THE JERUSALEM STRATEGIC TRIBUNE

The War in Ukraine
Initial Observations and Lessons

Changing Military Priorities
The Defense Budget Divisions

War in Europe

Amity in the Mediterranean

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New World Disorder: What the UN Vote on Russia Really Reveals About Global Politics

The latest battle zone in the Russia–Ukraine war was in the quiet, mostly mannerly halls of the United Nations. There, in the UN's iconic New York headquarters, the world voted on Russia's largest invasion since World War II—revealing fractures and fissures in global support for democracy.

Suspending Russia from the United Nations Human Rights Council was technically the issue put before the delegates. But every diplomat knew it was really a vote on Russia's assault on Ukraine. The consensus for democracy and self-determination was fragile: Only 93 states (out of 193) voted for removing Russia from the human rights panel, and therefore condemning its actions against its smaller, weaker neighbor. Another 24 nations (including China) voted with Russia. Most worrisome, 58 countries abstained, refusing to take sides in what many see as a duel between the great powers. Others feared that energy, food, and fertilizer prices might continue to climb if the conflict escalates. (Both Russia and Ukraine are major producers of oil, gas, wheat, and fertilizing petrochemicals—all of which are a matter of life and death for developing nations.) Fear and food are more important to many developing nations than democratic ideals.

American and European policy makers will have to face a hard truth: While Russia is diplomatically isolated, it is not entirely alone, and many countries do not side with Ukraine and its democratic hopes. The view from the rubble of Kyiv's suburbs isn't hopeful. Ukraine's democratically elected leaders know that they could be captured, wounded, or killed. And they also know that the history of sanctions, the weapon of choice of the Western coalition, shows that they almost always fail to tame invaders. All of these facts were known to the UN delegates. Indeed, they would have heard them directly from Ukrainian diplomats. But high ideals and real desperation didn't move them.

Let's look more closely at why 100 nations decided not to support Ukraine in the UN vote.

In Africa, Russia has forged long-standing relations with Libya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Mali, and often deploys a postcolonial rhetoric that it supports, which suggests that Russia supports the independent, emerging nations over their former colonial masters. This line of rhetoric is a continuation of the theme first promoted in the days of the Soviet Union, particularly from the 1950s onwards.

In Latin America, a form of anti-Americanism among the educated classes has translated into a reluctance to openly criticize

Putin. This is amplified by messages vocally propagated by Cuba and Venezuela.

China's initial abstention is seen more as a sign of embarrassment in the face of the belligerent aims of its Russian partner than as a show of their interest in a rapprochement with the West. In Western capitals, many want to believe that Beijing has an interest in an early ceasefire, so as not to hinder its economic growth. In reality, China sees no reason to anger Russia, a major supplier of oil, gas, and coal, especially since Western nations are discouraging the production of the very fossil fuels that China needs. Policy-making circles in Beijing are not crowded with idealists, and its decisions are invariably self-interested and pragmatic.

India, for its part, is a long-standing ally of Russia, one of its major arms suppliers. New Delhi believes that it will need those weapons in the face of the Chinese military build-up in the region, as well as in the face of unresolved issues with Pakistan. Arab nations do not intend to abandon their relations with Russia, which has established itself as a force to be reckoned with when it saved Syria's President Bashar al-Assad through its military intervention; nor with China, the largest buyer of oil and gas from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Indeed, Arab leaders are unhappy with the Biden administration for its precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan last year, its ongoing negotiations with the threatening regime in Iran, and its laxity in the face of the Yemen-based Houthi terrorist and rocket attacks. For the first time, Arab leaders are asking questions, publicly, about the sustainability of the American political system and the coherence of American foreign policy.

On the Iranian nuclear dossier, Israel, one of the firmest allies of the US in the region, fears that the Biden administration wants at all costs to conclude an agreement with the Iranian regime without taking into account the possible impact on the regional aggression of Tehran. The Israeli minister of defense even called for the implementation of a "solid plan B" to deal with the Iranian nuclear program. As a result, neither the Arabs nor the Israelis were enthusiastic about supporting the US at the UN—although they did line up in the end.

What has been eroding for some years now is the commitment of American leaders to defend, maintain, and advance an international order in which states observe common rules and standards, embrace liberal economic systems, renounce territorial conquests, respect the sovereignty of national governments, and adopt democratic reforms. In today's increasingly complex global environment, the US can only achieve its goals by leveraging its strength through a cohesive foreign policy that responds to the challenges posed by Russia and China. To do this, the US must deliberately strengthen and cultivate productive relationships with its allies, partners, and other nations with common interests.

The US must offer attractive political, economic, and security alternatives to China's influence in the Indo-Pacific, Africa, and beyond. At the same time, the US must maintain a productive strategic dialogue with China that will clearly communicate US concerns and strive to understand Chinese interests and objectives.

Universal principles must be combined with the reality of other regions' outlooks. Western leaders must recognize that non-Western leaders aren't just living in another place, but rather, they are coming from another place intellectually. Henry Kissinger put it best in 2014: "The celebration of universal principles must go hand in hand with the recognition of the reality of other regions' histories, cultures, and points of view on their security."

The UN vote showed that universal principles aren't quite universal yet. Rather than condemn the nations that abstained from voting against Russia, America must seek to understand why they thought sitting out the vote was their best option. Next, America must make clear that it still supports the rule of law and the ideal of democracy and put steel behind its ideals. ✳

AHMED CHARAI

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WAR IN UKRAINE, REGIONAL AMITY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN:

Evolving Aspects of a Complex International Reality

by Eran Lerman

A serious forum for the discussion of major regional and international developments and policy issues—such as the *Jerusalem Strategic Tribune* aspires to be—is not a daily paper chasing after events. And yet the sheer magnitude of what has been happening in Ukraine since late February 2022 forced its own logic upon us all. A large part of this fourth issue of the JST is by necessity focused upon the Russian invasion, the motivations behind it, the initial lessons drawn from the brutal but often deficient manner that it has been conducted so far, and its far-reaching implications for the world in which we live. In his opening letter, our publisher, Ahmed Charai, takes a sad note of the fact that many nations in Africa and elsewhere have failed to see this war in the same moral and political light as do those in the West who rallied against Russian aggression.

A leading expert on modern warfare, Eado Hecht, offers a first take on the conduct of Russian operations and on Ukraine's counteractions. Yaniv Levyatan adds insights into the role of information warfare and imagery from the battlefield in what he calls the "First Tik Tok War." Both Lev Topor, looking at the strategic imperatives, and Dima Course, discussing Russian ideological drivers, reflect upon the underlying causes of this paroxysm of violence on European soil, the most severe since 1945. JST's regular columnist Ksenia Svetlova dedicated her portrait in power this time to the man who unexpectedly became a latter-day Churchillian figure, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, tracing his transformation from a TV comedian to a real-life dramatic player in a drama scripted by his determined enemy, Russia's President Vladimir Putin. Meanwhile, Pnina Shuker's column on military matters traces the problematic impact of public opinion on the way in which Russia has been conducting the war.

The war does seem to prove prophetic Efraim Inbar's essay in our second issue, which foresaw that war is, and will still be, with us so long as the wills of nations and of leaders continue to clash. And yet the bitter lessons already learned

may yet, perhaps, lend weight also to Azar Gat's claim—in the third issue—that over time, in a world marked by the devastating economic (and reputational) costs of aggression, war may be losing its appeal to many (but clearly not to all) modern nations. In any case, the need for readiness against the prospect of war has now been brought back into the core of policy debates in the West.

Dov Zakheim's regular column thus takes us into the heart of the US policy debate over the scope and purpose of Biden's defense budget. Another dimension of this discussion derives from Israel's experience since its inception, or even before it, suggesting a possible template for survival in a hostile environment.

Here, two contributions suggest that Israel needs to adjust to new security threats. Yoav Gelber, a leading Israeli military historian, who questions the intellectual validity of the three traditional pillars of Israel's defense doctrine—*harta'ah* (deterrence), *hatra'ah* (early warning) and *hachra'ah* (decisive outcome or "victory")—and points out their growing irrelevance to the types of warfare Israel may need to fight in the foreseeable future. Responding to the challenge of change, Brigadier General Eran Ortal—an active service officer in charge of doctrinal development—suggests that the IDF's operational concept is now focused on regaining the initiative against forces such as Hezbollah and Hamas, which have crossed the threshold from guerilla organizations into what the recent doctrinal documents call "diffuse, rocket-based terror armies."

In this troubled world, the importance of new regional bonds of amity and cooperation—creating a dramatically altered strategic environment—has become more pronounced. The very definition of the "region" has changed, as links have been forged between the nations of the Eastern Mediterranean as well as between Israel and key Arab states. David Pollock, for many years a keen observer of public attitudes in the Middle East, gives us a tour d'horizon of Mediterranean developments. These are better understood against the American policy of "restraint" in the Eastern Mediterranean, presented here by former US Ambassador in Cyprus John Koenig. Ehud Eiran observes that this new definition of Israel's place in the world has transformed it from an isolated terminus to a regional hub; while Antonia Dimou brings a Greek perspective on the effective new alignment of forces. Eran Lerman's column on Grand Strategy and Identity Politics finds a link between President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's extensive use of Pharaonic symbolism in the public domain and the changing nature of Egypt's regional associations, focused less on the Arab and Islamic character of Egypt and more upon its Mediterranean partnership (including a much-improved relationship with Israel).

In two related pieces, Israel's former Director of Military Intelligence, Major General Amos Yadlin, points to the need for a joint response—perhaps in the form of a Middle East Air Defense Treaty (MEADT) to the Iranian-sponsored missile and drone attacks on the UAE and Saudi Arabia; whereas another prominent former practitioner, Ambassador Itamar Rabinovich (in his day, the chief negotiator with the regime of Hafez al-Assad) weighs Israel's options in Syria—none of them promising.

Lest we allow the unfolding drama in Ukraine to sweep aside all other priorities, this issue offers Jon Alterman's overview of the impact of COVID-19 (or rather, the lack thereof) on the political stability of regimes in the Middle East, with some suggestions as to why the reactions were ultimately so muted. It also carries two significant essays on African affairs by American diplomats. Charles Ray argues forcefully that it would be a mistake to ignore the continent's potential, all the more so during these turbulent times. J. Peter Pham, in his second essay for JST, takes note of the need to counter Iran's growing influence in Africa, as part of our ongoing debate about the Islamic Republic's ambitions and purposes. These, after all, could easily be the spark that could ignite the next great conflagration. ✳

ERAN LERMAN

Editor-in-chief

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THE RUSSIAN–UKRAINIAN WAR 2022: INITIAL OBSERVATIONS AND LESSONS

Ukrainian soldiers drive a military vehicle with a Ukrainian flag in eastern Ukraine. Photo credit: REUTERS

by Eado Hecht

On February 24, 2022, after a few months of preparations, the Russian army invaded Ukraine and at the time of this writing, in mid-March, the fighting is ongoing. This essay is an attempt to offer initial observations and lessons from what we know already—bearing in mind the difficulty of ascertaining facts on the ground amidst intensive disinformation campaigns on both sides.

THE QUALITY OF (DIS)INFORMATION

Many reports have been written about the progress—or lack thereof—of this offensive. However, we must regard all such assertions—including the points raised here—with caution. This is because the quality of the sources upon which everyone is basing their analysis is extremely problematic.

Outside the supreme commands of the Russian and Ukrainian armies, as well as American intelligence, reliable factual information is scarce. These three are not freely releasing reliable information to the public domain. What they are providing is either propaganda or carefully crafted information to prevent providing the enemy with actionable intelligence. Analysts must suffice with scraps—mostly civilian satellite imagery and photographs and videos created by the Ukrainian population as the armies operate around them (hence the titles used on these pages, "the first TikTok war"). The information is therefore partial and not necessarily representative of the situation.

The privately created and published videos quickly also began to contain propaganda clips, including snippets taken from wars in other places. Civilians providing commentary do not necessarily understand what they are seeing; they usually already support a particular side in the conflict, and their explanations represent that side. They also choose what to show and what not, so the time, location, and content of the pictures themselves become more important than the accompanying explanations.

One difficult chore is discerning photos and videos taken from other wars or events and given a Ukrainian title. One example is the clip purporting to show a Ukrainian woman taking control of an abandoned Russian armored car as an example of the Russian losses. In fact, the woman is a Russian civilian mechanic who makes videos on vehicle maintenance and made this particular clip more than a year ago in tribute to the Russian army on the annual "Defenders of the Motherland" day.

WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW

It is important to make clear what we do not know before attempting to assess the situation:

- We do not know the Russian political goals and military campaign plan. We have seen much of what they have done (not all of it), but we do not know what they are trying to do and the rationale behind it.
- We do not know the Ukrainian military campaign plan—how they deployed initially and how they fight.
- We do not know most of what is actually happening. It is a huge puzzle of thousands of pieces, and we have only a small portion of them—fragments from which we try to deduce a coherent overall picture.

These three lacunae must be understood and emphasized as a warning against placing too much trust in any analysis that is presented—including this one.

WHY THE RUSSIAN OFFENSIVE?

Understanding the military operations requires an understanding of the political goals of the belligerents.

Understanding the Ukrainian political goal was and is simple: to prevent the Russians from achieving theirs. Understanding the Russian goal is more complicated, especially since the information published about it by both sides is more propaganda than fact.

Russia is a diminishing power that is shrinking demographically, barely hanging on economically, and losing its influence internationally. In Russia's view, NATO, the victor of the original Cold War with communist Russia, is exploiting that victory to further its interests at Russia's expense and security. So is the EU viewed in Moscow as predatory in nature. The Russian leadership feels insulted that its opinion is ignored; it feels that its economic well-being is threatened, and that NATO is actually gradually continuing the old Cold War to gradually destabilize Russia's current political regime. It does not matter whether the Russian view is correct or not, as it is the basis for their actions; as viewed from Moscow, NATO's actions and official statements during the events leading up to the war only exacerbated Russian fears.

Russia has repeatedly made clear over the past three decades that it will not accept a common border with NATO. When the Baltic states joined NATO, Russia was too weak to respond. In 2008, however, Russia invaded Georgia in response to a similar bid, and in 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, in response to Ukraine's shift in that direction too. Russia now declares it is responding to a renewal of Ukraine's bid to join NATO, and thus the main declared political goal of Russia is to prevent the inclusion of Ukraine in NATO by replacing the current government of Ukraine. Recent statements by President Zelenskyy indicate that he may be increasingly inclined to accept this demand.

However, observation of the Russian military operations suggests undeclared goals too—at the very least, to connect Crimea to Russia by land and not just by the Kerch Strait Bridge and to capture the lower Dnieper to reopen the flow of crucial freshwater to Crimea. This canal provided 80% of Crimea's water requirement until it was blocked by Ukraine following Russia's occupation of Crimea. This created a permanent, severely damaging shortage of water for Crimea's population, agriculture, and industry, which the Russian government has been able to only partially alleviate from other sources.

The direction of operations of Russian forces after the first few days of the war may also suggest a decision to "liberate" other areas of Ukraine under Ukrainian control since the war in 2014—areas that had been populated by a Russian majority—and perhaps also to capture the Ukrainian Black Sea coast.

MAIN EVENTS

The offensive began with a mixed missile and air strike that drastically reduced—but did not destroy—Ukraine's air force. Despite the partial success, this attempt to achieve total control of the air was discontinued, and no one knows why.

In most operations by Western armies over the past few decades, the ground forces were kept back until the air forces achieved aerial superiority and were free to provide support. In contrast, the Russian ground forces did not wait, and they attacked immediately on five separate fronts:

- The first front targets Kyiv from three different directions—the largest Russian force.
- The second front aims to conquer northeastern Ukraine, with the city of Kharkiv as its focus—the second largest Russian force.
- The third front seeks to conquer a land bridge between Russia, Donetsk, and Crimea.
- The fourth front targets north along the eastern bank of the Dnieper River.
- The fifth front aims westward through southern Ukraine along the Black Sea coast.

Ahead of their ground forces, the Russians conducted massed heliborne attacks deep in Ukrainian territory. We know of two such operations, but there may have been more:

✷ An attempt was made to capture Hostomel airfield near Kyiv, presumably to enable rapid reinforcement with larger aircraft. It failed as the Ukrainians counterattacked rapidly, causing the Russian force to scatter and fight for survival.

✷ One landed at Taviirisk and captured and exploded the dam built by Ukraine to prevent water flowing from the Dnieper River to Crimea.

For two to four days, depending on the front, Russian ground forces seemed to be stuck, unable to advance. Then they began to move deeper into Ukraine. Breakthrough battles are never easy or quick, and apparently these were no exception. The Russians provided no information on their movements, whereas Ukrainian reports mentioned only Ukrainian victories and massive Russian casualties. However, videos published by civilians made it possible to gradually map the Russian advance on each front as civilians further and further from the borders published short clips of Russian forces passing by them or of Russian bodies, prisoners, and destroyed or abandoned equipment.

As breakthroughs occurred on each front, the Russians increased their forces so that by the tenth day of the war, they had employed the entire ground force that they had prepared in advance and began looking for reinforcements beyond the Russian army. Chechen security forces joined the Russian forces, and some reports claim the Russians have been trying to enlist experienced Syrian troops whom they had assisted in Syria's civil war (although this may also be part of the Russian campaign of intimidation).

Currently, the Russians have captured a continuous stretch of land connecting Crimea to Donetsk and Russia and are slowly advancing toward Odessa to cut Ukraine off from the Black Sea. They are also gradually increasing the size of the Luhansk and Donetsk territories. However, presumably Russia's two main objectives (judging by the size of the forces assigned to these fronts)—namely capturing or at least surrounding Kyiv and Kharkiv—have not yet been achieved and seem out of reach for the time being.

WHY SO SLOW?

The slowness of the Russian advance requires an explanation, especially since many thought the Russians would quickly capture Ukraine.

The public image of the blitzkrieg is greatly exaggerated. The German army in World War II took several weeks and heavy casualties to achieve its famous successes in Poland (1939), France (1940), and initial successes in Russia (1941). Similarly, the US army needed approximately a month to defeat the barely functioning Iraqi army in 2003—an army much weaker than that of Ukraine.

