict persists, with or without committed activists working to boycott Israel internationally, Israel will continue to lose diplomatic credit in the international arena and expend precious resources on related side effects.

Notes

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11   For example, in considering poll findings that differentiate between European states, the Netherlands was found to be one of twenty member-states where immigration is seen as the main issue facing the EU. See "Public Opinion in the European Union," *Standard Eurobarometer* 83, 2015, http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/eb/eb83/eb83_first_en.pdf.

12   The data regarding the readership of the six newspapers analyzed is taken from Mediamonitor van het Commissariaat voor de Media, which performs annual research on developments in the Dutch media sector. All statistics reflect the Dutch populace aged 13 and up and are correct to 2016. See http://www.mediamonitor.nl/nieuws/marktaandelen-en-bereik-nederlandse-dagbladenmarkt-2016/.

13 The research comprises articles in all sections of the newspapers. Most articles originate in the news sections but a smaller number of opinion pieces were also analyzed. News reports are perceived to reflect the situation on the ground more accurately, but opinion pieces are important in that they communicate commentary beyond "dry" facts, reflecting – and perhaps influencing – local public opinion. The central themes dealt within the research, namely the critical reporting on settlements, Israel's democracy, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at large, are primarily sourced in the news reports. The wording and style of reporting, however, differ per newspaper (and per article). As a result, the reporting in certain articles may seem more "neutral" than in others. In *Het Algemeen Dagblad* and *De Telegraaf*, searching for particular terms yielded only a few articles. This was overcome by inserting the general term "Israel" in the search engine of both dailies, after which articles were manually sorted according to their content.

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Women's Combat Service in the IDF: The Stalled Revolution

Meytal Eran-Jona and Carmit Padan

In September 2017, for the first time in American history, a woman completed the United States Marines Infantry Officer Course. This is one of the most demanding and challenging courses in the US military, and until now was the preserve of men. This achievement is part of a growing but gradual process of women integrating into combat positions in the American military, which reached a new height with the integration of women into the combat units. Since 2001, over 300,000 female US soldiers have been sent to Iraq and Afghanistan on military missions. Some of these women served in combat positions while others performed other tasks, but all served shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts in combat regions. Some have also paid with their lives: by late 2017, 166 female soldiers had been killed in action and over 1,000 wounded. More generally, since 2015, 640 American women have been assigned to combat tasks that were previously closed to them, in the artillery, the ordnance corps, and the navy.[1]

The integration of women into combat units and positions in Western militaries has become more common over the last two decades. The militaries of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway embraced a policy of full equality in the 1980s, and various processes led to a situation where today all positions are open to women in the militaries of Canada, Britain, Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands (apart from the Marines).[2]

In the Israeli context, women have served in the IDF since its inception, some even as fighters and pilots. Their equal integration is mentioned in every comparative study as a shining example of equal opportunity for women

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in militaries. In fact, however, there was always occupation segregation inside the organization, and women served primarily in combat support units, in jobs perceived as "feminine," and in civilian front units. Since the end of the 1990s there have been changes in women's service after most jobs were opened to them and efforts were made to integrate them in combat positions. Two decades later, this article examines where women's service in the IDF stands today. Have the efforts to integrate women borne fruit? Is the revolution in gender equality in the Israeli military complete?

Civil-Military Relations in Israel, and the IDF as the Arena for a Social Struggle

Seventy years since the establishment of the State of Israel, unlike most Western militaries, the IDF remains, notwithstanding many changes, "a people's army," a public institution with a unique status in Israeli society. In spite of growing criticism since the 1970s regarding various aspects of the IDF's performance,[3] criticism referring mainly to its role as a public institution (for example its efficiency, budget management, and personnel management), the IDF remains the most highly esteemed public institution among the Israeli (Jewish) public – more than other institutions such as the police, the judicial system, the government, and the Knesset. The Israeli public continues to express a consistently high level of support for the various aspects of the IDF's performance as a fighting organization.[4]

As "the people's army," with its unique status among the Israeli public, the IDF has become an arena for struggles between various groups in Israeli society. In fact, there is no other organization in Israel that provides a platform for these types of social struggles. This unique status is expressed in a series of struggles waged since the 1980s by various groups using the IDF in an attempt to promote their specific beliefs, values, and rights. There are numerous examples: the struggle of the reservists' movements over pay, recognition, and prestige in Israeli society; the political struggle by left wing movements (such as Breaking the Silence, New Profile) against IDF activity in the territories; bereaved parents' movements; organizations that wish to promote tolerance of LGBTQ soldiers; the struggle of feminist movements for gender equality and honorable military service for women; and more.[5]

