

INSS Insight No. 1074, July 11, 2018

A Conventional Arms Race

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While many are justifiably worried about a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, and the regional and international agendas continue to focus on this issue, the region itself is at the height of a conventional arms race. The motivation behind the purchases is linked mainly to the fear of Iran, internal regional competition, and the desire of Arab countries, headed by the Gulf states, to acquire status and prestige for themselves. However, the quantity and quality of the weapons reaching the region could damage Israel's qualitative military edge (QME).

Trends in Regional Empowerment

Data published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) show that the scope of weapons exports to the Middle East increased in monetary terms by 103 percent in the period 2013-2017, compared to 2008-2012. During this time, Saudi Arabia and Egypt (each among the five leading arms purchasers in the world) increased their weapons imports by 225 percent and 215 percent, respectively. Notwithstanding the difficult economic situation in Egypt, and the belt tightening in the Gulf states due to the drop in oil prices in recent years, the defense budgets of these countries have not been significantly affected, and as a rule they have not reduced their military purchases. Egypt is going through a broad process of military buildup. Its air and sea defense arms are undergoing major modernization, including with the acquisition of two helicopter carriers from France, four advanced submarines from Germany, and 50 MIG-29 planes and S-300 air defense systems from Russia. In the Gulf, the scope of arms purchases by Saudi Arabia and the Emirates exceeds those of all Western European countries together. Moreover, a large part of the acquisitions budget is directed at the purchase of offensive systems, both Western and non-Western: attack drones as well as ground-to-ground missiles (mainly short range), accurate guided munitions (GPS), including bunker-busting bombs, and air launched cruise missiles.

In recent years, some Arab countries have tightened their security ties with China and Russia, which have fewer restrictions than the United States on the export of weapons, and more advanced weapon systems made by them have been supplied to countries in the region, and at an accelerating pace. The acquisitions are intended to strengthen relations with Moscow and Beijing; to create pressure on the United States – in part as a response to the American refusal to sell certain systems; and to limit their dependence on a single

supplier. To be sure, the acquisition of weapons from different sources creates the need for suitable spare parts, specialized training, and a specific maintenance setup, and thus places a burden on the acquiring militaries. However, varied procurement also reduces dependence on the United States and reinforces the ability of these countries to adopt a more independent policy. Some of the deals with China and Russia include technology transfer and joint production. For example, China – which supplies attack drones to Jordan, Iraq, Algeria, the Emirates, and Saudi Arabia – agreed to establish a plant to manufacture them on Saudi territory.

The current empowerment process derives to a large extent from the tension among Middle East countries (including among Arab countries), but also inflames it. One example is the interest in Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the Russian air defense system, the S-400. Saudi Arabia is trying to advance its acquisition of the United States THAAD air defense system (which the Emirates already operate) but last year signed a memorandum of understanding with Russia to purchase the Russian system, including Russia's consent to transfer technology. The Saudis, who want to block the deal between Qatar and Russia, have an interest in closer ties with Russia as part of their plan to develop a domestic arms industry in the framework of "Vision 2030." Against the background of the rivalry between Doha and Riyadh, recently Qatar quietly acquired the Chinese SY-400 missiles.

Overall, recorded developments in recent years in the area of conventional arms purchases in the Middle East represent a challenge for Israel.

Erosion in the American Position?

Various reports suggest that there could be erosion in the position commanded by Washington – which still accounts for the supply of about half the arms that reach the region – over sales of advanced systems to some Gulf states. Israel must clarify the administration's position and highlight the possible dangers of this trend. In this context, at least two countries, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, have already expressed an interest in acquiring the F-35 advanced fighter plane. Israel must prepare for the possibility that the Trump administration will permit the sale of these planes to Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. The administration in general is now seeking to carry out a comprehensive revision to make its policy regarding arms exports, including fighter planes and attack drones, more flexible in order to increase the competitiveness of American companies. President Trump is pinning his hopes on the contribution of such deals to achieve his promise of creating more jobs. Presumably Israel's position toward these deals will also be considered, but it appears that the administration expects Israel to refrain from interfering in the deals.

The advanced platforms reaching the Gulf, in some cases more advanced than those possessed by Israel, are perceived by the Gulf states as a means to help them be better prepared to defend themselves against Iran, and enable them to assist, and even if necessary to integrate into any possible American military action against it and to better defend themselves against any Iranian response. In addition, the acquisitions are intended to tighten their links with the US and, apart from developing their military capabilities, also help them in the competition for prestige and status in the intra-Arab arena. In certain cases, the countries lack the ability to operate and maintain some of the systems. However, in recent years Arab militaries – especially the Emirates – have accumulated considerable experience and demonstrated much better operational capability in the use of advanced systems and integration between the different branches. Israel must keep abreast of what is happening and examine which systems could be supplied to the Gulf states to improve their security and strengthen their ties with the United States, in a way that does not endanger its own security. In addition to the need to work with the US administration on this subject, Israel must consider whether it is possible to develop leverage with Russia and China.

The Israeli Dilemmas

Israel faces a number of dilemmas. First, the Trump administration insists on the need to strengthen friendly regimes in the Gulf against Iran, and stresses the interests of the US arms industry, as well as the competition against other suppliers, above all Russia and China. Israel does not want to be seen as damaging a basic American interest and the ability of the current administration, which has set itself the target of improving the American economy, with the emphasis on “bringing the jobs back to America” as a means to this end. In addition, the security cooperation between Israel and the Gulf states as well as with Egypt and Jordan is growing, and Israel has no wish to damage this. In light of these developing ties and the drive to create a bloc against Iran, Israel has in fact already softened its stance regarding the export of advanced arms to these countries. Moreover, Israel itself has in recent years reportedly sold its own advanced security systems to some Gulf states. If so, to what extent can the Israeli government work freely vis-à-vis the current administration, whose central objective is to reinforce exports of its own weapons? And to what extent could any determined Israeli action against the sale of advanced American weapon systems to Gulf states harm the fabric of developing relations between Israel and some of those countries?

Finally, there is an ongoing fear linked to the chronic instability of the regimes. In recent years the Middle East has provided examples of changes in orientation and the collapse of regimes that appeared to be stable, sometimes with no early warning signs. It is impossible to completely rule out a situation where the stability in one of the countries is undermined and its weapon systems fall into the wrong hands, as happened in the case of

less advanced systems in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. Is Israel aware of what is happening in the area of conventional weapons purchases in the Arabian peninsula, in Turkey, and Egypt, and can it obtain American, technological and political assurances that the weapons won't be turned against it?

The Arab Gulf states were never involved in direct military conflict with Israel, but the possibility that the weapons they are now acquiring will be turned on Israel at some time in the future, even if not by them, cannot be ignored. Israel must therefore examine the significance of the entry of various high quality platforms into the Middle East for its national security. Israel must raise its concerns on this subject with the United States, and insist that the IDF's qualitative military edge (QME) will be guaranteed, even vis-à-vis the armies of regimes that are, for the moment, friendly.