Also, the size of Ukraine and the winter weather, especially the deep soft mud that prevents free maneuver, are not conducive to short, fast military operations.

Furthermore, the modern Russian army does not do blitzkriegs—it conducts methodical attacks based on a repeated cycle of lengthy bombardments of the enemy, followed by short bounds to the next enemy location, renewing the bombardment and again by local advances. However, it seems the Russian army did not do what it has been trained to do. Therefore, military analysts can only suggest various factors that may have created this situation, some more likely and some less.

There is a story of a general who lost a battle and was asked by a reporter why. "I think," responded the general sarcastically, "that the enemy had something to do with it." The Ukrainian army notably is the most powerful rival the Russian army has fought since the end of World War II. This point is often glossed over. The Ukrainian army is bigger than any other army in Europe except the Russians. And most media descriptions of the Russian army exaggerate its size. Moreover, as if to assist

the enemy in having "something to do with it," the number of Russian ground forces actually deployed to attack Ukraine is considerably smaller than the Ukrainian ground forces they face. The only clear numerical advantage that the Russians have is in combat aircraft—but they do not seem to be exploiting it. Not having a massive preponderance in force is completely opposite to the Russian military doctrine and past practice. However, it is not the only Russian behavior in this war that contravenes their doctrine.

A central pillar of Russian practice is combined arms operations, especially massive fire support for their mixed tank and infantry units; the Russian army employs more artillery support per maneuver battalion than any other army in the world. Yet, during the first days of the war, videos of Russian units showed single-arm units, either infantry or tanks, driving ahead without artillery support, scattered in small columns, each seemingly fending for itself. The Russian commanders did practice their doctrine in training exercises as well as during past actions in Ukraine and Georgia. In both cases, the military actions were conducted according to doctrine, with varying competence, but at least they were obeying doctrine.

The most likely cause for this utter disregard of their own doctrine seems to be that the Russian high command did not expect a war—perhaps a few battles while crossing the border (we have no video footage or reliable texts describing the battles there) and then "clear sailing" to their final objectives. This theory is strengthened by the number of police units among the combat units—the first Russian unit to attempt to enter Kharkiv was a riot-control police unit; it was met not by rioters but rather by Ukrainians carrying small arms and light anti-tank weapons.

The cost of ignoring their doctrine has led to heavy casualties—thousands of soldiers killed and wounded and hundreds of pieces of equipment abandoned—although the numbers provided by Ukraine are likely exaggerated.

Furthermore, the Russian forces seem to have received explicit instructions to minimize Ukrainian civilian casualties, although Ukrainian propaganda is to the contrary. The strength of Russian fire power when employed is miniscule compared to past practice and generally focused on specific targets, rather than the past "level everything" approach. Furthermore, video clips released by Ukrainian civilians, intent on showing their bravery in stopping Russian forces, actually show Russian forces halting rather than running over or shooting those civilians blocking their path. Of course, there are civilian casualties, but the true number is unknown and given the proven low reliability of Ukrainian reporting, the official number of casualties could be close to the truth or could be extremely exaggerated. As a result, the Russians have wasted much time by halting their advance and have endured heavier casualties by not obliterating enemy positions by fire before advancing with their tanks and infantry. The final cause is simple incompetence, reaching amazing levels in some cases, as in the battalion that drove in the most stupid manner possible into a Ukrainian village and was destroyed. It is difficult to gauge how widespread is this incompetence since the evidence is all Ukrainian propaganda showing Russian failures only; at the same time, we do not know whether the Ukrainians are any better.

Three issues puzzling analysts outside the war zone are the miniscule involvement of the Russian air force in the fighting, despite its complete numerical superiority, and the seeming absence of electronic warfare and cyber warfare—two fortes of the Russian military, as shown in past practice. No reliable explanation has been provided for these.

THE UKRAINIANS

Information on the actions of the Ukrainian forces is even more scarce than that of the Russians. They are definitely fighting and contributing to the slowness of the Russian advance, but, despite the casualties they are

inflicting and the comfortable ratio of forces, they have only halted the Russians in two areas:

✷ At Kyiv, the Russian attack from the northwest reached a village some 20 kilometers from the city on the third day of the war, but since then the Ukrainians have successfully blocked all attempts to complete the advance to Kyiv.

✷ At Kharkiv, Russian forces reached the northern edge of the city within a couple of days, but all their attempts to encircle the city have been successfully prevented.

In addition to the regular army and reserves, the Ukrainian government began forming armed volunteer militias. This will undoubtedly increase the inferiority of the Russian forces, but very few of these militias are capable of actual sustained combat. Some of them have, however, been busy rooting out Russian spies, saboteurs, and local looters, who are often shot on the spot, tied to trees or telephone poles half-naked in the subzero temperature or tortured in various ways. Ukrainians have filmed their actions and have published them proudly on social media. Many, if not most, are innocent, as was an Israeli who was killed because he had a beard and therefore must be a Chechen saboteur.

However, if the spy/saboteur panic is based on a grain of truth, these actions reveal something about Russian operations: Russian special forces personnel are preceding their ground forces by dozens of kilometers to provide them with general information and targets. One Ukrainian video clip purported to show an infrared light beacon located near a potential target so it could be located in the dark by Russian pilots.

CONCLUSION

"War no longer exists. Confrontation, conflict and combat undoubtedly exist all around the world... Nonetheless, war as cognitively known to most non-combatants, war as battle in the field between men and machinery, war as a massive deciding event in a dispute in international affairs... such war no longer exists[1]."

The above declaration was written in 2005 and represents not just the particular author but an entire school of thought that has been dominant in the West since the late 1990s. The current war in Ukraine is not the only example to disprove that thesis, but it is certainly the most powerful one.

The Ukraine war is not over; unless a political compromise is reached, it is likely to continue for a long time. So far neither side has suffered enough casualties and equipment losses to physically prevent them from fighting on. Furthermore, neither side seems to be showing a crisis of fighting spirit—although when it does occur, it is usually difficult to see beforehand.

Given the current size of the Russian forces, the size of the territory they attacked (which they have partially cleared of Ukrainian forces that harass their supply convoys), the overall ratio of forces between Russia and Ukraine, and the surprisingly low level of professional competence exhibited so far by the Russians, they might be nearing the end of their potential to maintain the strength of their attacks. A major factor we do not know is the Ukrainian army's situation. It too has suffered severe casualties, and so far it has mostly defended itself with very few and small counterattacks. Whether this is a strategic decision or one compelled by a lack of capability we do not know. ✳

1. Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World,* Allen Lane, 2005, p.1

EADO HECHT

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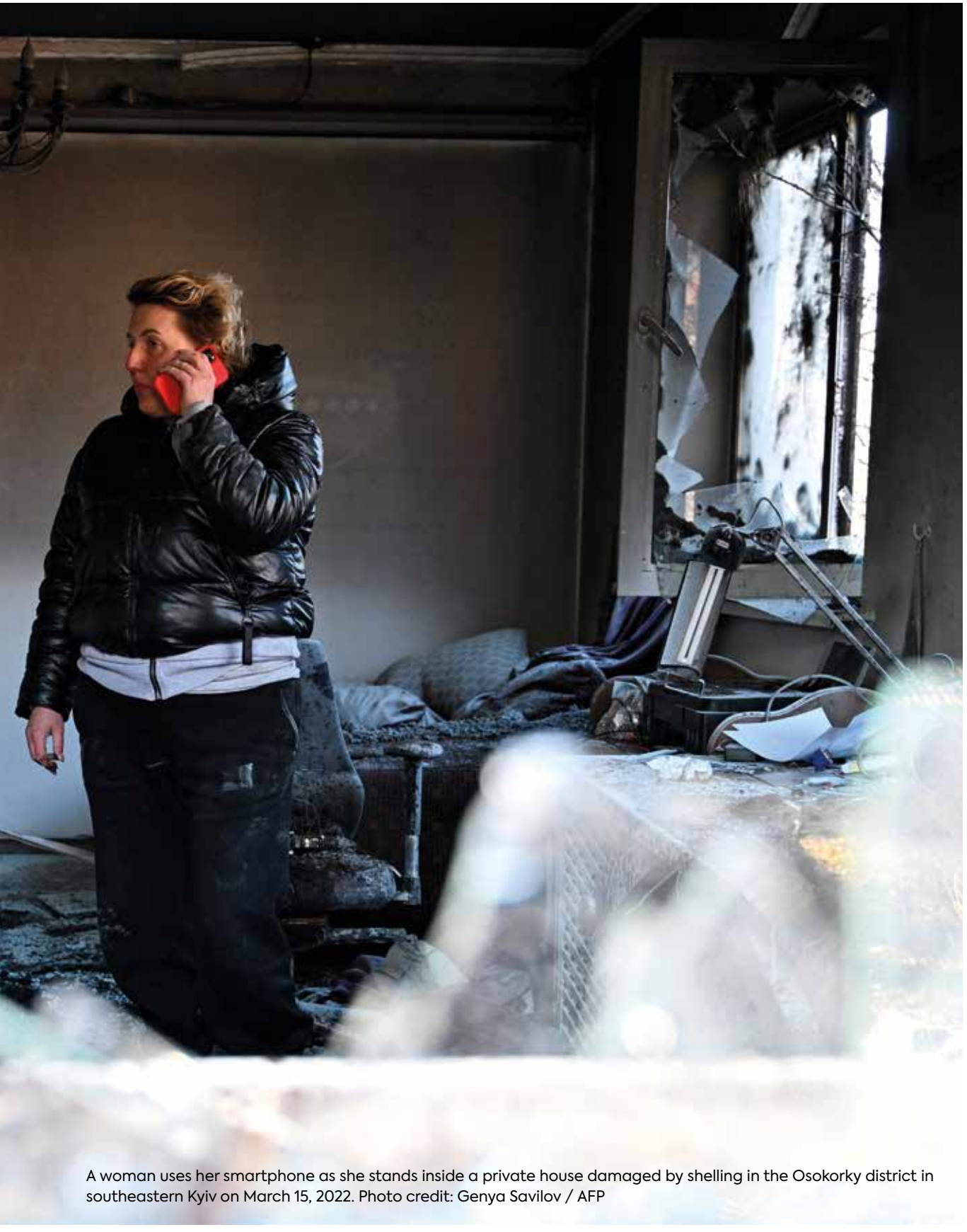
Residents carry their belongings as they leave their damaged building following Russian strikes in Kyiv on April 29, 2022. Photo credit: Sergei Supinsky / AFP

THE FIRST TIKTOK WAR



A woman uses her smartphone as she stands inside a private house damaged by shelling in the Osokorky district in southeastern Kyiv on March 15, 2022. Photo credit: Genya Savilov / AFP

by Yaniv Levyatan

The Russia–Ukraine war—within days since the Russian invasion began—can already serve as an important case study in terms of the intensity and importance of information warfare (IW) in the age of social media. Indeed, it has already been branded as the "first TikTok war." Both sides are engaged in extensive IW efforts; cyber activities have converged with psychological warfare. The clash has been long in coming, and the escalating tension between Russia and Ukraine in recent years meant that both sides had time to prepare their IW strategies. Moreover, it can even be regarded as part of a "Cold War 2.0" paradigm, giving even greater import to the messaging on both sides.

Russia has entered this conflict with a clear and coherent approach to IW, which is part of the Russian army's perception of hybrid war (the combination of kinetic power with elements, such as cyber, deception, and psychological warfare). In the last two decades, Russia has demonstrated on numerous occasions its IW abilities: the 2007 cyber attack on Estonia, the 2008 war with Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the 2016 cyber intervention during the US elections. The Russians, however, are not the only players in this field. Although the Russia–Ukraine war of 2022 is still ongoing, it already appears that both sides are capable of making significant and effective use of information techniques—aimed at each other, at their own domestic audiences, and at the world at large, given the importance of its military, diplomatic, and humanitarian support.

RUSSIA'S IW STRATEGY

Ukraine has been the target for Russian cyberattacks long before the current war began. While the invasion started on February 24, 2022, major cyberattacks had already been taking place for more than a month. In mid-January, the Ukraine government reported that its websites were hacked as a preview of things to come. The main advantage of the use of cyber tools is that it allows the perpetrator to act while maintaining anonymity or a low profile. The Russian cyberattacks, alongside the deployment of the Russian army across the Ukrainian border, also served a psychological purpose. Before the actual war began, Russia sought to use the element of uncertainty to weaken the resolve of the Ukrainian people and to undermine their morale. In practice, due to various reasons (including the impact of Zelenskyy's inspirational leadership), they have hardly been successful.

Furthermore, during this pre-war phase, Russian IW delivered conflicting messages. Although visual materials proved that tensions have been high, at the same time, statements of Russian leaders promised a nonviolent approach. Thus, on February 14, Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, said that there was still a chance for diplomacy. A day later, Russia declared that it was pulling back its troops to their bases, and that escalation had been prevented—a *maskirovka* (deception) tactic that Israelis with long memories may associate with the events of October 1973.

In the months and weeks before the war, Russia was using both traditional and new media to deliver what it calls "Enlightenment Propaganda"; namely, a technique for delivering the message to the Ukrainians about Russia's overwhelming military power. Alongside the

Ukraine Twitter account on smartphone, Russian flag in background. Photo credit: Shutterstock

traditional media, social media platforms are playing a major role. Photos from the front were published by both Russian propaganda experts and civilians joining the warfare efforts. Social media content can potentially persuade the target audience more easily, mainly because users are usually receiving content from people they know and trust. Russian troops were taking videos of their movement, and civilians (Ukrainians near the border) were also uploading these videos. The result was that social media content was delivering the message that Russia was amassing an enormous number of troops by the Ukrainian border.

On February 21, Russia announced that it had killed five Ukrainian soldiers who were trying to penetrate Russian territory. Ukraine denied this claim. Presumably, it was a Russian attempt to arrange a false flag operation and to try to blame Ukraine for the war. That same night, Russia's President Putin announced that Russia recognized the claim of independence of the separatist forces in eastern Ukraine, while also claiming that the Ukrainian government was to blame for a genocide in this area. Through these declarations, Putin was preparing the ground for the next step in the war.

Russia has deployed its psychological warfare abilities to ensure that the invasion faces as low resistance as possible.

On February 23, a major cyberattack was launched against Ukraine. It consisted of a major DDOS (distributed denial of service) attack, as well as the use of sophisticated malware that erased data from Ukrainian servers. A DDOS attack denies the public access to major websites and internet services. It can cause tension and increase the public's anxiety. Although DDOS attacks are not considered an advanced cyber tool, the malware that hit Ukraine was highly sophisticated, and it seems that a lot of effort was put into its preparation. This combined cyberattack was a part of the initial stage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine: Early in the morning of February 24, missiles hit Ukraine and armored columns crossed the border.

The Russian–Ukrainian war is also considered the first TikTok war because of the role of this social media platform in the opening

stages of the war. On February 25, TikTok was bombarded with huge amounts of psychological warfare content. Videos on TikTok showed tanks in urban environments, while texts in the video claimed that Kyiv had been captured. Some videos showed Russian paratroopers jumping from planes allegedly into Ukraine while in others, Russian planes were seen flying in low formation over what looked like Ukrainian cities. The majority of these videos were, of course, fake. In creating huge amounts of propaganda materials, military content from other militaries were freely borrowed. Some of the material even came from "other planets"—visuals were stolen from the Star Wars movies and from computer games and used to give the overwhelming feeling that the Russian invasion was a new variation of a science fiction blitzkrieg.

For the layperson watching these videos, the might and strength of the Russian army predominates. Russia has deployed its psychological warfare abilities to ensure that the invasion faces as low resistance as possible. Rumors are one of the best weapons in this arsenal. During the early stages of the war, rumors spread about Russian special operations units *(spetsnaz)*. According to the whispering campaign, these special forces are supposed to be undercover, and their mission is to raise chaos and to kill the Ukrainian president. Other rumors spread about the Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, reporting that he had given up the fight and fled the country.

Early in the war, Russia announced that it was bringing troops from Chechnya to assist the Russian army. The Chechen troops are known as fearsome warriors. Furthermore, they may not have empathy for the Ukrainians, which Russian soldiers might have, because of the close cultural background.

A major element in the Russian psychological warfare effort is President Putin's own rhetoric. In his speeches, Putin addresses two major target audiences. First is the Russian public. Putin has marketed this war as a war against Nazis. By using the term "Nazis," Putin hopes to rally the Russian public, civilians and military alike, around the most potent remembrance of their collective memory, the great patriotic war of 1941–1945. Second is the Ukrainian people. Putin aims to address the neutral and pro-Russian elements in Ukraine and persuade them to stand down and abandon Ukraine's nationalist cause. This is a part of his divisive propaganda, aiming to raise tensions between segments of Ukrainian society.

UKRAINE'S RESPONSE

From the beginning, the Ukrainian stance in the IW clash has been based upon their assuming the role of David in this epic battle with Putin's Goliath. During the initial part of the war, the Ukrainian IW mission interactively combined two major roles: (1) Building and supporting the morale of the Ukrainian people as they faced the invasion; and (2) Addressing the world, demonstrating resilience, and using it to mobilize Western public opinion in support of Ukraine and in favor of measures against Russia.

In both respects, since day one of this war, President Zelenskyy has admirably led the Ukrainian communication and psychological warfare efforts. Coming from a strong media and theatrical background, President Zelenskyy was quick to assume a heroic role and has demonstrated a good understanding of the new media and the impact of social networks. What many saw as his weakness—namely, being perceived as a comedian who accidentally became a politician—became his strength. Using his smartphone and selfie video clips, President Zelenskyy became a star worldwide. His short, accurate speeches are the glue that

As in previous wars, in this one also there are stories about brave-hearted soldiers. It is almost impossible to tell whether these stories are true or merely fake news, but they are important as an element of morality and morale.

unites Ukraine. One of his early clips was directly designed to debunk the rumor that he had fled the country. In that video he filmed himself in the center of Kyiv wearing simple soldier fatigues. He cemented his position as a fighting leader when he was given the opportunity to be rescued and leave the country. His memorable answer to Biden was "I don't need a ride, I need munitions." Insofar as such sentiments can be measured during wartime, public support for him increased from 20% to 90%. President Zelenskyy gave hope to the people of Ukraine, and he became a symbol of courage and resistance in this conflict.