Women in the IDF and the Struggle for Equality

Until 1987, restrictions on the service of women in the IDF were defined in laws and regulations governing the security service, primarily in terms of positions that were closed to women. In 1987, this item was removed from the law, but no objectives for women's integration were defined. In 1995 a petition was filed in the Supreme Court by a young woman named Alice Miller, with the assistance of the Citizens' Rights Association and the Israel Women's Network (IWN), for acceptance to the IDF pilots course. In their precedent setting ruling, the Supreme Court judges decided that there was no justification for the distinction between women and men or for preventing women from applying to the course. This decision marked an achievement in legal and ethical statements regarding the right to gender equality in the military. Following the Supreme Court decision, a change in the Security Service Law came into effect in January 2000, stating that "a woman may perform any job in the IDF, including combat jobs, and benefit from equal rights after her discharge."

In the two decades that have passed since the Alice Miller High Court ruling, the issue of women's equality has attracted much public attention in the discourse on and between the IDF and Israeli society. In addition, the IDF has since become the arena for the struggle between two main groups regarding women's military service. On one side, liberal forces represented by secular groups, public figures, and movements for human and women's rights call for full gender equality in the IDF. On the other side, religious leaders (religious Zionist rabbis as well as ultra-Orthodox rabbis) and others from these sectors who oppose women's service demand gender segregation, and struggle against women's integration in combat units. The struggle between the liberal forces and the religious leadership centers on two main topics: equal service for women (today the main focus is on women serving in combat units); and regulating the service of women alongside religious soldiers.

During this period several changes occurred that improved the status of women in the IDF. It appeared that the changes in the Security Service Law and the processes that followed changed the face of the IDF and significantly increased the options open to women for more varied and equal service. Many jobs that had been reserved for men were opened to women, including the prestigious courses for pilots and naval officers, combat jobs in the artillery corps, the anti-aircraft units, and the Border Guard, training and rescue positions, and more. The percentage of positions

open to women rose from 55 percent in the 1980s to 92 percent today; the Women's Corps was abolished and replaced by a limited HQ branch in charge of promoting the integration and equality of women (the Women's Affairs Advisor to the Chief of Staff); military training that was separated by gender was combined; more attention was paid to the prevention of sexual harassment in the army; and more.[6]

There was also a significant change in combat service. According to IDF data, over a fifteen-year period the number of women serving as combat soldiers rose six-fold, from 435 in 2005 to 2,700 in 2017. Women are now integrated into the light infantry, the Border Guards, the search and rescue units of the Home Front Command, air defense, the Navy diving and towing units, electronic warfare, and the field intelligence corps. In 2017 the fourth mixed light infantry combat battalion was established, as well as a special training base for light infantry units.

The change did not occur overnight, and the integration of women into combat units encountered many difficulties. The military authorities dealt with some of them, while others are still being studied or processed. During this process, the IDF conducted medical-physiological studies to examine the effect of physical strain on women. Commanders and doctors were briefed in order to prevent women's injuries, training and strength scales and nutritional components were adapted for women's bodies, personal equipment and weapons were adapted, building infrastructures were reviewed, adjustments were made in the screening process, and a preparatory course before basic training was opened.[7]

Another change in women's service arrived from an unexpected direction. Young religious Zionist women, who until a few years ago did not enlist in the military, gradually choose to enlist: out of a potential 8,000 women each year, there were 935 religious female recruits in 2010. Within seven years this number tripled (to reach 2,700 in 2017). This change occurs to the dissatisfaction of some rabbis who are fighting against it, for example, Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, who ruled against women enlisting in the IDF.[8] The growing number of female recruits represents a quiet movement of change coming from the women themselves, with the support of parents and educators, as well as associations such as Aluma and post high school preparatory programs ("mechinot") for religious young women that accompany them through the enlistment process and their service to help them maintain their religious way of life.

The Joint Service Order as a Field of Battle

Along with these achievements, it appears that the negotiation among social groups in Israeli society over women's military service is in constant process, in which any achievement that may enhance the gender equality is perceived as a threat to male religious soldiers.