In order to keep the morale high, Ukraine is producing propaganda materials that tell the story that it is possible to fight and even to win against the mighty Russian army. Many video clips show missiles hitting Russian helicopters, tanks, and armored vehicles. The Ukrainians have put extra emphasis on Russian prisoners of war as propaganda props. This type of content serves several objectives: (1) Proving the fact that even though the Ukrainian army is small and weak, it is possible to hurt the Russian army; (2) In the Ukrainian clips, the Russian soldiers appear confused and demoralized, and clips of Russian POWs have gone viral on social media; and (3) These images, if they are going to be presented in Russia, can undermine Russian morale and generate public unrest.

As in previous wars, in this one also there are stories about brave-hearted soldiers. It is almost impossible to tell whether these stories are true or merely fake news, but they are important as an element of morality and morale. In what in the US may be called an "Alamo" story, on February 25, the world learned about the tragic end of 13 brave Ukrainian soldiers that died defending their post in the Black Sea and who were defiant until the very end. After a Russian warship gave them the option to surrender, the Ukrainian soldiers preferred to answer the Russian with a "@#$k you" epithet, and then supposedly perished in the battle. The recording of this incident went viral on social media and reached mainstream media. This story helped build the moral and brand Ukrainian resistance as heroic. Brave men and women were ready to fight and keep their honor and not to surrender. From a propaganda point of view, these are the materials that build a nation; they are crucial examples in time of war because this is how the state expects its citizens to act. President Zelenskyy ordered a special medal of honor on their behalf. Two days later, it was published that the soldiers who allegedly died while defending the Black Sea post probably survived, as the Russian military showed pictures of them being taken from their post while still alive. This is another chapter in a swirling cauldron of disinformation on both sides. Another example of unverified and unexplained bravery comes from the story of "The ghost of Kyiv" about a Ukrainian pilot who allegedly had shot down six Russian jet fighters in one day. The problem is that no one can verify this rumor nor give his name.

CONCLUSION

The 2022 Russian–Ukraine war presents a dramatic landscape of information warfare possibly as important as kinetic warfare. Elements of cyber and psychological warfare were used to achieve goals on all sides. It is clear that information warfare had a crucial part in the early stages of the war, setting the stage for the opponents to act. The field of information warfare is thus becoming a major element of the battlefield for various reasons.

In the age of post truth, it is crucial to create and control the narrative. As the media is around us 24/7, everybody is a potential reporter, journalist, or publicist. As war is lethal (not to mention the potential of nuclear war), it is important to develop nonlethal capabilities. Weak players such as Ukraine can use IW tools in order to compensate for their starting position. War today is a serious grand theater unfolding in front of a global audience. It is crucial to win the support of world public opinion. If you can persuade them to leave their neutral position and support you, it may be a game changer. ✳

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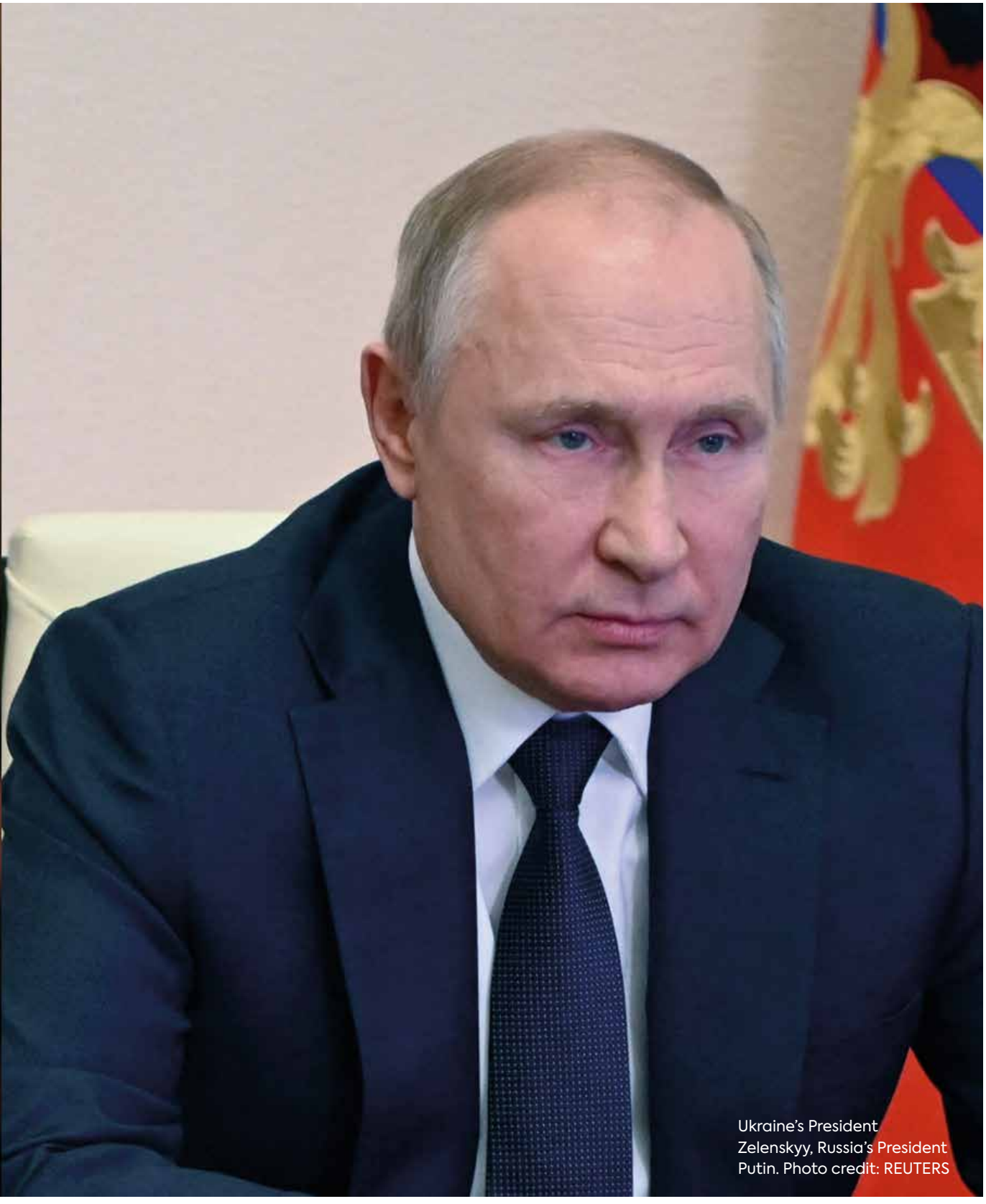
STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES ON THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS: RUSSIA, NATO, AND ISRAEL



Ukraine's President Zelenskyy, Russia's President Putin. Photo credit: REUTERS

by Lev Topor

The current conflict in Ukraine can be described as a hybrid proxy war between the ex-Soviet power, Russia, and the Western allied forces, which are led by the United States. It is being fought not only with tanks, artillery, and aircraft but also with special forces and foreign fighters, drones, cyber campaigns, and social media campaigns of disinformation and fake news that only create chaos and heated debates among people worldwide that do not always understand the reality of the situation. Many call this current conflict "Putin's War." The lopsided vote at the UN General Assembly indicates that this interpretation has become widespread. In order to understand the current situation, one must understand the underlying history of the Soviet—now Russian—conflict with the West. In this essay, I elaborate on aspects of the strategic logic behind the Russian attack—bearing in mind the humanitarian aspects of warfare, indeed, of any major war. I also address Israel's position in the situation between a rock and a hard place.

The end of World War II is a good starting point for any attempt to understand the 2022 Russian–Ukrainian crisis. After the Allied forces won, the two major powers—the United States and the Soviet Union (with Britain fast in decline)—led in both strategy and ideology and laid the foundations of a new world order. The world shifted from being a multipolar system (prior to World War I) to a bipolar one. Even if one power was stronger than the other, both dictated the rules of the game in the global arena. In an attempt to prevent a situation in which one power would rise above the other, both powers began strengthening their ties with their allies. In April 1949 the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was founded as a precautionary measure, responding to the consolidation of the Soviet Union's control in Eastern Europe and the rise of communist power elsewhere. It also served to prevent further conflicts between European members, ultimately leading to the rise of the European Union (the European Coal and Steel Community, the kernel from which it grew, was established two years later, in 1951). From Moscow's perspective, both the military alliance and the much more pacifistic EU came to be seen as directed against Russian interests. Following that strategic move, and after Western Germany joined NATO in May 1955, the Soviet Union, in its turn, established the Warsaw Treaty Organization (WTO), commonly known as the Warsaw Pact.

NATO brought together Western and Central European countries and, to the south, Turkey and Greece, as well as the US and Canada, while the Warsaw Pact consisted of the Soviet Union and the regions of Eastern European taken by the Red Army in the war, including Poland (relocated westwards) and East Germany. The logic behind these pacts was simple: collective

Donetsk in the aftermath of shelling. Photo credit: Taisiya Vorontsova/TASS via Reuters Connect

security. That is, an attack on one ally would be considered an attack on all. When the Soviet Union dissolved in December 1991 due to various causes, including ideational and material reasons, Russia, however, remained a great power but in decline. The US and NATO understood the situation and—considering the initial rise of China a decade before—began to "enlarge" eastwards; Russia, however, only saw it as an attempt to speed up its own decline. Even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia still aspired to have significant global influence, particularly in Eastern and Central European countries and in the Middle East, an influence the West wanted to revoke. Again, as seen from Moscow, the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact lost, while NATO won and was no longer necessary, but why should NATO continue to exist, let alone expand, if not for some dark anti-Russian purpose?

Indeed, NATO did not fade away but actually grew stronger, a fact that signaled to other world powers that they needed to prepare themselves as well. In 1949, 12 states established NATO, including the US, the United Kingdom, and France. Turkey joined in 1952. [Western] Germany joined in 1955, Poland in 1999. In 2004 seven more countries joined NATO, many of whom were in the Soviet sphere of influence. North Macedonia joined in March 2020, making NATO a pact of 30 states. Thus, Russia gradually lost its influence over extensive parts of Europe and, consequently, its influence over the world. In terms of the balance of power, and adhering to a realist approach, Moscow had no desire to stay behind the US and China. As a nuclear power and the world's largest country, it began to push back against the expansion of Western influence eastward. It was also increasingly determined to prevent Western economic and military power from taking hold near its borders. This meant undermining NATO's attempt to recruit Georgia on Russia's southwestern border, deterring Finland and Sweden in the Baltic area, and,

of course, Ukraine, which, together with Belarus, served as a buffer sharing a long common border with Poland, a NATO member. As seen from Moscow, extending NATO to the East would provide a ground on which the military alliance, in combination with the economic machinery of the EU, could move toward Russia as well as decrease Russia's response time in case of a nuclear attack.

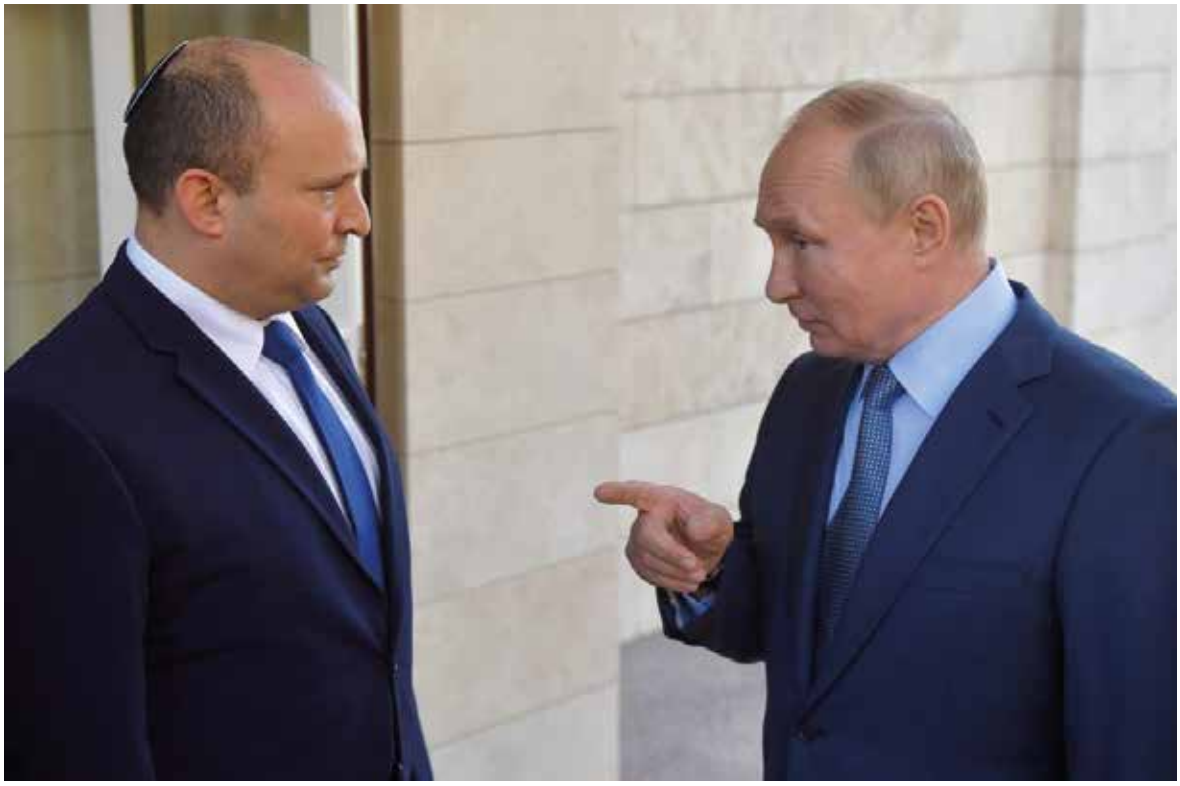
Ukraine became an independent country in August 1991 but remained within the Russian sphere of influence in its early years of independence. Both during the Orange Revolution (2004–2005) and during the Maidan Revolution (2013–2014), Ukrainian politics remained in the battleground as the West pushed for one candidate and Russia pushed for another. Ukrainian politics became the proxy upon which powers fought with each other. In 2008 NATO began officially discussing Ukraine's membership but was pushed back by Russia. Ukraine also attempted to join the EU, as it has favored pro-Western candidates since 2014; Russia perceived this economic pact as no less dangerous for its global position than NATO itself. In an attempt to push back Western pressure and influence over Ukraine, Russia annexed the area of Crimea in early 2014. Additionally, the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, referred to as the Donbass region, declared their separation from Ukraine as most of the population there was pro-Russian as Russia had promoted a pro-Russian administration in the region.

Given its self-perception as a powerful hegemon in a tri-polar global system (despite the pitiful size of its economy), Russia came to see itself as being under attack. Clearly, according to its own perceptions, it should not be considered the sole aggressor in this crisis. Russia's attempt to create a European dependence on energy (i.e., Nord Stream) can be construed as a bid to extend Russian economic influence westward, but overall, Moscow was on the defensive. In the current Ukrainian matter, strategically speaking, Russia is not an agent but a reagent. From Moscow's perspective, it seeks to preserve its influence and not gain more. One could also assume that if the West had not pushed or tempted Ukraine, by trying to recruit it to NATO or to the EU, Russia would not have invaded Ukraine in 2022 nor in 2014. Indeed, as liberalism and democracy are important concepts, Ukrainians' voices must be heard, and their voices are composed of many—liberals, conservatives, nationalists, and in between. Yet, liberalism and democracy do not always align with strategic goals, especially not when one great power is struggling with another. Moreover, while Russia attempts to preserve or boost its global influence, the West is also attempting to preserve its leadership—while Putin or Xi may speak of global hegemony—at a time in which this claim for primacy is also being challenged by China.

This reading of the situation also entails an effort for conflict resolution. Russia must stop its intervention in Ukraine, and there is no doubt about that. In the current state of affairs, however, it will fall to the West to respond to Russia's demand that Ukraine become a neutral buffer zone and not as bridgehead of hostile forces.

The current conflict in Ukraine is thus a gamble for both sides. On the Russian side, the decision to invade and attack Ukraine and Ukrainians is a dangerous one for Russia's President Vladimir Putin. The conflict appears to have stirred significant criticism from the Russian public and even from Russian officials and businessmen. From within the Kremlin's walls, upon hearing the aggressive personal denigrations, it is not difficult for Russia to assume that the Western pressure on Moscow is intended to overthrow Putin's regime from within, similar to the way that the Soviet Union was pushed toward dissolution in 1991.

Moreover, both publics in Ukraine and Russia perceive themselves as brothers, or as nations with similar values at the very least. Moscow therefore risks that not only Russian citizens but also government officials, military



Russian President Vladimir Putin talks to Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett during their meeting in Sochi, Russia prior to the war. Photo credit: REUTERS

commanders, and soldiers will refuse to fight in Ukraine as many Russians also have Ukrainian relatives. One can assume that the decision to deploy soldiers from the Chechen Republic to Ukraine was made to address this risk, as Russians, the majority of whom are Christian and ethnically Slav, will probably care less about the death toll of those it perceives as foreign fighters against whom Russia has fought on two occasions. Non-Russians and non-Slavs will also not care about fighting Slavs, a fact which will lower the probability of Chechen soldiers and commanders refusing to fight. Deploying Chechen solders also serves as an indicator of the loyalty of the Chechen Republic to Russia, as Russia also seeks to avoid future conflicts there.

On the Western side, the refusal to publicly deny Ukraine's possible future membership in NATO or in the EU is perhaps understandable as a response to violence. But it is also a dangerous stance, as it could possibly lead to the perpetuation of conflict in Ukraine, and indirectly (or worse) to a clash between members of the EU and NATO with Russia. Active military involvement of NATO members in the conflict might invoke article five—that an attack on one ally is an attack on all. This situation could lead to the largest military conflict since World War II and even to nuclear warfare. Thus, one must hope that both sides will halt their vigorous intervention in Ukraine. The West must let local politics follow culture and democratic enlightenment, not the other way around. One must also hope that should the conflict escalate, both side will step away from the brink.