Negotiations within the military take place through ongoing revisions of the Joint Service Order, whose purpose is to regulate relations between female soldiers and male religious soldiers. This order was first published in 2003, to provide a response for male religious soldiers and protect their rights. The order allows religious soldiers to avoid joint activity with women: if they are serving in mixed combat units they can be assigned to all male units; they can ask not to serve alongside women in training courses; there is an obligation to provide separate sleeping facilities, bathrooms, and showers; and there is an obligation to offer separate times for physical activity. In 2011 the Women's Affairs Advisor to the Chief of Staff, Brig. Gen. Gila Kalifi-Amir, claimed that the way this order was actually implemented led to a double loss: women were restricted in their movements and in their ability to function effectively, and the rules of proper integration were interpreted so strictly that they were impossible to implement and in effect impose religious extremism.[9]

The clauses of the order have been revised several times since, following pressure on the military by representatives of various social groups. The very fact of such frequent changes shows the intensity of the struggle. Dr. Yofi Tirosh claims that the Joint Service Order reveals an obsession with separate living quarters, the height of the canvas barrier between tents, and blocking the line of sight between men and women soldiers. The central characters are the women, who are perceived as "a potential attack on modesty," in a discussion where they are present but absent. For example, if their appearance is perceived as "immodest," a male religious soldier can ask not to serve alongside them or not to receive training from them.[10]

Policing of relations between religious servicemen and women, as expressed in the negotiations over this order, was given an extra dimension some ten years ago with the start of recruitment of Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) soldiers on the special Shahar

> In spite of the many changes that have occurred in the IDF, improving enlistment, screening, and assignment processes for women and opening a whole range of roles to them, the core of combat service is currently beyond women's reach.

track (which is in addition to the separate combat Nahal Haredi track). These tracks offer non-combat service for Haredi soldiers (most of whom are married with children) in professional roles. The Shahar project began in the Air Force and spread to the Intelligence Corps, the Technology Division, the Navy, and other branches. To encourage it, the IDF undertook to offer the Haredi recruits a service that is "freed" from women. In other words, the military units and areas where Haredi soldiers served were "purified" of women.

Over the last year, the struggle against women's service in combat roles was led publicly by Brothers in Arms, an organization established in early 2017 that launched a campaign with the slogan: "Save the IDF, stop the joint service."[11] The organization has an array of volunteers who run a media campaign to promote their battle against women's service. The prism through which they view women in the context of integration into combat units casts women as a weak object needing protection, with the potential of seducing men while being "ruined" themselves.[12]

The main argument they have raised is the physiological argument, which has a seemingly "objective" reason, defined as "injury discourse." They claim that the hypersensitivity of women soldiers during training and while serving in combat roles leads to injuries that affect their health. In fact, this subject was studied in depth by the IDF, which is when the scales of effort and strength, nutrition, and other means were adjusted to the female body.[13] Other arguments raised by opponents of women's service (which present nothing new) relate to women's exposure to the scenes of war, to being the cause of inappropriate behavior, to lowering the operational threshold, and more.

The Brothers in Arms campaign reflects the threat posed by joint service in combat units as seen by religious Zionist rabbis. The threat is so great that it has led rabbis from the national Haredi camp, the conservative wing of religious Zionism, and the liberal wing to join forces. In March 2017, they each separately published a letter calling on pupils not to enlist in combat units where men and women serve together.[14] This move reflects a moment of unity between the different streams of religious Zionism, which are often engaged in culture wars among themselves on religious, public, and political issues.[15] Such unity was driven by their shared concern over secularization and the tendency among young religious men and women who join the military to leave the religious fold, a fear grounded in the perception of secularism as excessive permissiveness.[16]

The liberal side of the struggle formerly consisted largely of feminist movements, although today their voice is heard little in the public discourse. The Israeli feminist movements have relatively few resources and little political power; it seems that they have wearied of the Sisyphean effort to promote women's service and have decided to channel their resources elsewhere. As of today, the sole organization leading this ongoing struggle appears to be the Israel Women's Network, which consistently comments on this subject on social networks and in the media. Unlike the Religious Zionism leadership, the feminist movements are not led by officers in the reserves who move freely around the offices of the Chief of Staff and the Human Resources Directorate of the General Staff, nor do they have an agenda of introducing cultural or political changes to the IDF beyond their request for gender equality.[17] The feminist movements mostly act by responding to incidents of discrimination and women's exclusion in the military.

In November 2017, the liberal camp received support in the form of a letter submitted to the Minister of Defense by a group of religious and secular officers from combat units, calling for support for women in combat service. Similar voices were heard from former and current IDF commanders. For example, at a session dealing with women's military service at the 2017 Herzliya Conference, Brig. Gen. (res.) Oren Abman said, "The IDF does not know, is unwilling and unable to manage without significant service by women…Women provide enormous quality…After all, not all men can be Egoz fighters." However, in terms of the balance of forces, it appears that apart from a few localized efforts, the field of battle for women's IDF service has been almost abandoned by the liberal (both secular and religious) part of the Israeli public.