What would be the next possible strategic step for Russia after the Ukrainian situation hopefully de-escalates? A probable outcome, which may ultimately pose greater threats to the West, is that Russia might decide to create a "grand alliance" with China while it temporarily halts actions in Ukraine to de-escalate the situation. Strategically, Russia has already signaled to countries which have considered joining NATO in the past, like Finland and Sweden, that they should think twice. As with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, ideational and material aspects must change with time and with generations both in Russia and Ukraine, to ensure a peaceful transformation from Soviet times. Furthermore, considering the current fragile situation of the EU, one must also wonder why Ukraine seeks to join an alliance which is no longer in its prime. This question, however, is outside the scope of this essay.

Lastly, where does Israel stand in this situation? As a country that, alongside its neighbors, has de facto been used as a fighting ground between global powers, Israel is placed in a problematic situation. The reasons for this are threefold. First, Israel is one of the most significant allies of the US in the Middle East and cannot renounce its loyalty, nor can it renounce its association with NATO, given the Iranian nuclear threat. Second, Israel cannot renounce its relationship with Russia, nor can it comprehensively criticize Russian actions as Russia is a key influencer in the Middle East and on Syria and Iran. Israel's obligation to undermine the Iranian nuclear program and thus secure itself must come prior to Israel's desire to criticize other countries or intervene in foreign conflicts. Third, a significant amount of Israel's ex-Soviet population, of which I am also a member, is critical of Russia and protests in favor of Ukraine. This fact might color the political landscape and undermine the logic of strategic decisions in case Israeli politicians are tempted to win another electoral slice for future elections.

On February 25, 2022, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy requested Israel to mediate with Russia. This might be an effective move considering the fact that both NATO and Kyiv are aware that Moscow has significant leverage on Jerusalem, making the mediation more reasonable for both sides. If this would halt the invasion and bloodshed and bring Israel closer to Russia while making it more credible in American eyes, Israel should indeed take the role of the mediator. Moreover, Israel, as a sovereign nation with many security problems, must avoid being dragged into the conflict—beyond the UN vote, in which it sided with the West. Moral stands may win politicians some votes, but the country might lose significant strategic benefits. In this regard, the now deleted call of the Ukrainian embassy in Israel to recruit Israeli citizens to fight against Russia should be considered as a diplomatic provocation as it runs against local laws, local loyalties, and the need to sustain a working relationships with Russia. I am not sure that this is a good idea for Israeli and Jewish citizens, considering the neo-Nazi recruitment to the Ukrainian Azov Battalion. Although many in Israel take pride in the fact that Volodymyr Zelenskyy is Jewish, the best use of this angle of the situation, as he himself seemed to acknowledge, is to translate it—alongside the relationship with Putin—into an ongoing mediation effort. ✳

LEV TOPOR

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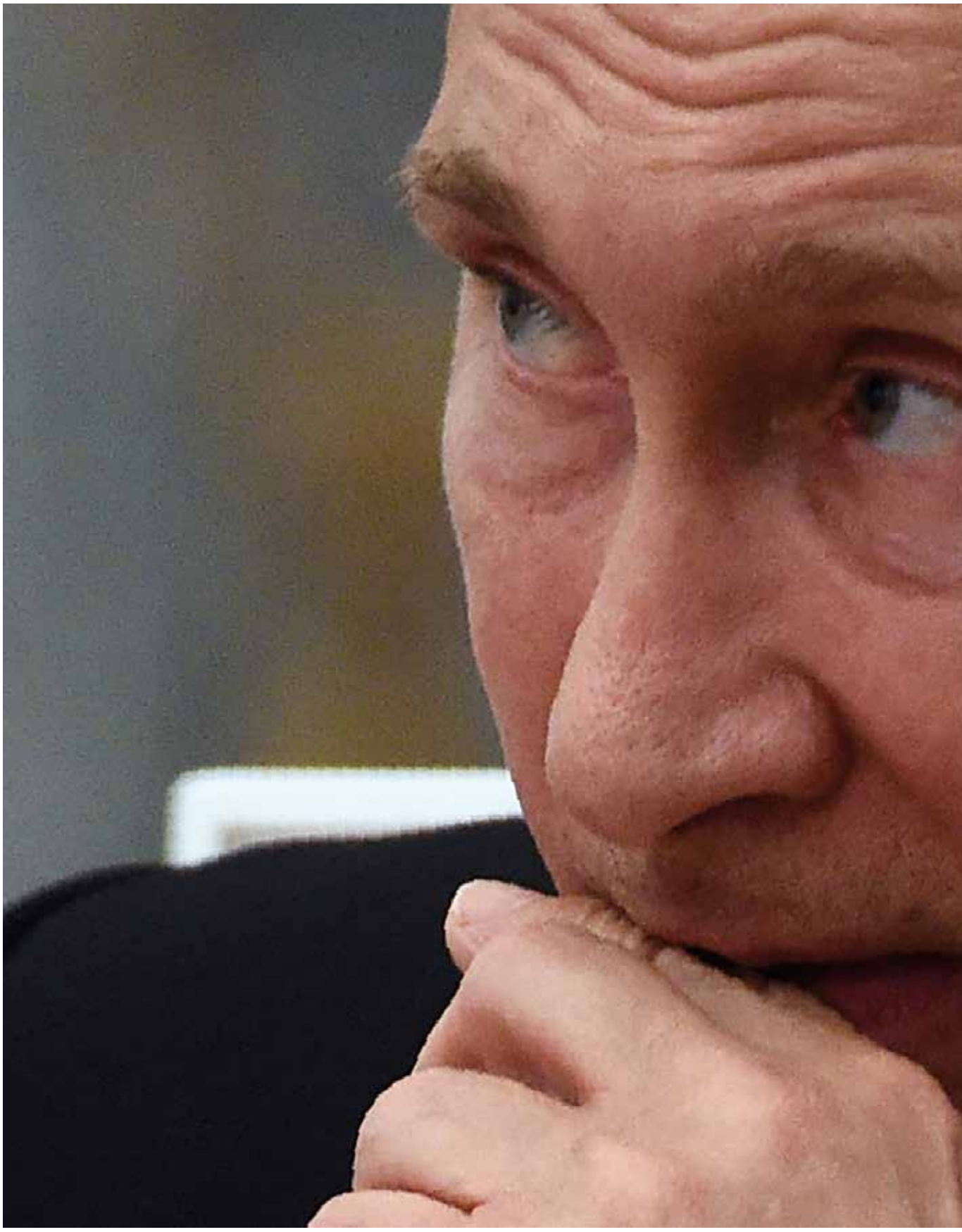
A banner depicting a Ukrainian flag with the words "Ukraine Can't Br eathe" displayed on the facade of the Friends of Zion Museum in the center of Jerusalem on April 5, 2022. Photo credit: Ahmad Gharabli / AFP



PUTIN'S RISKY GAMBLE IN UKRAINE

Russian President Vladimir Putin.
Photo credit: Vasily Maximov / POOL / AFP

by Dima Course

As events in Ukraine unfold, we are only just beginning to glimpse the parameters and characteristics of a transformed system of international relations. Undoubtedly, the world is facing one of the most acute crises since the end of World War II. At the same time, the rapidly developing crisis requires decisive analytical conclusions, instead of the effort to cook up self-deceptive theoretical rationalizations at any cost.

First, the explanations offered by Vladimir Putin himself should be rejected. This is not "a struggle with the West for the security of Russia," but rather a struggle to restore the Russian Empire in its most basic historical sense, as a means of survival for Putin's regime. Before the rationale for this assertion can be explained, a certain caveat is called for. The above argument does not intend to totally absolve the West of critically reviewing its attitude toward Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of Yeltsin's democratic regime. Mistakes were made. The West could have possibly been more understanding of the specific challenges faced by all leaders of Russia.

However, Russia's internal struggles and Moscow's weakening grip in the so-called "spheres of influence"—the countries of the post-Soviet space—are by no means the results of the intrigues of the West, as Putin has tried to present it. Russia's influence over its neighbors has waned year after year due to the evolution of Putin's regime that threatens the neighbors' sovereignty. That evolution has led to the degradation of the Russian economy, civil society, science, technology, and culture, and finally to the moral and professional deterioration of its diplomacy.

The current impression is that Western pundits have been mistakenly divided while studying Putin's Russia. Roughly speaking, the unique internal features of the regime were well observed, and the foreign and security policies were largely covered, but separately from each other.

The popular assumption was that no matter how much Putin moves his country toward autocracy and how easily he allows the looting of resources as a payment for the loyalty of the bureaucratic pyramid, in the international arena he should be perceived as a rational actor.

There has been a tendency to perceive the aggressive Russian propaganda—claiming the greatness of Russia—as a tool for mobilizing legitimization, which has been cynically used by the Kremlin, without the necessary reckoning that the constant atmosphere of anti-Western, anti-liberal sentiments must affect at some point the very core of the regime itself.

On a personal note, I should add that a decade ago when I suggested to some experienced and renowned scholars in Europe that Putin's rhetoric had gradually turned from being neutral and even friendly to the West into a rhetoric similar to that of radical ultranationalist thinkers like Alexander Dugin, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, and Gennady Zyuganov, the reaction was quite dismissive: "Are you really trying to convince us that a cold-minded and non-ideological leader such as Putin is turning into a radical ultranationalist leader?"

In fact, on February 24, 2022, Putin answered these questions, by launching a war, which had been predicted in detail by the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia leader Zhirinovsky as early as 2018. Putin's speech the day before, delegitimizing the right of Ukraine to sovereignty and its own original identity, is also very much a restatement of Zhirinovsky's approach to the topic, loudly and constantly voiced by him at least since 1998.

This gradual shift or Putin's ideologization did not turn Russia into a completely "irrational actor," but it has become a significant structural factor for the standard pretending-to-be-rational process of day-by-day decision making in Moscow. As a result, the Russian official risk assessment became distorted. The component of honor rose to excessive levels; the sincere ideological hatred and contempt distorted the assessment of the strength of rivals like Ukraine; and the deterministic belief in its greatness shaped Russia's self-assessment. The decision makers may well have been blinded by cheerful and unjustifiably positive reports of officials, appointed to their posts on the principle of absolute personal loyalty and the skills of sycophants. Few if any new (and questioning) faces have joined the upper circle. For example, 66-year old Valery Gerasimov, the current chief of General Staff of the Russian army, has held his position for more than ten years—an absolute record in Russian history, at least since the mid 19th century.

In all likelihood, it was this evolution (or regression) of the decision-making process and of situation assessments by the Putin regime that made the extremely risky decision to invade Ukraine possible.

As for the so called "economic wing" of the Putin regime, even if they had soberly assessed the potential consequences of a military adventure for the Russian economy, they no longer had the opportunity to convey their opinion to the leadership, without losing influence or even their positions and without being perceived as "pro-Western traitors" or just cowards.

In all likelihood, it was this evolution (or regression) of the decision-making process and of situation assessments by the Putin regime that made the extremely risky decision to invade Ukraine possible. But what exactly does Putin intend to achieve? Right now, three main goals can be discerned. First, Putin has decided to finally cut the Ukrainian "Gordian Knot" by seeking to occupy Kyiv, replace the democratic government, and subjugate this "troublesome"—and in his eyes, artificial—neighboring state once and for all. In this manner, he seeks to get rid of the constant headache that takes the form of a democratic alternative in a country that is historically and culturally close to Russia and that might serve as a model of aspiration for Russian citizens.

Second, one can assume that Putin's intention is to frighten the Western world and force its leaders, especially the Europeans, to

become more convenient negotiators. In the long run, by combining forceful threats with energy blackmail, Putin presumably will impose his will on the EU. In turn, the results of this pressure may help Putin stabilize the Russian economy, which already was collapsing under the pressure of mounting corruption, excessive state intervention, and sheer backwardness and inefficiency.

Finally, the collapse of Ukraine should have been a terrible signal to Russia's neighbors from among the former Soviet republics. The message was simple: accept the influence of Moscow or your fate may be similar to that of Ukraine. However, as we can carefully assume at this stage, something has gone critically wrong with the Russian plans.

PRELIMINARY IMPRESSIONS FROM THE BATTLEFIELD

Not surprisingly, the Russian command's prewar assessment seems to have been wrong. At the tactical level, the supposed attempt to elegantly and easily occupy Kyiv—by an advanced descent operation, which included the landing of *spetsnaz* at the Gostomel (Ukrainian: Hostomel) airport, and a subsequent planned advance into the center of Kyiv—has been completely foiled.

Overall, the presumably forceful abilities of the Russian army are now being seriously questioned. After more than a week of fighting, they have still not occupied any of the large cities of Ukraine. In fact, only two notable cities are under Russian control right now: Kherson and Melitopol. All the attempts to capture Kyiv and Kharkiv have failed, with significant losses for the Russian army (even if Ukrainian numbers cannot be fully trusted).

Overall, the presumably forceful abilities of the Russian army are now being seriously questioned. After more than a week of fighting, they have still not occupied any of the large cities of Ukraine.

The air defense system of Ukraine is still active, hindering the activities of the Russian Air Forces, at least over the main Ukrainian cities (Kyiv, Kharkiv, Dnipro, and Odessa). Russians cannot credit themselves with any serious achievements in the field of cyber and electronic warfare, and Zelenskyy has done quite well in the traditional battle over the "world" (i.e., US) public opinion.

The whole operation now seems clumsy, slow, and without glimpses of original military thought. An analysis of hundreds of videos published by Ukrainians suggests that the Russian army's equipment looks—among other difficulties—outdated from the results of prolonged budgetary denials.

On the contrary, the Ukrainians, who simply trusted Putin's honest and loud promise to wipe out their identity and sovereignty, have been fiercely resisting—with little regard for losses and suffering—since the war began. Ukraine's leadership, led by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, has proved itself as stress-resistant, organized, and self-confident. Zelenskyy's popularity, until recently in sharp decline, has risen dramatically. Indirectly, Putin managed to unite most Ukrainians overnight. A majority of the political parties in both Ukraine's parliament (Rada) and municipal councils now act as a united national political movement.

One gets the impression that the Russian command is not yet risking either a full-scale frontal assault on cities nor the use of full-scale firepower against residential areas. Both scenarios could lead to an even greater shift in public opinion in the West and push Western leaders to take even more decisive steps against Russia and perhaps not only in the economic dimension. On the economic and diplomatic fronts, the Russians are doing even worse than on the military one. The ruble is in free fall against the euro and the dollar, and the Moscow Stock Exchange is dead. At least three powerful oligarchs and a board of directors of the Lukoil oil company called upon the Russian leadership to stop the war.

In the UN, 141 states voted to condemn Russia, against only four which voted with it against the resolution. Most of the post-Soviet states, considered close partners of Russia, were absent from the voting or abstained. Kazakhstan and Armenia ignored the call of Moscow to join it in its "operation" against Ukraine.

INITIAL IMPLICATIONS

Despite everything said above, Russia is still a military power capable of changing the current situation in its favor, at least on the battlefield. At the same time, the Ukrainians also have not yet had their last word. It seems that they are very determined and are receiving significant financial, military, and political support from all over the West.

Meanwhile, both are still locked in a mostly zero-sum game, with both sides risking their political existence. In the worst case, the Ukrainians are in danger of their democratic regime being violently replaced by the Kremlin's puppets. However, should the Russian army's efforts result in a fiasco, Putin's regime may finally lose its stability and be in danger of destruction.

Given what is at stake, it has become imperative that the democratic world do anything necessary to avoid future dependence on Russian energy. Moreover, it must be ready to put Putin's dictatorship in its place by providing a steady flow of military means to Ukraine, in the worst case. China and Iran are watching closely, and the West's hesitation may push them to be more assertive.

As one could expect, while struggling on the battlefield and in the economic sphere, Putin turned to apocalyptic threats rattling his nuclear sword. His previous messianic and suicidal claims from 2018 that "we, as a martyrs will go to heaven, and they [the West] will just peg out" were a part of a pre-planned intimidation campaign, intended to present Putin as a "crazy" actor, ready to die for his "principles."

Nevertheless, the West need not recoil from doing what needs to be done even in the face of Putin's harsh threats. If the Western leadership conveys weakness in that regard, the oligarchic ruler in the Kremlin will conclude that further exploitation of the nuclear issue may serve his interests. It is this logic that may become really dangerous.

Finally, the current situation is extremely challenging for the Israeli leadership. Israel's government will have to solve a very complex mathematical equation, with many variables: the beneficial outcome of deconfliction with the Russian Air Force in Syria versus belonging to the Western democratic camp; the need to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons versus the understanding that Iranian oil may become critical for the EU in cancelling the purchase of energy from Russia.

In this extremely difficult situation, one certain task lies ahead: resolving the legitimate political rifts dividing Israeli society; it is surely the time for more dialogue and less diatribes, given the magnitude of the possible challenges the country might face. ✳

Given what is at stake, it has become imperative that the democratic world do anything necessary to avoid future dependence on Russian energy.

DIMA COURSE

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy visits the town of Bucha outside the capital Kyiv. Photo credit: Ronaldo Schemidt / AFP

THE DAVID OF UKRAINE

by Ksenia Svetlova

"Of two bad people, you choose the lesser evil. And you do that for 25 years in a row. And you know what's interesting? Nothing will change... And then these [bad people] come to power. They lie and steal, steal and lie—the accents are different, the meaning is the same. And no one cares... If only I would be sent there for one week, if it were possible. I would teach them a lesson."

From a monologue of Vasily Goloborodko, the fictional president of Ukraine, played by Volodymyr Zelenskyy, on the Ukrainian TV series "Servant of the People".

Shortly after Volodymyr Zelenskyy won the election in 2019 and became president of Ukraine, the first telephone conversation took place between him and Russian President Vladimir Putin. To illustrate the phone call, the Kremlin website used a photo of Zelenskyy from the "Servant of the People" TV series in which he starred, either by mistake or with some hidden meaning. The residents of the Kremlin drew three conclusions on Ukraine and its newly elected president, a former comic actor: The actor will never mature into a real politician; he will never be able to withstand Russian might; and he is not the kind of leader who will stubbornly fight for his people and his land. All three assumptions were dead wrong.

Putin was not the only one who made assumptions about Zelenskyy. American leadership offered him safe asylum in the West, assuming that he would not want to risk his life or to fall into Russian captivity (clearly, after the pitiful conduct of the Afghanistan leadership, American expectations were rather low.) His answer will go down in history: "I need ammunition, not a ride." Unnamed Israeli sources were quoted in the Hebrew press snidely stating that "Zelenskyy fell in love with his new role, being a hero."

And yet, the man who spent 20 years of his life making other people laugh and who built his political campaign around his successful satirical show "Servant of the People," a president who was thought to be a tragicomical figure, stood tall in the face of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Over a month into the war, President Zelenskyy is being spoken of as a leader in the mold of Winston Churchill and other remarkable world leaders who led their nations courageously during wars and conflicts. Zelenskyy's case is even more fascinating, insofar as he personifies the new generation of leaders in post-Soviet countries—those who were born in the USSR but would like to take their countries as far away as possible from the Soviet experience.

BORN IN THE USSR

Just like Vladimir Putin, Volodymyr Zelenskyy was born in the USSR, although he is a generation younger (Putin was born in 1952, Zelenskyy in 1978). They probably read the same books in their childhoods (the Soviet curricula did not change significantly over the decades), ate the same ice cream, and enjoyed the same iconic Soviet movies, such as "The Elusive Avengers" that told the story of the battles of

Being spoken of as a leader in the mold of Winston Churchill. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson meets Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as he visits Kyiv. Photo credit: EYEPRESS via Reuters Connect

the Red Army during the civil war in Russia. Both men grew up steeped in Russian culture—Zelenskyy started improving his non-existent Ukrainian only in 2017. But at that point their shared experience ends. Putin was born and raised in a tough neighborhood of Leningrad (today St. Petersburg), the son of a poor family bearing the scars of the Great Patriotic War. Zelenskyy had spent his childhood in the small city of Krivoy Rog in Ukraine. He was born to a family of Ukrainian Jews, the son of a scientist and an engineer—A classic Soviet middle-class family.

Since his early childhood, Zelenskyy experimented with acting, and already during high school he became famous on a local satirical TV show, in Russian, where teams competed by giving funny answers to questions and acting in prepared sketches. Zelenskyy grew up and matured during the turbulent years of Perestroika, when the Soviet empire collapsed, about which the young Zelenskyy had probably made many jokes. Vladimir Putin, 26 years older, had experienced Perestroika very differently. At that time, Putin was already a KGB officer who served in Dresden, looking after Soviet interests in East Germany and beyond. When the Berlin Wall came down, he was in his office in Dresden, burning top-secret papers, wondering what would become of him and his peers.

Later Putin said that the demise of the USSR was the "worst geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century." He has often spoken highly of the glory of the Soviet empire, stressing the heroism of the Red Army and the grandeur of the state that developed nuclear weapon and launched spaceships, but lacked diapers for babies. Zelenskyy, on the other hand, has accused the USSR of being one of the perpetrators of World War II and mentioned the lack of respect for the law, which in his opinion developed during the Soviet era. In the midst of the war he spoke

Zelenskyy became famous on a local satirical TV show, in Russian.
Volodymyr Zelenskyy hosts a comedy show in 2019. Photo credit: REUTERS

about the importance of European values, while the other Vladimir has ridiculed Europe, and his Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky has insisted that there are no "European values" whatsoever. Both leaders of Russia and Ukraine were born in the USSR, but they could not be more different from one another.

THE PROTEST CANDIDATE

How did Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the successful actor, comedian, and TV producer, become president of Ukraine? What made him so special and different from the rest of the candidates (there were 44) in the fateful 2019 elections in Ukraine, allowing him to beat the acting president, the billionaire Petro Poroshenko? Although Zelenskyy was not officially involved in the political process prior to establishing his own party, he certainly had a say about what was happening in Ukraine since it had become a sovereign country. He was critical of corruption and attacked it fiercely on his TV show. He despised the rule of mighty oligarchs and their unchecked power, and he was shocked by Russian aggression against his country in 2014, when the war in Donbass first broke and Crimea—the pearl of the Black sea—was annexed. At that time he travelled to the front and gave concerts to Ukrainian soldiers, and his sharp criticism of Russian policy caused friction between him and his Russian partners.

The war that was launched by Putin in 2014 had forced many Ukrainians to reassess their beliefs and reshape their identity; as any war or aggression against a group of individuals, it highlighted the differences between the attacker and the attacked. Perhaps, in preparation of his future political campaign, Zelenskyy, who

Zelenskyy had already made it to the pantheon of fame of the world's leaders. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy delivers a virtual address to Congress at the Capitol. Photo credit: REUTERS

was born in the Eastern part of Ukraine, mostly populated by Russian speakers, started to brush up his Ukrainian. According to law, a president of Ukraine must speak Ukrainian. At first glance, this condition looks peculiar, but given the Soviet practice of undermining the local languages in the republics for the sake of the Russian language, and given that almost 40% of Ukrainian citizens do not speak Ukrainian, it makes sense.

In 2015 Zelenskyy's show "The Servant of the People"—featuring a history teacher, Vasily Goloborodko. who ends up being elected president—became an instant hit. In a country severely hit by the plague of corruption, a slogan such as "The goal is that a history teacher will live like a president, and a president shall live like a history teacher" seemed revolutionary. The servant of the people struggled with corrupt oligarchs and their yes-men at the Ukrainian Rada (parliament), made jokes about Putin, and spoke about the Ukraine of his dreams (Zelenskyy's dreams?).

After three successful seasons, Volodymyr Zelenskyy became the ultimate protest candidate. He used his popularity against other candidates' money and influence. In his campaign, he focused on combatting corruption and poverty, while the question of relations with Russia, the status of the Russian language, and the future of Crimea were secondary. Initially supported mostly in the cities of eastern Ukraine, he soon was endorsed in the rest of the country. People who voted for him voted against corrupt and greedy politicians who lied to them and prevented their country from developing.

The meteoric rise of Zelenskyy—a civilian who was never part of any security

Zelenskyy stayed in Kyiv and continued doing what he does best: talking.
Ukraine's President Zelenskyy addresses the Ukrainian people in Kyiv. Photo credit: via REUTERS

organization—could happen anywhere in the West, but not in Putin's Russia. Instead of seeing Zelenskyy as an elected leader who built a skillful campaign and managed to get elected by winning over the hearts of the people, the Kremlin saw him as a weak link in the chain, who would be unable to resist the pressure from Moscow—personally, politically, or militarily. Autocracy does not understand democracy and instead ridicules it and its many faults, without ever grasping democracy's essence—the free will of the people to choose their elected officials and get rid of them if they fail.

"THE FIGHT IS HERE; I NEED AMMUNITION, NOT A RIDE"

In the weeks prior to February 24, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy repeated several times that he did not believe that a large-scale Russian war against Ukraine would commence. On a few occasions, he and his ministers had criticized the Western governments for evacuating their diplomatic missions in Ukraine. Zelenskyy was certainly updated by the Americans, the British, the French, and the Germans who thought that a full-scale war was just around the corner, yet he refused to believe that Ukraine's neighbor would cross the red line and turn from hybrid warfare to bombing residential quarters and maternity wards.

Was Zelenskyy really shocked when Russian troops crossed the border on the night of February 24 and sirens were heard all over Ukraine? Was he still repeating his mantra that war was not possible just to highlight the peaceful intentions of his own government and to reassure the Russians that Kyiv was not about to fight, not in Donbass, or anywhere else? Time will tell.

In any case, even if Zelenskyy was absolutely sure that the Russians would viciously attack

the cities of Ukraine, could he evacuate the entire country beforehand? Probably not. When the moment came, he did what only a determined and noble leader could do—he stayed in his city, with his people, his soldiers, and his family. Zelenskyy could have run away like Afghanistan's President Ahmad Ghani, or relocate to a nearby EU country like Belarusian leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Western leaders offered him that option, as they feared for his safety and assumed that Ukraine had no chance against Russia. It no longer was a satirical TV show but a brutal reality within which Zelenskyy had to make his choice.

Zelenskyy stayed in Kyiv and continued doing what he does best: talking. He addressed the nation and inspired Ukrainian citizens, soldiers, and volunteers. He urged Western leaders to help Ukraine and explained why the war against Ukraine was, in fact, a war against the collective West. When Vladimir Putin looked alienated at his ridiculously long table, Zelenskyy was taking selfies with his team at Bankovaya Street in Kyiv, in the heart of his homeland. During one month of war, Putin never visited the front and never met his soldiers, who were soon to be killed, captured, injured, or maimed on the battlefield. Instead, Zelenskyy was the one to address them, saying "You still have a chance not to get killed. Just go home."

While Vladimir Putin had created a concrete wall around him, similar to the Berlin Wall, Volodymyr Zelenskyy was reaching for the future. Today, as the fighting in Ukraine is still intense, and the people of Ukraine are still dying in Russian attacks, starving for bread and water, and fleeing their country as refugees, there is still no way to know how this story will end. Given that no Western intelligence believed that Zelenskyy and his army would last for so long, almost any scenario that would include the end of hostilities and Russian retreat might be perceived as a "David" victory over a Russian Goliath. And yet, the reality today is grim; there is no certainty that the Russians will withdraw from the occupied Ukrainian territories anytime soon, and it is unclear how long the war will last and when Ukrainians will be able to start rebuilding their country.

Zelenskyy might win the war (or last incredibly long), but he might lose the political battle afterwards, especially if he will be forced to accept painful compromises. In his show "Servant of the People," President Goloborodko was impeached and then struggled to win over the love of his people, after pushing for unpopular reforms. But regardless of future political developments, President Zelenskyy had already made it to the pantheon of fame of the world's leaders. He will be remembered as an actor who refused to be intimidated by a KGB agent, as a leader of a country that fought courageously against the Russian bear, and as a Ukrainian David who stood up to a Russian Goliath, whose fancy weapons proved to be ineffective against the wit and the free spirit of the weaker fighter. ✳

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IT'S ALL ABOUT RESI
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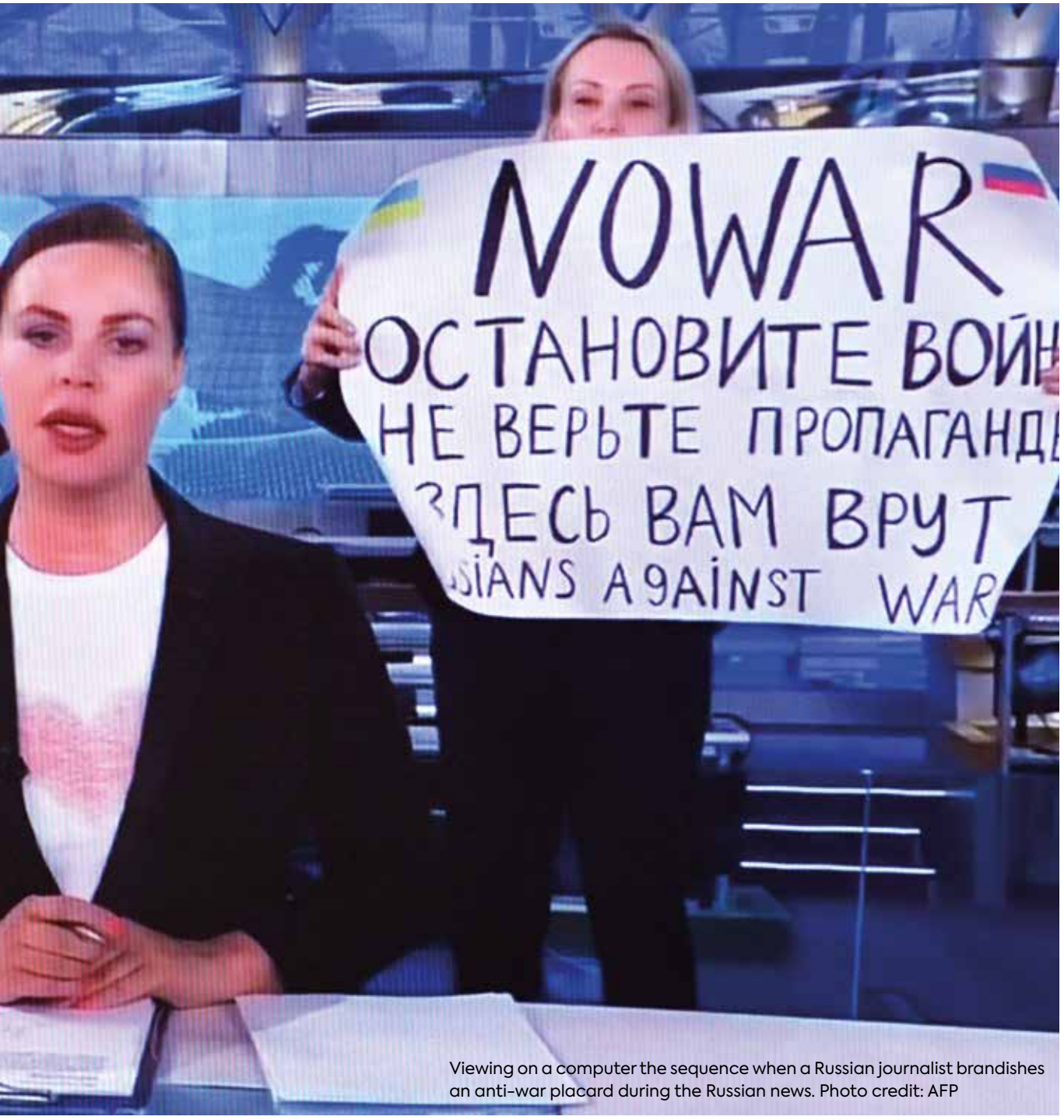

Viewing on a computer the sequence when a Russian journalist brandishes an anti-war placard during the Russian news. Photo credit: AFP

LIENCE: THE ROLE OF HE WAR IN UKRAINE

by Pnina Shuker

In recent years, among scholars of war, there has been a growing consensus that nonmilitary factors have an increasing impact on determining the aims of war, on the choice of warfare methods, and sometimes even on the conduct of the war itself. A key aspect in this regard is the impact of public opinion. Until the 20th century, public opinion (where the term applied) largely perceived the use of force as a legitimate tool for achieving the states' interests. The horrors of the two world wars, however, have led to the delegitimization of the use of force, mainly but not exclusively in Western democracies (at least at the level of slogans that the Soviet Union took pride in leading among the "peace camp" worldwide). Some democracies are so attentive to public opinion that they cannot go to war without broad support from their citizens, possibly reflected in a parliamentary vote of approval.

Although the war in Ukraine is still ongoing at the time of writing, my point in this essay is that one of the main explanations for Russia's failure, so far—contrary to most expectations—to secure a swift victory in this war can be found in the combination between low national morale in Russia and a surprisingly high level of resilience in Ukraine. It seems that President Putin assessed correctly Russian public opinion as being hesitant and therefore sought to manipulate it, drawing on powerful symbols and memories (hence the talks about the "denazification" in Kyiv) in order to increase its willingness for sacrifice. At the same time, however, it can be assumed with high certainty that he failed to read the resilience of the Ukrainian public and its determination to fight.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RESILIENCE IN WARTIME

Michael Howard has taught us that societal resilience and the willingness to bear the cost of war are no less important than the military capabilities of a nation and its achievements on the battlefield. Such resilience may outweigh operational and technological inferiority in a net assessment equation. A significant component of societal resilience is national morale, defined by Hans Morgenthau as one of the most important components of national power.

Casualties during war, by nature, can lead to demoralization. The prevailing view is that democratic leaders are more sensitive to casualties than autocratic ones, since they have a greater degree of accountability to their citizens, or else they cannot expect to remain

One of the main explanations for Russia's failure to secure a swift victory in this war can be found in the combination between low national morale in Russia and a surprisingly high level of resilience in Ukraine.

Odessa residents fill bags with sand to defend the city. Photo credit: Yulii Zozulia via Reuters Connect

in office. A well-known claim in this regard has been Edward Luttwak's argument, namely that sensitivity to casualties is a permanent feature in Western societies in the post-Cold War era and its roots lie in demographic, economic, and social developments. However, throughout the history of wars, one can find clues that non-Western societies are also are attentive to public opinion but to a different extent and with other manifestations. Thus, for example, the Soviet leadership recognized the heightened sensitivity of the public in the Soviet Union to casualties, and this had an effect on its choices, as well as on those of the decision makers in Russia later. All this had an impact on the way they conducted the wars in which they were involved.

CONSIDERING PUBLIC OPINION IS NOT EXCLUSIVE TO WESTERN SOCIETIES

According to Fukuyama, during the war in Afghanistan, Soviet operations apparently reflected great sensitivity to casualties. The Soviets relied on heavy preparatory fires with airstrikes and artillery and used mechanized infantry columns to clear lines of communications. The Soviet forces remained quite invulnerable to the Mujahideen since they refused to dismount from their armored vehicles, which hampered their ability to search out and destroy the enemy. There was little use of dismounted infantry or airborne troops to clear ridges and take the high ground.[1] Despite Soviet efforts to minimize their losses, which included concealing the number of casualties, the years of fighting in Afghanistan left at least 15,000 invading Soviet soldiers dead. This high casualty toll had a demoralizing effect on the home front and led to the unprecedented establishment of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, which is still active today in the context of the war in Ukraine. Similarly, during the first Russian war with Chechnya, after its early failures in Grozny in 1994, Russian forces changed their approach and sought to avoid direct fighting in urban areas. Instead, they fought from a distance, using massive aerial and artillery bombardments to destroy the city, finally gaining control in February 1995. Russia's second war against Chechnya in 1999 also relied heavily on the use of massive firepower and the indiscriminate use of force. The Russian siege of Grozny (1999–2000) devastated the city, prompting the UN to label it "the most destroyed

city on Earth." Such tactics were also on display during the crucial stages of Russia's intervention in Syria, from September 2015 onward.