The Forces Hindering the Integration of Women in Combat Units

While the revolution regarding women's IDF service that began in the 1990s can claim several achievements, at present the forces hindering change are more prominent. We examine and describe these central processes below.

One of the most prominent processes taking place in Israeli society in recent years is the rise in the dominance of the religious camp in Israeli society and politics. This process is expressed in the growing power of religious parties (Jewish Home, Shas, United Torah Judaism) in the present government,[18] who use their political strength to shape the character of the country according to their world view. This process, called "religionization,"

is reflected in the attempt to impose on the secular public a school curriculum with religious content; the entry of religious associations into state secular schools; and the insertion of religious elements into national ceremonies. Some have claimed that a gradual process has turned Israel into a country controlled by a religious minority, and that this minority has so much influence on Israeli politics that it is able to impose its wishes on the majority.[19]

Another factor working against the full integration of women in the military is the demographic change among combat officers. Since the early years of this century, due to various processes and with the support of religious Zionist rabbis, the proportion of graduates of national religious education enlisting in combat units in general, and in command tracks in particular, has increased. The exact numbers today are not known, but from 2001 to 2008 the proportion of religious officers in combat units is more than double the percentage of religious soldiers (22-31 percent of combat soldiers in Infantry Supplement Courses were religious, depending on the year). This process changes the social composition of the military from within, which in turn brings traditional perceptions of femininity and norms of inequality to the military culture. Joining these processes is Haredi recruitment, which began with the establishment of the first Haredi battalion, Netzah Yehuda, and has spread significantly with the opening of the Shahar tracks. Closely linked to these processes is the strengthening of religious elements within the military, which are reflected in growing cultural-religious influence on the nature and function of the IDF. A book describing these processes refers inter alia to the relatively new phenomenon of refusal to evacuate settlements on religious grounds,[20] competition between rabbinical and military authority, increasing power of the Military Rabbinate and the intervention of rabbis in routine and combat matters, encouragement of rabbis to their students to occupy positions of command in the security establishment, the harm and exclusion of women in the army under the Joint Service Order, and more. Some even claim that the IDF is undergoing processes of theocratization, expressed by the gradual penetration of religious authority into the IDF, in the attempt to influence areas of conduct that should normally be under the military's control.[21] Be this religionization, or the return of conservative attitudes, or processes of theocratization, there is no doubt that the military is dealing with a challenging reality vis-a-vis the need to balance between various social groups serving in its framework, and women are the ones who pay the price.

The processes described above create hidden and overt pressures on the military system to exclude women and reduce their integration in the IDF.[22]

Women's Service in the IDF: A "Stalled Revolution"?

Where is women's IDF service now? Is the process of change advancing toward equality or is the evolution stalled?[23]

In spite of the many changes for the better that have occurred in the IDF, improving enlistment, screening, and assignment processes for women and opening a whole range of roles to them, and the importance of these changes in promoting the revolution for women's equality, the core of combat service is currently beyond women's reach. The proportion of combat soldiers among all women serving in the IDF is still marginal, about 6 percent.[24] Women have been integrated into a variety of roles because the military recognizes their large and high quality potential, but at the same time this integration is limited in quantity and in terms of their assigned units.[25] Even changes that were hailed as significant advances such as the opening of the pilots course to women have not brought the desired outcomes (of 36 trainees who completed the last pilots course in December 2017, only one was a woman).

It appears that the positive changes that were already implemented in the IDF have been blocked by a series of recent decisions by senior IDF officials. For example, in October 2017 the IDF announced its intention to "stop the trend of combat service by women in order to conduct a series of tests."[26] This announcement came against a background of an (expected) increase of 200 women soldiers in 2017 serving in combat duties, where the total number of women fighters that year reached 2,700. Without pressure from the religious lobby, it is difficult to understand why the IDF rushed to block more female combat soldiers while their proportion among all combat soldiers is still marginal. The IDF's explanation for the decision was: "The IDF wishes to freeze the current situation and at this stage will not increase the quotas (of female combat fighters) in order to reexamine the effects of such service on young women."[27] This explanation shows that at this stage the opposition forces have succeeded

> The forces blocking the revolution are grounded in processes taking place in Israeli society and politics, in the demographic change in the composition of combat units, and in the strengthening of religious foundations within the military.

in blocking the expansion of female combat positions due to the threat it poses to religious men.