With the war in Ukraine, President Putin seems aware of the fragile state of domestic public opinion and is trying to influence it on two parallel planes: physically, by seeking to minimize Russian casualties in the battlefields and gain military achievements by other means; and cognitively, by trying to persuade the Russian public about the necessity of war and to consolidate public support for the invasion.

The patterns of Russian warfare in Ukraine reflect the first effort. So far, the Russian forces seem to prefer avoiding deep maneuver, which could cost them mass casualties, especially considering the fact that they managed to achieve aerial superiority. Therefore, the war from the Russian side has been conducted mainly from the air as well as by heavy reliance on artillery and missile strikes against major contested cities, such as Kherson, Kharkiv, and Mariupol, in order to demoralize the Ukrainian people. Additionally, the Russian decision to deploy Chechen forces to Ukraine also can be interpreted as part of the Russian will to prevent demoralization of the Russian forces.

Since the very beginning of the war, Chechen forces have played a role in Moscow's plans. Beyond the psychological effect inherent in it, with Chechen forces having a reputation for being particularly cruel, the logic behind their deployment to Ukraine is that, unlike most Russian soldiers, they do not share language, culture, religion, family ties, and friendships with the Ukrainian people. A Russian soldier who fights in Ukraine sees civilians who could have been members of his family. This is also the reason why Russian soldiers who were captured claimed that they were told that the invasion was only an "exercise" or "special operation." The Kremlin estimated that Chechen forces would have far fewer inhibitions in carrying out the mission that could cost many Ukrainian lives. One can also assume that operating the Chechen forces will gain more legitimacy within Russia for the war, instead of sending Russian citizens to fight. Furthermore, using Chechen volunteers in the war in Ukraine allows Putin to minimize international and domestic criticism alike, by claiming that he had nothing to do with their deployment and rather place the blame on their will to volunteer to fight in war zones.

It is not the first time that Russia has deployed irregular fighters to its war zones: Chechen forces have been sent to Georgia (2008), East Ukraine (2014), and Syria (2015). Recently, the Kremlin also declared that it was receiving a reinforcement of foreign fighters, mainly Syrians with experience of guerrilla warfare, to boost the country's manpower (given that regular Russian troops, as distinct from volunteers for professional service, are not supposed to be sent into battle beyond Russia's own borders—as detailed below).

In the cognitive realm, state-owned media coverage of the war manipulates domestic public opinion and convinces the public that the Russian forces are trying to minimize both civilian casualties and collateral damage, while seeking to "denazify" Ukraine and "liberate" its people. Thus, Russian TV screens present accounts of a Kremlin Kremlin mission that is humanitarian—one in which "surgical" airstrikes target Ukrainian nationalists and spare civilians. Additionally, a new law, which passed at the beginning of March, forbids journalists covering Ukraine from using the words "war" or "invasion," and instead must use "special military operation"—the term

State-owned media coverage of the war manipulates domestic public opinion and convinces the public that the Russian forces are trying to minimize both civilian casualties and collateral damage, while seeking to "denazify" Ukraine and "liberate" its people.

Russian President Putin delivers a speech during a rally to support his bid in the upcoming presidential election. Photo credit: REUTERS

used by President Putin when he announced Russian forces would enter Ukraine to protect Russian speakers in Donbas and to remove the "neo-Nazi" elite from power. An additional law penalizes any media coverage of the military that contradicts the Kremlin's messages or is deemed as denigrating the armed forces. Since the war in Ukraine began, Putin has exerted iron control over the news outlets in Russia, and state-owned media is not publishing casualty numbers. As a matter of fact, President Putin declared already in 2015 that all Russian military deaths will be considered state secrets.

THE LOW RUSSIAN WILLINGNESS TO FIGHT IN UKRAINE AND ITS POTENTIAL IMPACT ON THE WAR

It is becoming quite apparent that President Putin's concerns regarding demoralization among the Russian public were justified, Although the common international belief is that Russian society will fully support the Kremlin in a prolonged confrontation, invading Ukraine was unpopular even before one shot was even fired. Deploying Russian troops into Ukraine has actually not been popular since the Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014. A Washington Post poll, conducted in December 2021, revealed that only 8% of Russians think their country should send troops to fight against Ukraine. Furthermore, polls conducted over the past decade show that Russians opposed any plan to annex Ukraine or to re-establish the Soviet Union. Yet, early polls conducted immediately after the Russian invasion on February 24 indicate that the majority of Russian respondents—about 60%—endorsed the "special military operation" and expressed support for President Putin. However, these results should be treated with great caution, since citizens living in repressive states may avoid expressing dissenting views in surveys about political issues. But even if these polls results are accurate, they can be attributed to the familiar "rally around the flag" effect, characterized by high domestic support for war at its initial stages that dissipates as the war lingers.

Moreover, there is clear evidence that large segments of the Russian public have not accepted the Kremlin's justifications for the invasion. Several thousand people have been detained in cities across Russia for participating in protests, and a growing number

of Russian celebrities, journalists, and other public figures, such as 2021 Nobel Peace Prize winner Dmitry Muratov, have publicly opposed the war in Ukraine, using their social media accounts to express their opposition to the war's continuation. At least 100 journalists signed an antiwar petition, among them employees of state-owned media, and more than 150 Russian scientists signed an open letter against the "unfair and frankly meaningless" Russian military action in Ukraine.

Despite the Kremlin's efforts to effectively control the constant information flow from Ukraine—mainly by blocking Twitter, Youtube, and Facebook and by spreading propaganda with the state-owned media—Russian citizens do have an idea of what is really happening in Ukraine through alternative platforms, such as Telegram and TikTok. Thus, the Russian public has also seen the images of defeat from the battlefield, such as Russian prisoners of war, destroyed Russian vehicles and aircraft, and reports about the elimination of four Russian senior generals by the Ukrainian forces, illustrating to the Russian public that the war in Ukraine is not going well for Russia.

Recently it appeared that even the older generation, the hard core of Putin's popular support, have begun to show cracks in their response to the way Russia treats its own soldiers and their families. The families of Russian conscripts are angry that President Putin violated his agreement to not deploy conscripts to Ukraine, after many conscripts had been killed during the two Chechen wars. As a result, Putin had agreed that only "professional" soldiers were to be sent to the front, as the Russian public was more agreeable to deploying professional soldiers, who volunteered for service and receive extensive and prolonged training. Despite Putin's promise, conscripts are being forced into signing contracts of voluntary service to change their status. This has led many young men of conscription age to try to avoid military service—a phenomenon that has caused a recruitment crisis, from which the Russian army has only recently begun to recover.

Despite Russia's refusal to disclose the death toll, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense provides ongoing reports regarding the casualty numbers. This information sows demoralization among the Russian public while it also encourages the Ukrainian public.

A recent report published by the Pentagon described the low morale among Russian troops. The report claimed that in some cases Russian soldiers are parking their armored vehicles and tanks and are looking for shelter in the woods. These manifestations of demoralization can be explained by the fact that some of the troops perceive the war as unjustified and feel deceived, since they were told that the war would be short and that they would be welcomed by the Ukrainian people. The great shortage in food and equipment that they are experiencing (some of them have been reduced to robbing food stores for survival) has likely also affected their willingness to continue fighting. According to recent reports, some troops are intentionally shooting themselves in the leg to avoid fighting, using Ukrainian ammunition to make it appear as if they were hit by enemy fire. Recently, British intelligence also claimed that many of the Russian troops are undermotivated and simply refuse to carry out orders.

Furthermore, despite Russia's refusal to disclose the death toll, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense provides ongoing reports regarding the casualty numbers. This information sows demoralization among the Russian public while it also encourages the Ukrainian public. Additionally, the Ukrainian military allows captured Russian soldiers to hold telephone conversations with their families, thereby, in effect, using them to undermine Russian public resilience, in hopes that it would

Dnipro residents weave camouflage nets. Photo credit: Mykola Myakshykov via Reuters Connect

intensify the public pressure on Putin to cease Russia's aggression in Ukraine. The Ukrainian government is also trying to tempt Russian soldiers to defect in exchange for monetary compensation.

For the time being, it appears that the war in Ukraine is developing into a war of attrition, in which resilience is bound to be of even greater importance. According to US intelligence estimates, in the first month of the war, Russia suffered between 7,000 to 15,000 military casualties—more than the US sustained in both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, which lasted two decades. As the war continues, the casualties will mount and will lead, inevitably, to diminishing public support, especially since Russian soldiers, as well as the public, are not convinced that the war is justified. Together with lack of military achievements, demoralization is expected to continue to spread among Russian society.

Other than the great human toll that Russian society is paying during this presumably unnecessary war, Russia is also experiencing firsthand the economic consequences of the war. Violent clashes over basic products such as oil, sugar, and salt have already become routine. Recently it was reported that for the first time since the Russian Revolution in 1917, Russia is in danger of insolvency, following the sanctions imposed on it, which included the freezing of its dollar accounts in Western countries. It is likely that as the sanctions imposed on the Russian public become heavier, the prospect of public unrest to end the war will become greater. Therefore, intensifying sanctions and a useful Ukrainian information warfare can help deepen the cracks in the Russian public's resilience: whereas Ukrainian society may continue to demonstrate its high resilience. This asymmetry between the two countries' resilience can be a game changer for Ukraine. ✳

1. Francis Fukuyama, *The Future of the Soviet Role in Afghanistan: A Trip Repor*t (RAND Corporation, 1980), p. v.

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THE GREAT WAS OVER THE DEF

US President Joe Biden's State of the Union address at the Capitol in Washington. Photo credit: Saul Loeb / POOL / AFP

HINGTON DIVIDE
ENSE BUDGET

by Dov S. Zakheim

Vladimir Putin did what was seemingly impossible: He united Democrats and Republicans against him. The war in Ukraine also had the effect of forcing an otherwise reluctant Biden administration to seek additional funds for the defense budget to support the beleaguered Kyiv government. Initially, the White House had planned to request $3.5 billion for the Department of Defense, as well as $2.9 billion for the State Department for both military and humanitarian assistance. While the administration's request for State Department funds was in addition to those it had previously included in its fiscal year 2022 budget request, those identified for DoD were simply a reallocation of already budgeted defense dollars. In other words, the Biden administration was prepared to transfer monies from within the defense budget to support its assistance to Ukraine. In effect, it was reducing the budget that it had initially proposed. Not surprisingly, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell promptly rejected the administration's proposal for DoD support to Ukraine; as did many Democrats.

The Biden administration finally relented and altered the actual proposal it sent to Capitol Hill. It increased its request to $4.8 billion for defense funds to support Ukraine. The White House designated these funds as being in addition to the DoD base budget; at the same time, it increased its request for the State Department by two-thirds, to $5 billion.

On March 11, when the House and Senate finally approved a bipartisan spending bill for fiscal year 2022, more than five months after the fiscal year had already begun on October 1, the so-called Omnibus Appropriation actually included $13.6 billion to support Ukraine. Of that sum, however, $6.5 billion was to replenish the stocks of weapons that the military had transferred to the Kyiv government, as well as to cover the cost of additional military operations, including the dispatch of nearly 10,000 troops to buttress the American presence in the territory of its central and eastern European NATO allies.

Despite the clear bipartisan support for Ukraine, however, the administration continued to prioritize domestic programs over those for national defense. The Democratic leadership in the House of Representatives became hostages to their party's left wing and, in some instances, even to the much smaller group of four, later five, far-left Democratic Socialists who call themselves "the Squad." The House Progressive

The Biden administration had seriously underestimated both the size of the defense budget that it hoped that the Congress would approve and funding levels to support Ukraine.

Caucus numbers 100 members; progressives therefore could, and did, block movement on legislation when they chose to do so. Thus, the progressives' determination to link Biden's popular but costly ($1.3 trillion) infrastructure bill to the even more costly "Build Back Better" proposal, which included almost all of their particular priorities, delayed the passage of the infrastructure bill for the better part of six months.

While the fight over Build Back Better continued to rage, the divided houses of Congress were engaged in another major spending battle, this time over the size of the administration's proposed budget for fiscal year 2022 and its allocation of resources for defense. The White House Interim National Security Strategy, released in March 2021, defined national security in the broadest possible terms, relegating the traditional concept of defense to only a short portion of the text. The document assigned high priority to addressing "a global pandemic, a crushing economic downturn, a crisis of racial justice, and a deepening climate emergency." It fused Democratic domestic priorities with those of national security, arguing not only the need "to redefine America's economic interests in terms of working families' livelihoods, rather than corporate profits or aggregate national wealth" but also "advance[ing] gender equality, LBGTQI+ rights, and women's empowerment as part of our broader commitment to inclusive economic growth and social cohesion."

Defense requirements and budgets occupied only two pages in the 23-page document. Moreover, the Office of Management and Budget Fact Sheet, highlighting the key elements of the president's fiscal year 2022 budget, did not mention defense at all, much less the need to combat threats to American interests worldwide.

The details of the president's budget proposal reflected the White House's new index of priorities. The administration asked Congress to approve a defense budget of $715 billion, including emergency supplemental spending. This sum amounted to an increase of just 1.6% in nominal terms and, when accounting for inflation, was a real decline from the previous year's approved budget. Moreover, as inflation began to spike while Congress was debating the budget proposal, the president's defense request declined even further in real terms. In contrast, the president's budget asked for a real increase in nondefense programs of approximately 16%.

The planned request was actually of a piece with the Biden administration's overall rather negative attitude toward defense spending. In addition, the administration stressed elements of the defense budget that did not actually enhance military capabilities. These included a commitment to increased diversity in the military and ending sexual harassment. The budget request included $617 million for what the administration called "preparing for, adapting to and mitigating climate change." This sum was well beyond the levels that the DoD really needed, such as protecting naval facilities from flooding and air bases from the worst effects of hurricanes. The budget also included over $500 million for "COVID-19 and pandemic preparedness," although it was not at all clear why so large a sum was needed from the Defense Department, as opposed to other government agencies, as a hedge against future pandemics.

The congressional response, however, was to increase defense spending to a level well above the administration's request. The National Defense Authorization Act provided $740 billion for the DoD, an increase of $25 billion. Progressives in the House had bitterly opposed the increase. Indeed, they had sought a 10% decrease in defense spending, but their amendment to that effect was soundly defeated. The defense authorization stalled in the Senate, however.

Appropriations for defense—that is, approval of actual spending—got caught up in the stalemate over the entire budget for fiscal year 2022. As noted, the fiscal year 2022 budget focused heavily on social programs, which Republicans were reluctant to approve in toto. Since appropriations require 60 votes for closure of debate and a vote of approval by the Senate, the Democrats did not have enough votes to get the budget passed. As a result, as had been the case for almost all of the previous decade, the October 1 fiscal year began without a new budget. Instead, the Congress passed a "continuing resolution" to avoid a government shutdown.

U.S. President Joe Biden Delivers Remarks On U.S. Assistance To Ukraine. Photo credit: Rod Lamkey/POOL via CNP/INSTARim via Reuters Connect

A continuing resolution enables the government to continue to function and avoid possible default on its payments. With very few exceptions, however, such a resolution does not enable the government to initiate new programs, termed "new starts." That meant that in practice, the government was functioning on the basis of Trump's fiscal year 2021 program, as opposed to that of Biden for the following fiscal year. It also had serious implications for national defense, because planned new programs, intended to maintain America's critical technological lead over China, could not be initiated, while increases in ongoing programs, such as for F-35 fighter aircraft, could not be implemented either.

The continuing resolution afforded Republicans and Democrats more time to resolve their differences and pass and appropriate funds for fiscal year 2022. Unfortunately, they were not able to do before the resolution terminated on December 3, 2021. Indeed, two other continuing resolutions had to be approved before the fiscal year 2022 appropriation, totaling $1.5 trillion dollars, finally passed in the House on March 9 and the Senate the following day.

The Democrats were able to increase spending on domestic programs substantially, but nowhere nearly as much as their progressive wing had sought. The bill which President Biden signed on March 1, provided for $730 billion for domestic programs, the largest increase in four years. It provided for $782 billion for defense, not only well above what Biden had initially requested, but even above that which the Armed Services Committees had approved only a few months earlier. Indeed, the increase in defense and nondefense programs were close: Nondefense spending grew by $46 billion or 6.7% while defense programs rose by $42 billion, a 5.6% increase.

The congressional appropriation for fiscal year 2022 appeared to indicate that the more extreme elements in both parties were losing their grip, ever so slightly, over the majority of their colleagues. Progressives, who had sought a budget decrease, saw the defense budget rise far beyond the administration's initial request. Those on the far right were equally frustrated. For example, the appropriation legislation overrode the opposition of Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky, who had blocked funding for Israel's Iron Dome program for many months. Unlike members of "the Squad" who opposed funding for the Iron Dome because they simply were against further aid to Israel, Paul did not oppose the program per se. He merely wanted

it to be funded with monies originally earmarked for assistance to Afghanistan. Neither the Squad members nor Paul got their way; the appropriation included $1 billion to fund the Iron Dome.

The appropriation act also included the Israel Relations Normalization Act, which would seek to support the 2020 agreements between Israel and four Arab states. Texas Senator Ted Cruz (R) had opposed language in the act that supported a two-state solution to Israel's dispute with the Palestinians, which has been longstanding American policy. The act had initially won lukewarm support from the Biden administration, and even less support from the progressives, which had identified these agreements with the Trump administration, rather than seeing them as a major step forward toward peace in the Middle East.

The Biden administration had seriously underestimated both the size of the defense budget that it hoped that the Congress would approve and funding levels to support Ukraine. It also overestimated the congressional appetite for spending more money on COVID-19 programs beyond the $1.9 billion American Rescue Plan that the Congress had passed in March 2021.

Even as late as February, some analysts had expressed fears that Congress would not be able to approve an appropriation for the fiscal year 2022 at all, and that one or more continuing resolutions would extend until the beginning of fiscal year 2023. One reason for such pessimism was the upcoming 2022 congressional elections, which most polls indicated would result in a significant Republican majority in the House, and possibly a majority in the Senate as well. The prospect of returning to power in Congress, it was thought, would lead Republicans to obstruct any of the Biden administration's initiatives beyond the American Recovery Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act that passed in 2021. Nevertheless, bipartisan concern over the need to increase the defense budget in the face of Putin's invasion of Ukraine, as well as an agreement to accept increases in domestic spending commensurate with those for defense, led both parties to come to an agreement in March 2022.

At the end of the day, however, the government was unable to agree on a budget for five months after the beginning of the fiscal year. Nor is there any indication that Congress and the administration will reach agreement in time for the passage of a fiscal year 2023 budget before it begins on October 1. Continuing resolutions have become a congressional addiction.

In a January 12, 2022 hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, DoD leaders outlined the impact of these resolutions on the department's ability to operate effectively. David Berger, Commandant of the Marine Corps, summed up the common concern of all the Chiefs of Staff as well as of the civilian leadership of DoD: "Continuing Resolutions are backward looking, destabilizing and decelerating. . . . Future budget certainty—adequate, stable and predictable funding—is the single most effective way to maintain critical strategic momentum as we compete with the pacing threat and enable investment in the force design and modernization required to prevent or prevail in future conflicts."

Virtually all members of Congress voice their agreements with DoD's concerns. Yet they are unlikely to do much to alleviate them. Party leaders blame each other. A primary system that radical activists exploit, coupled with the maladjustment of congressional districts, will continue to bring to Congress, and particularly to the House, members who have no inclination to compromise with their counterparts on the other side of the aisle. A deeply divided nation is also likely to produce tiny, unstable majorities in the Senate. Some legislation will win bipartisan support, but most will not. As a result, the laments of America's military leaders will go unheeded, unless and until America faces a crisis even more threatening than that of Ukraine. Should this happen, it may finally goad legislators into performing one of the most important tasks that the citizenry expect of them, namely, to provide the government with the funds it needs in a structured and timely manner. ✳

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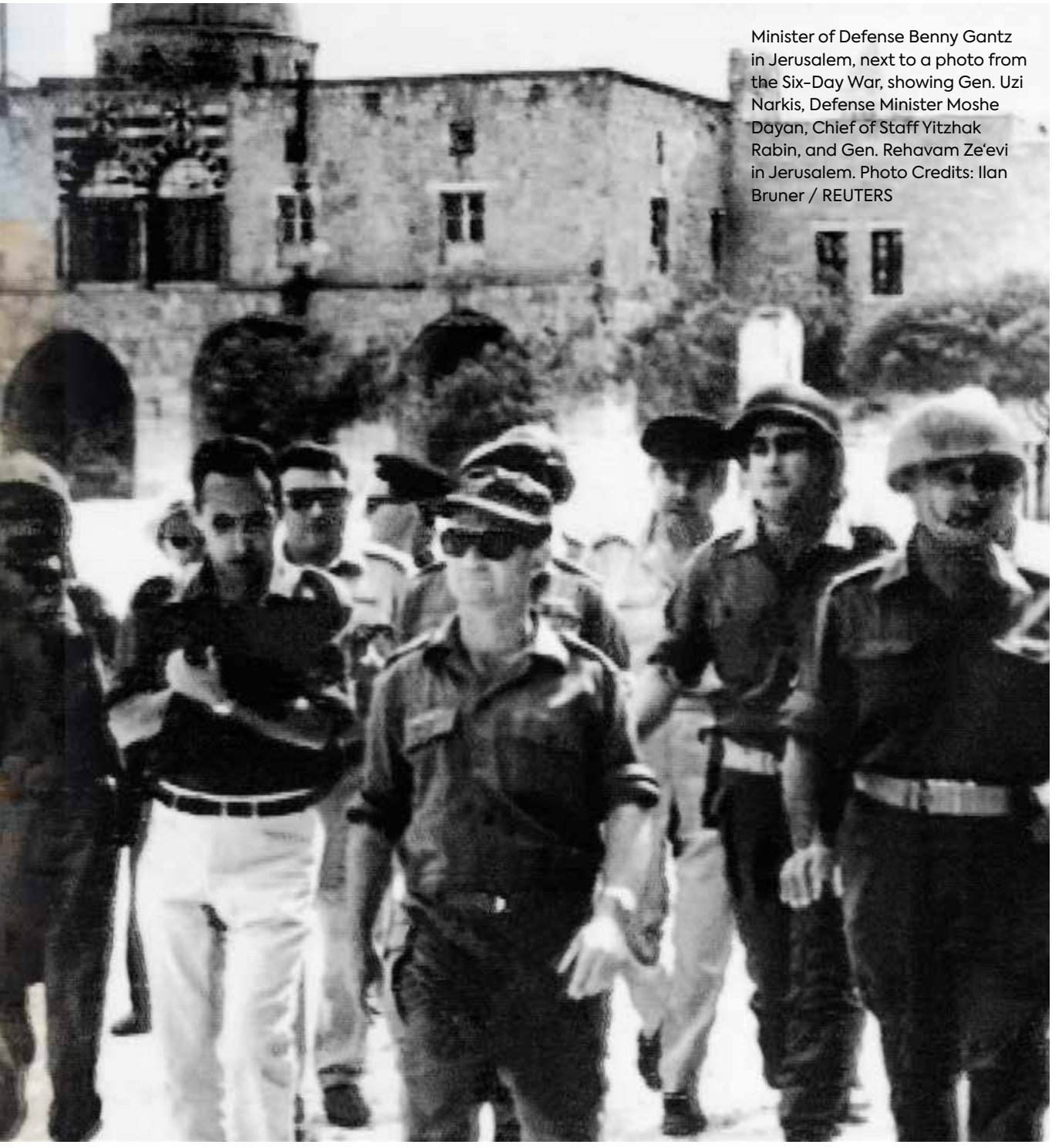
THE ILLUSION EARLY WARNING, AND



Minister of Defense Benny Gantz in Jerusalem, next to a photo from the Six-Day War, showing Gen. Uzi Narkis, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin, and Gen. Rehavam Ze'evi in Jerusalem. Photo Credits: Ilan Bruner / REUTERS

OF DETERRENCE **DECISIVE OUTCOME**

by Yoav Gelber

A precondition for any military strategy is the consolidation of a few principles of a country's security doctrine to guide it. Israel's first, unwritten security doctrine crystallized in the wake of the War of Independence in 1948 and answered the problems of the postwar geopolitical reality: hostile surroundings, indefensible borders without tactical depth—to say nothing of a strategic one, a large part of the population living within the enemies' artillery range, and an army based on a militia of reservists mobilized to face the attack (at that time, full mobilization required a whole week). Two security principles resulted from this reality: (1) Compensating for the lack of depth by moving forward or rapidly transferring the war to the enemy's territory; (2) A strong air force that does not need a lot of manpower and can cover the mobilization, protect the civil population from the enemy's artillery, and determine the campaign on the ground. Israel implemented this doctrine partially in 1956 and fully in 1967.

The Six-Day War in 1967 demanded a critical reexamination of Israel's doctrine given the changed geopolitical realities. Such revision has never been don e. Instead of a defense doctrine compatible with the new circumstances and established on appropriate principles, a virtual doctrine emerged, built upon on slogans and preconceptions. Its pillars were three tenets, which originated in the postwar atmosphere of hubris—deterrence, early warning, and decisive outcome. Unfortunately, they are still valid today.

Let's start with the tenant of governing assumptions or "conceptsia." It became a dirty word in Israel after 1973, a reference to the complacency inherent in the assumption that Egypt would not launch at attach at the Bar Lev Line across the Suez Canal. Conceptual assumptions are, however, essential to any process of thinking and any estimation of a situation. They reflect the preconditions for any course of action or an event. However, to be valid, an assumption's point of departure and basic suppositions should be highly reliable/probable; otherwise it is no more than an illusion. Subsequently, from time to time, fundamental assumptions should be reexamined and reanalyzed to ensure that the necessary conditions have not changed. Such reexamination was not done from the Six-Day War to the Yom Kippur War. On the contrary, rather than regularly scrutinize its validity, the assumption became the covenant of the Israeli Intelligence Directorate. Instead of occasionally examining its compatibility with the changing circumstances, the Intelligence Directorate adapted the facts to the assumption

A similar, less prominent, less famous but equally harmful assumption was the operational one, which stemmed from three axioms:

(1) The IDF will have an early warning of few days before the outbreak of war; (2) In case of surprise attack, the regular army and the air force will block the attack until the reservists can be mobilized and move to counterattack; (3) 300 tanks will suffice to defend the Sinai Peninsula.

Since Israel did not want and did not need a war, discouraging the Arabs from launching a new war became the central pillar of its defense doctrine after 1967. However, deterrence is a psychological construct that conceals many pitfalls, and it is difficult—if not irresponsible—to make it a foundation of a state's security doctrine. The principal hindrance is that the deterring power may not know when its opponent ceases to be deterred. Deterrence does not end with the outbreak of war but long before, when the party that hitherto had been deterred until then made up its mind to hit the road and prepare for war in earnest.

The clearest definition of the meaning of indecision was given a few months before the Yom Kippur War by Chief of Staff Elazar: "A war that in its end both sides will claim to be triumphant will be a defeat for the IDF." This was a prophecy that came true several times after the 1973 war both in Lebanon and in Gaza.

During 1967–1974, Israel's military leadership understood deterrence in terms of the balance of military power and the outcomes of local, limited skirmishes. It gained confidence from both the IDF's technological superiority and the results of air battles, raids, and battle days. The army's prestige and popularity after 1967 helped bolster its leaders' self-confidence that war could be prevented by deterrence, and there was no need to concede anything to the Arabs and certainly not to accept all their stipulations. This persuasion increased over time, and their arrogance was reinforced when the Egyptian threats of war did not materialize.

The political leadership relied on the army and this confidence, which was not completely justified, made it easier to resist pressures to compromise and concede. The only advantage of the political leaders over the professionals who assist them in collecting the data and estimating situations lies in their assessment of the leaders of the opposing side. They alone are familiar with the isolation of those at the head of the pyramid and can empathize with, understand or, at least guess what transpires in their minds and hearts. Then Prime Minister Golda Meir, however, did not pass this test, as she admitted to and regretted her underestimating of Sadat.

Relying on the army's approach to deterrence in topographic and military terms only blinded the Israeli leaders from seeing other factors that affected deterrence. The political leadership, more than warlords, should have considered leadership, motivation, national honor, sovereignty, perceptions of success and failure, the significance of casualties or the use of elements of national potential, such as economic power or international support. Moshe Dayan might have been somewhat of an exception, but he was inconsistent in his attitude toward these issues and did not fight for his ideas about deterrence when they exceeded the limits of consensus and provoked opposition among his colleagues.

When the deterrent stops deterring, early warning then becomes important. If the

deterring party is warned of the loss of the deterrence or even of its weakening, steps can then be taken to reconstruct it. Although if there is no early warning, the deterring party continues to live with the illusion that it is successfully deterring the adversary, and ultimately, that party will be surprised to find out that a war has broken out. This is precisely what happened to Israel in 1973, and several times later until most recently in May 2021.

If deterrence is a psychological trap in wars between states, then all the more so when fighting against guerilla and terror organizations—especially suicide terrorists. Actually, the concept "deterrence" does not exist in this type of warfare. The goals of the adversaries are far apart; the balance of power and casualties have no meaning; the initiative for war always starts with the irregular side, while the counterguerilla troops are restricted to responding; the principles of international law and war ethics are central only to the regular army and limit its freedom of action and movement. Under such circumstances, it is possible to thwart and reduce terrorism but seldom can it be routed out completely. A lesson learned from the last confrontation in Gaza is that Israel needs to reconsider its security doctrine and adapt it to Lebanon and Gaza of the 21st century. To repeat the follies of 2006, 2009, 2012, 2014, and 2021 will be far worse than stupid.

Early alert or warning has been perceived in Israel as the "golden nugget of information": unilateral news about the enemy's intention to launch war and its time table. This was the kind of information that the Israeli Intelligence Directorate waited for before the Yom Kippur War. However, such an animal has yet to be born in real life. Even the "golden news" that arrived in the early morning hours of Saturday, October 6 would not have been perceived as such without the infrastructure of earlier information that preceded it. Early warning is a process, not an act or an event that is parallel to the preparations of war on the other side. Such a process took place in Gaza in the last year; but for all we know from the media and the press writings about a temporary accord and how much Hamas strives for it and does not want war, Israel's intelligence and/or their political bosses appears to have missed it this time as well.

Decisive outcome (or what some would call a "victory") is an even more vague concept. At the end of the 1980s, Ehud Barak attempted to define it through the concept of destruction: hitting X percent of a unit meant its destruction. Still, the concept itself remained vague; for example, is a tank considered destroyed when its turret is hit and it has lost its capability of producing fire? Is it destroyed when it loses its mobility and cannot maneuver? Or is it destroyed when the crew is killed or injured and stops functioning? It is easy and requires only a little imagination to extrapolate from the individual tank to a unit, a formation, or a whole army.

The Six-Day War, dramatic as its course may have been, ended in what can be described retrospectively as a partial decisive outcome. The Arab armies lost their combat capacity, but the outcome was insufficient to force the Arab states to accept Israel's minimum political demands. The Yom Kippur War ended with no clear-cut decisive military outcome , as after the ceasefire Golda Meir admitted to her colleagues that "it is a draw. We are on the west side and they are on the east side." Wars of attrition continued on both the Egyptian and Syrian fronts after the ceasefire (in the long run, the war brought about the Israel–Egypt peace agreement). The first war in Lebanon in 1982 also ended indecisively and was followed by a long war of attrition that lasted until the IDF's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, which led to the Second Intifada. The clearest definition of the meaning of indecision was given a few months before the Yom Kippur War by Chief of Staff Elazar: "A war that in its end both sides will claim to be triumphant will be a defeat for the IDF." This was a prophecy that came true several times after the 1973 war both in Lebanon and in Gaza.

At that time, Elazar meant regular war between armies. Decisive outcome is an even more evasive concept in fighting against guerilla

The Six Day War. A portrait of Egyptian President Abdul Nasser leaning against a destroyed Egyptian tank. Sinai, Egypt. 1967. Photo credit: Micha Bar Am / Magnum Photos

or terrorist organizations. In such cases, there is little meaning in measuring the percent of destruction, while excessive harm to non-combatant populations may act as a boomerang. Decisive outcomes are usually achieved when the enemy has lost its capability of fighting. Only in very few wars did armies manage to subdue guerrilla organizations to this level. A good example is the British army's success against the Arabs in Palestine in the fall of 1938 and against the rebels in Malaya in the early 1950s. A more recent and relevant example is the IDF's operation Defensive Shield in 2002–2003. At the same time, a guerilla or terror organization has no chances of winning a campaign against an army. A guerilla or terror organization can only harass an army to accomplish political goals like national liberation in the campaigns of decolonization, or become itself a regular army capable of winning on the battlefield, as Mao Tse Tung showed in 1949.

Israel's defense doctrine should thus be reassessed, if deterrence is irrelevant to anti-guerilla and anti-terror warfare and given the difficulties in achieving decisive outcomes against guerilla and terror warfare. It needs a reset, followed by an analysis of the geopolitical situation in the Middle East in general and in every potential arena of military activity from Iran to Gaza. This analysis, in turn, should yield a short list of principles that will guide the rebuilding and operation of Israel's armed forces. This is not a subject for speeches, statements, and declarations but for quiet consultations and debates, drawing conclusions and taking the necessary actions. ✳

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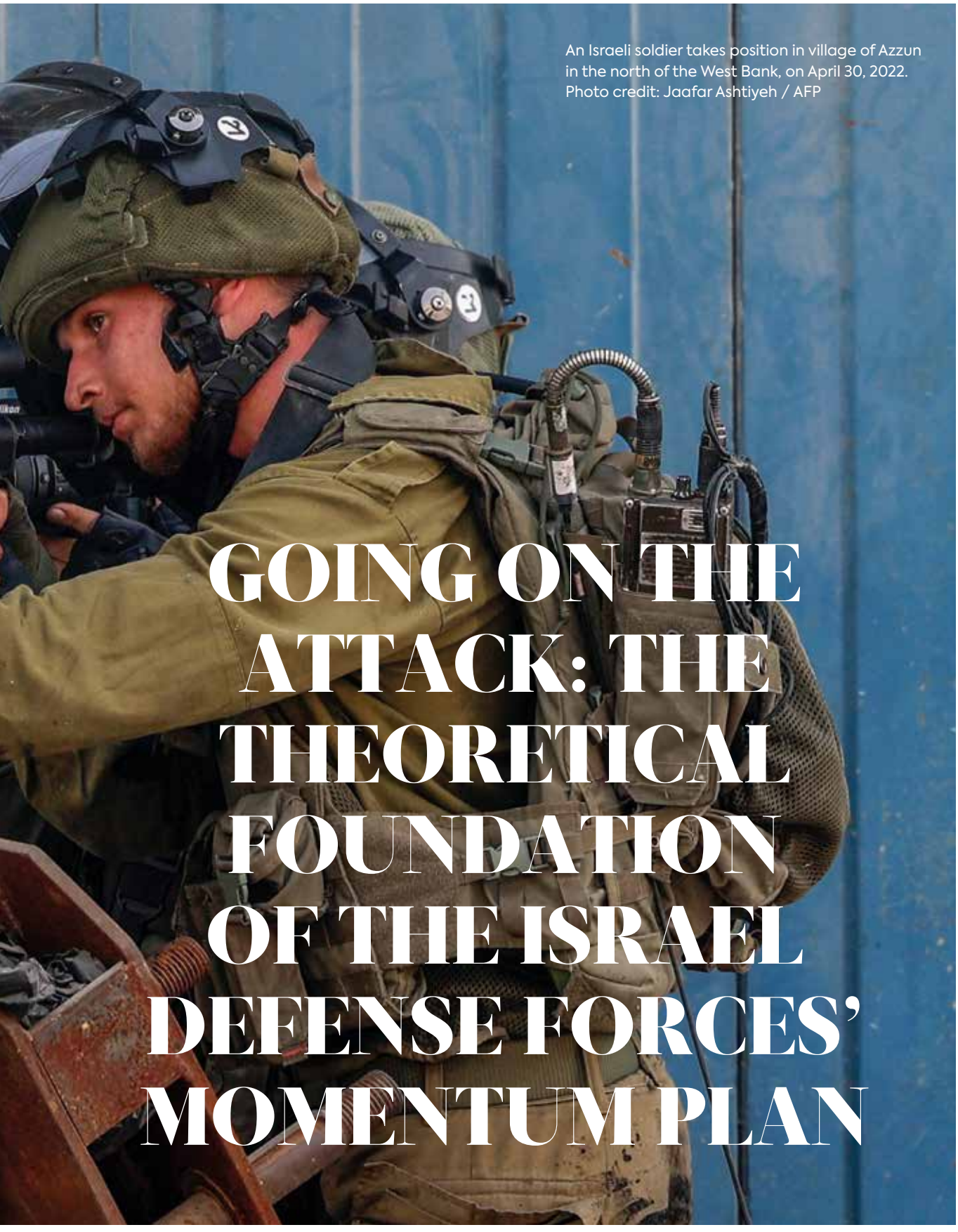


An Israeli soldier takes position in village of Azzun in the north of the West Bank, on April 30, 2022. Photo credit: Jaafar Ashtiyeh / AFP

GOING ON THE ATTACK: THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF THE ISRAEL DEFENSE FORCES' MOMENTUM PLAN

by Eran Ortal

The planners of the Israel Defense Forces came to view Israel's main threat as emanating from "asymmetric" forces, a concept that emerged in a context of clear Israeli military supremacy against all neighboring conventional armies. Since then, however, Iran has challenged Israel's military supremacy both directly and indirectly. The arsenals of Iran's proxies on Israel's borders have required the enemy to be redefined as terror "armies." Thus, the threat to Israel has grown significantly and changed in nature. The theoretical framework of the IDF's "Operational Concept for Victory," which is the basis for the 2020 "Momentum" Multiyear Plan, therefore defines Israel's new reality, lays out an updated approach for decisive victory against capable adversaries, and provides a theoretical and practical outline for the necessary force design requirements.