Another recent IDF decision that harms the status of female fighters is the decision to reclassify IDF units based on their involvement in life threatening situations in combat. According to the new rating system approved by the Chief of Staff in September 2017, at the top of the pyramid will be the Advance Guard, or "sharp" units. A "sharp" soldier is defined as a soldier trained for combat action that involves risking his life to strike the enemy. The "sharp" units include Special Units, HQ Units, and Shaldag Unit, but also combat soldiers in infantry brigades: paratroops, Golani, Nachal, Givati, Kfir, and the Armored Corps and Artillery.[28] Women have no foothold in these units (except for current attempts to integrate women into the Armored Corps). Men and women fighters in the Caracal Battalion and Home Guard, which are part of the border defense array and where most combat women serve, have secondary status and are not part of the "sharp" units.[29]

This rating affects not only symbolic rewards for the soldiers but also their actual pay and benefits during and after their military service,[30] and it is another layer that hinders efforts to achieve equality for women in the military by giving secondary status to jobs where women are integrated.

A recent decision made by the Chief of Staff in the framework of the ongoing struggle over the Joint Service Order concerns a new update in the order's wording. After continuous pressure from the religious lobby, in December 2017 the Chief of Staff decided on a number of changes, including deleting the clause requiring implementation of the order "as far as possible, not by separating men and women soldiers." This deletion could encourage solutions that include separation and discrimination against women.

These recent IDF decisions are part of what we define the "stalled revolution." While the integration of women into combat units is already marginal, the decisions mentioned above indicate a halt to the process of change, blocking progress in the revolution. This means a halt to the (new) efforts to integrate women into combat units.

Conclusion and Future Implications

Although the IDF has embarked on important changes with the aim of integrating women into all military jobs, including combat positions, it appears that the IDF has turned from a site of breaking the "glass ceiling"

into a site where heavy pressure is being exerted to stop the revolution – to keep women away from the heart of military activity. The forces blocking the revolution are grounded in processes taking place in Israeli society and politics, in the demographic change in the composition of combat units, and in the strengthening of religious foundations within the military. They are reflected in a series of recent IDF decisions that hinder or reverse changes. The proportion of women combat soldiers remains small, and moves toward equality for women often encounter fierce opposition from religious quarters. The current situation was well described by Yofi Tirosh, who claims that "wherever rules are formulated with the whole purpose of maintaining modesty and protecting men from proximity to women, the women become more and more a potential threat to modesty."[31]

For David Ben-Gurion, the uniqueness and the unity of the IDF were vital for its moral strength and its ability to prevail in war. For that reason, in a move aimed at de-politicization of the IDF, Ben-Gurion worked to establish a national military that would unite all the armed forces and eliminate any ties to a political party or ideological movement. In view of this, Ben-Gurion was opposed to links between the Military Rabbinate and the religious parties on matters relating to religious observance in the army; he opposed the establishment of a separate religious corps and any kind of special treatment that would encourage separation and widen the rift between secular and religious, leading to two armies and two levels of command.[32]

The processes described in this article indicate that contrary to the vision of Ben-Gurion, there are signs of a worrying trend in which the IDF, in the name of acting as "the people's army," is becoming sectorial, segmented, and discriminatory. Religious and ultra-Orthodox groups are creating separate islands within the IDF, free of women, and consequently threatening its national character, the value of equality for all, and the essence of the IDF as a shared framework for all elements, genders, and groups in Israeli society.

Notes

1   "Women in Ground Combat: Facts and Figures," WIIS Women in International Security, 2017.
2   According to the Women's Affairs Advisor to the Chief of Staff, as presented to the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee in an open discussion on January 30, 2016.

3   Stuart Cohen, "The IDF and Israeli Society: A Re-examination," *Studies in Middle Eastern Security* 46 (2001).

4   Tamar Hermann et al., "Israeli Democracy Index 2017," Israel Democracy Institute, 2017. See also Roni Tiargan and Meytal Eran-Jona, "The Israeli Public's Perceptions towards the IDF: Stability and Change," *Armed Forces and Society* 42, no. 2 (2016): 324-43.

5   See for example G. Doron and Udi Lebel, *Politics of Bereavement* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2005); M. Laron, "Dear Families: The Struggle of Bereaved Families to Change the Method of Recompense in Israel," Shine Center for Social Science Research, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2003.

6   N. Moshe, "Women's Service in the IDF," Knesset Center for Information and Research, 2013.

7   Ibid. Data from the Women's Affairs Advisor to the Chief of Staff.

8   "Rabbi Shlomo Aviner: Religious Girls are Bringing the IDF to Destruction," *Srugim*, March 9, 2017, http://bit.ly/2BSgUcs; Yaniv Kobowitz, "The IDF is Preparing for a Surge in Religious Female Recruits," *Haaretz*, December 26, 2017.

9   Gila Kalifi-Amir, "Proper Gender Assimilation," *Maarachot* 436 (April 2011): 28-35.

10   Yofi Tirosh, "Koby Niv's Position is Detached and Purist," *Haaretz*, March 20, 2017, https://www.haaretz.co.il/opinions/.premium-1.3937059.

11   See the Brothers in Arms website at https://ahimlaneshek.org/.

12   "Rabbi Levenstein: "They've Driven our Girls Mad," *Arutz Sheva*, March 7, 2017, https://www.inn.co.il/News/News.aspx/341636.

13   Data from the Women's Affairs Advisor to the Chief of Staff.

14   See for example Yedidya Ben Or, "The Integration of Men and Women Harms the Cohesion of the IDF," *Arutz Sheva*, March 27, 2017, https://www.inn.co.il/News/News.aspx/343052; "Mothers' Letter: Eisenkot – Cancel the Joint Service Order," *Srugim*, April 2, 2017, http://bit.ly/2COYIzN.

15   Yair Ettinger, "In the Dispute over Joint Service, Liberman and Eisenkot are Helping the Conservatives," *Haaretz,* March 16, 2017.

16   Yagil Levy, *The Supreme God-Commander: The Theocratization of the Army in Israel* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2015).

17   Levy, *The Supreme God-Commander: The Theocratization of the Army in Israel*.

18   For purposes of comparison, in the previous government, not one of the Haredi factions – Shas or United Torah Judaism – was in the coalition. Moreover, the Ministries of Justice, Education, and Interior (three influential ministries) are now all under the control of religious parties, which has never happened before.

19   Karin Carmit Yefet, "Synagogue and State in Israeli Military: A Story of 'Inappropriate Integration,'" *Law & Ethics of Human Rights* 223 (2016).

20   For example, the idea of refusing to evacuate settlements first emerged when the disengagement plan was adopted by the Knesset and the government. In February 2005, the Yesha Council rabbis announced that it is absolutely

forbidden to evacuate settlements. A document from the IDF Military Advocate General Corps states that before and during implementation of the plan, there were 163 cases of refusal or threats of refusal by soldiers in regular service, in the standing army, and in the reserves. See "Limits of Obedience and Refusing Military Orders," Knesset Research and Information Center, January 19, 2010, https://www.knesset.gov.il/mmm/data/pdf/m02408.pdf.

21 Levy, *The Supreme God-Commander: The Theocratization of the Army in Israel*.

22 C. Heber and Pnina Sharvit Baruch, *Women's Service in the IDF: Continued Advance or Retreat?* (Institute for National Security Studies and Israel Democracy Institute, 2013).

23 The expression "stalled revolution" is taken from Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1989).

24 Data from the Women's Affairs Advisor to the Chief of Staff. We could not find the corresponding data for men, as they are presumably censored. Estimates put the proportion of regular soldiers in combat roles at about 30 percent.

25 Zeev Lehrer, "Alice in Wonderland: The Politics of Religion and Gender since the Alice Miller Supreme Court Case," lecture given at an Open University seminar, "Between Pink and Orange: Religion and Gender in the Army," November 11, 2009.

26 Nir Dvori, "The IDF is Freezing the Increase in Combat Female Soldiers," November 1, 2017, *Channel 2*, *Mako News*.

27 Dvori, "The IDF is Freezing the Increase in Combat Female Soldiers."

28 Yossi Yehoshua, "Response Attack: The IDF in a Battle Revolution," *Yediot Ahronot*, September 14, 2017.

29 Amir Buhbut, "The Reform in Combat Soldiers' Status: Golani and Givati Inside, Caracal and Home Front Outside," *Ynet*, September 14, 2017.

30 Yehoshua, "Response Attack: "The IDF in a Battle Revolution."

31 Tirosh, "Koby Niv's Position is Detached and Purist." See also Michal Pailan, "Modesty Roll Call in the IDF: Female Soldiers Testify," *Mako*, September 27, 2017.

32 Z. Ostfeld, *An Army is Born: The Main Stages in Building the Army under the Leadership of David Ben-Gurion* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Publishing, 1994), pp. 599-752.

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