INTRODUCTION

During 2019–2020, the IDF released two important publications: "The Momentum Multiyear Plan" and a conceptual document, "The Operational Concept for Victory." The two documents indicate a significant change in the way the IDF sees both itself and its adversaries. At the heart of these publications lies the IDF's understanding that reactive measures are insufficient to confront contemporary challenges. Instead, the IDF must undergo a fundamental change.

This necessity for change is shaped by two core factors:

✷ The IDF's new understanding of the military challenge—Israel's adversaries are "diffuse, rocket-based terror armies" (i.e., not just guerrilla or terror organizations). The IDF must come to a new understanding of its enemies and reinvent itself in light of this understanding. That will be the focus of the first section of this article.

✷ The IDF's potential for change—A driver for change is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Change happens when we also identify new opportunities of which we have not yet taken full advantage. In this case, our opportunities lie in the recent developments in the digital revolution, also known as the "fourth industrial revolution."

The new IDF operational concept and the Momentum Plan rest on a theoretical framework based on these two factors.

THE EMERGENCE OF ROCKET-BASED TERROR ARMIES

The 1990s and 2000s shaped the IDF's worldview and how it has perceived reality since then. These two decades represent a relatively rare moment in military history of near-total dominance of advanced Western militaries. This military supremacy was primarily manifested in airpower that increasingly looked like it could win wars on its own from then on, without any real danger to ground forces or to the country itself.

Israel's foes had ample reason to take its air supremacy seriously. The dissolution of the Soviet Union suspended the development of Syria's air force and its anti-aircraft missiles for more than a decade. The memory of the defeat of the Syrian air force and the destruction of its surface-to-air missile array by the Israeli Air Force in the 1982 First Lebanon War was still fresh in the minds of Syrian generals when they witnessed up close the overwhelming display of American airpower in the 1991 Gulf War.

As prominent military thinkers in the West and in Israel celebrated the seemingly historic victory of airpower in the 1999 Kosovo conflict, the other side had already determined the main elements of its response to Western airpower—concealment, transitioning from armored warfare to low-signature light infantry, proxy warfare, and long-range fires as a primary tactical and strategic tool. IDF researchers Carmit Valensi and Itai Brun called this development the "other revolution in military affairs." This revolution is rooted in diverse conditions—the weakening of Middle Eastern states, the Islamic revolution in Iran, the breakup of the Soviet Union, and, of course, the revolutions in information technology and in military affairs (RMA) in the 1990s—leading to the total dominance of Western militaries and the IDF as a result.

The IDF called these enemies, which developed in the 1990s and 2000s, "asymmetric," emphasizing their military inferiority. In Southern Lebanon, Gaza, and the West Bank, the IDF found itself fighting forces that were indeed inferior militarily. The main challenge, as the IDF saw it at the time, was in the limitations that the IDF had self-imposed, and not the enemy's capabilities.

Still, worrying signs indicated an erosion of Israel's air supremacy as early as the 1990s.

"It is not enough that we do our best; sometimes we must do what is required."
—Winston S. Churchill

All the IDF's campaigns during the 1990s in Lebanon and Gaza featured extended periods of fighting, with rising costs and increasing strikes on the Israeli home front, a threat that remained relevant even after the introduction of the Iron Dome system in the 2012 Operation Pillar of Defense against Hamas.

The disappointing results of these campaigns were usually attributed to the familiar challenges of counterinsurgency and counterguerrilla warfare. The IDF's successful fight against terror in the West Bank in the early 2000s contributed further to the failure to distinguish between the phenomena emerging over the border in Lebanon (and later in Gaza) and the challenges posed by asymmetric adversaries. The apparent paradox between the total supremacy of the IDF and the ambiguous results of the campaigns against Hamas and Hezbollah caused frustration among both decision makers and the Israeli public.

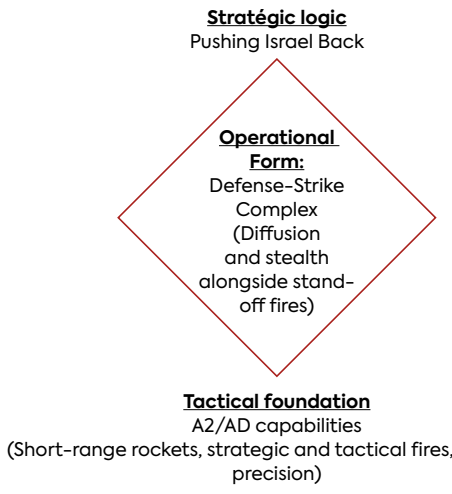
In this regard, the Operational Concept for Victory, and the term "rocket-based terror armies" are important guideposts in the Israeli understanding of the challenge. The IDF no longer speaks of "asymmetric warfare" against "inferior forces," in which Israel's main limits on the use of force are self-imposed. It no longer sees Hezbollah and Hamas as challenges rooted in "insurgency" or "guerrilla warfare." Rather, the new IDF operational concept describes the enemy as an advanced networked adversary that has cracked the secret of Israel's military power and presents Israel with an operational challenge that serves enemy strategy. These are organized, well-trained armies, well-equipped for their missions, with straightforward operational ideas and tactics, all of which support a clear and dangerous strategy and ideology.

Moreover, the IDF's recent publications represent an understanding that the paradigm of deterrence operations is a dead-end strategic and doctrinal pattern. Such operations were not meant to be decisive victories and only served to inoculate the enemy against IDF power by gradually exposing him to limited doses of our capabilities, while indicating to the enemy that his military concept is effective and that he should continue to develop it. The operational concept at the heart of the Momentum Plan

effectively accepts this argument. Limited operations are still an available alternative for decision makers, but the main test of Israel's military power is that of decisive victory. This includes the ability to not only defeat a terror army like Hezbollah but also to do it relatively quickly, at an acceptable cost to our forces and our home front, and in a way that is irrefutable.

THE MAIN DISTINGUISHING ATTRIBUTES OF THE MILITARY THREAT FACING ISRAEL

The enemy's "system" can be defined by its strategic logic, its practical tactical manifestations, and the operational idea that connects the two. At the strategic level, Iran directs the enemy's system, which seeks to deprive Israel of its regional position. This threat will gradually intensify Israel's security challenges through deterrence and is based on fire bases created around Israel's borders (at this stage, Lebanon and Gaza). At the operational level, these fire bases rest on two complementary principles—self-protection in complex environments and massive strikes. At the tactical level, this operational form is enabled by familiar tactics, like ambushes or other hit-and-run attacks, and especially by the ability to strike effectively from a distance. In other words, these are anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities (military capabilities designed to deter or delay deployment of the other side's into a given theater or to prevent their effectiveness of operation in that theater) of tactical proportions.



The persistent attacks in recent years by Iranian proxies and/or by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps against Saudi and Emirati targets offer a model of action that could be turned against Israel.

In a similar manner, under the cover of the deterrence that fire bases along Israel's border can create, Iran is trying to strengthen its hold on the areas adjacent to Israel. In parallel, Iran is working toward nuclear capabilities that will become, in its eyes, the ideal deterrent and will allow Iran even more freedom of action to undermine the regional order.

What can we learn from the changing nature of the threat Israel faces? Modern military history can be seen as alternating waves of the dominance of offense and defense, of maneuver and fire. The precision-fire revolution of the 1980s and 1990s negated the need for non-Western conventional armies to maneuver on the battlefield. The adversary's adaptation to this reality has moved from reducing its vulnerabilities in airpower in the 1990s and 2000s to a new phase of gaining precision-strike capabilities of its own. Israel's enemy can now strike from a relatively safe distance, beyond the range at which Israel—the target—can respond, thus threatening the IDF's freedom of action on the battlefield. Effective fires cause damage and thus serves as a deterrent. This capability allows adversaries to carry out an escalating insurgent strategy, which undermines the existing order and the balance of forces in the region.

The challenge that Israel faces is a particular manifestation of a global military phenomena—A2/AD-based defense-strike complexes. These are a global development and the product of the contemporary military era, whose essence is the dominance of fire over maneuver. IDF Researcher Dvir Peleg coined the phrase "defense-strike complex" to describe the phenomenon of regional powers (Russia and China) taking advantage of stand-off fires technology in order to extract a high cost from the US if it chooses to intervene in regional crises. The Russians and Chinese are not "asymmetrical" but are instead "near-peer competitors" in American eyes. If the US decides to protect its interests and fulfill its commitments to allies threatened by Russia

The world's first supersonic unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV). Photo credit: Kelley Aerospace/Cover Images via Reuters Connect

or China, it will face a real threat to its planes, ships, and regional bases. A broad escalation would also mean the US itself is threatened by ballistic missiles—a threat that includes nuclear weapons at its extreme. Under the cover of this threat, Russia and China are carrying out a gradual subversive campaign that rests on gray zone warfare—small steps, below the level of war, that gradually increase their influence.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

In the past, the IDF knew how to take advantage of technological advances in order to develop groundbreaking concepts. The precision-fire revolution, as mentioned above, forced the Syrian military to go from a strategy of strategic parity on land and in the air, to a concept of limited confrontation with Israel, relying heavily on proxy forces. If we have indeed identified the main directions of change needed to face our enemies, how can the technological potential developed over the last decade, part of the so-called fourth industrial revolution, allow us to achieve a new, much needed, breakthrough?

Automation and advanced information processing enable the creation of battlefield sensing, processing, and rapid strikes complexes—a form of reconnaissance—as part of the maneuvering force. As opposed to the main elements of intelligence gathering and processing, which operate detached from the maneuvering force, the tactical reconnaissance complex will be based on networked unmanned aerial vehicles and radars receiving and deciphering the signatures emitted by the

enemy during combat. Interconnected data and advanced information processing could break through the current glass ceiling blocking more effective results from the intelligence/air force attack system and could allow more information to be processed more rapidly, in turn enabling more targets to be attacked more quickly and accurately.

The Momentum Plan is complemented by a conceptual framework that enables a clear set of practical priorities in a resource-starved reality. The theoretical framework must answer three fundamental questions:

✷ What is the foundational idea that enables a better use of military force?

✷ How do we fix the clock while it is still ticking? In other words, how do we change the force without replacing it at an exorbitant cost, while maintaining and improving its readiness for immediate challenges?

✷ What is all this meant to achieve? In other words, what is the operational goal of Momentum's force design?

The IDF's "Operational Concept for Victory" answers these questions through three primary principles:

Principle 1: Multidomain

The idea of multidomain should be understood as a new quality of combat-integration of air, land, intelligence, electro-magnetic, cyber, and other dimensions, never before possible by traditional command-and-control mechanisms.

The idea of multidomain comes from two insights: First, complex problems need complex solutions. Israel's enemies present a complex problem that includes a closed, populated combat environment; stealth; diffusion; diverse strike capabilities; and legal and psychological snares. The multidomain principle expands military maneuver capabilities from geographic realms of land, air, and sea to other dimensions of cyber, electro-magnetic spectrum, information, and subterranean, and provide a new realm of opportunity to pose dilemmas to the enemy.

Second, we live in an age of integration. Not only does the nature of our adversary require it, but also the era we live in demands new, closer synergy that was not possible before. The age of integration allows us today to build forces that can operate cyber, electronic warfare, air, sensors, information processing, strike, and ground elements on the tactical level. These means will not replace the institutional services and the professionalism that provides highly advanced air, intelligence, telecommunications, and cyber capabilities.

The multidomain principle at the tactical level is simple. The more we develop independent, organic operational capabilities that function simultaneously in different domains under one command framework and toward one defined mission, the more room we will have to maneuver and confound our adversaries, while their ability to adapt effectively wanes. This is the guiding principle for developing capabilities in the Momentum Multiyear Plan.

Principle 2: "Smart" Responses

Often the term "transformation" is seen as a utopian fantasy of a state-of-the-art modern military force, which takes massive investments in time and resources to build. Indeed, the question is often asked—how can a military organization change at acceptable cost and in a reasonable time frame, while maintaining its readiness for war?

The principle that resolves this tension is the idea of the "smart suit." The idea can be explained by the "smart city" metaphor. The city already exists—paved roads, municipal services, places of business, neighborhoods, traffic lights, cultural and athletic institutions, and, of course, the residents are already there. To create a more effective, "smart" city—one that uses less energy while providing better services, one that makes do with fewer police while providing more security, in addition to being more accessible and less crowded—more investment in the traditional infrastructure is not necessary. Instead, a new layer is needed—a communications and sensor network built on the basis of existing infrastructure, which will gather and process information in order to provide insights on how to better make use of existing resources. Digitization of production processes, including agriculture, medicine, and

industry, is another example of adding a layer of sensors and data processing on top of existing infrastructure.

By donning a "smart suit," Israel's existing military force can adapt to the challenge of fires-based stealth enemies without harming its immediate readiness for war and without demanding impossible budgets. In practical terms, this means a reconnaissance screen-based on squadrons of UAVs belonging to tactical forces, synergy of intelligence and sensing means, all of which is connected to joint databases and effective information extraction systems. This will allow us to locate the enemy more precisely and more rapidly. Creating this platform is not cheap, but the "smart suit" allows us to base our solution on the existing force while clothing it in affordable and practical modernization elements.

Principle 3: Negating Enemy Capabilities

In the past, the IDF defeated Arab armies by using maneuvers in enemy territory to threaten encirclement and to cause them to collapse. This is how the IDF brought about the collapse of the Egyptian army in the Negev and in the Sinai deserts in the four major wars from 1948 to 1973, forced both the Jordanian army to retreat from the West Bank and the Syrian army from the Golan Heights in 1967. However, against fire-based terror armies, it is unlikely that in a future conflict capturing territory and threatening to surround them will achieve similar results. Territory is an important asset for the enemy system, but it is no longer the ultimate purpose of the system. The new enemy fights to maintain continuous fire into Israeli territory. Since the IDF cannot stop the fire attack through intelligence/stand-off fires alone, the central aim of the Momentum Plan is to design a force that can negate the enemy's combat capabilities, first and foremost fire capabilities.

In conclusion, two central elements of the response to the enemy's defense-strike complex threat are being developed, utilizing the technological potential of the fourth industrial revolution:

✷ A quicker and more precise ability to locate enemy forces—This is attainable primarily during tactical contact that forces the defender to take actions that emit signatures. Locating the enemy and striking its prepared hideouts or as the enemy moves between them will neutralize the enemy's ability to operate as a system.

✷ Fire suppression—The tactical purpose of enemy actions is to enable fire on Israel's civilian home front and fire against the IDF's maneuvering forces. Enemy fire is the only time that the enemy reveals himself in an unequivocal fashion. The moment of fire is thus the main weakness of an adversary whose main strength is stealth. This moment must become a core component of the effort to locate the enemy. Destroying the sources of fire in this window of time will neutralize the combat capabilities of fire-based adversaries.

CONCLUSION

The new operational concept comes largely from the new understanding of the nature of threats facing the State of Israel and the opportunities inviting the IDF to change. At the heart of the updated IDF operational concept and the Momentum Plan is a fundamental change. The challenge of the Momentum Plan is to match the IDF's existing might to the evolved threat, and to enable Israel to go on the attack—to return to short wars, decisive victory, and removal of the main military threat to Israel, that of rocket fire. Negating the threat of rocket fire will give Israel significant strategic freedom of action and will thwart the adversary's rebuilding efforts after the war. The Momentum Plan aims to address this challenge by taking full advantage of the emergent technological potential in order to make the IDF a "smart" war machine. ✳

ERAN ORTAL

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IDF Chief of Staff in consultation with Eli Zeira, director of Israel's Directorate of Military Intelligence, during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Photo credit: IDF Spokesperson's Unit/CC BY-SA 3.0

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO **ALTERNATIVE VIEWS IN INTELLIGENCE ANALYSIS?**

by Amir Oren

It is mid-July 1958, and the Middle East is on fire. Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion calls in the US ambassador and tells him that what is taking place is "the most important political event since the Second World War." Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser seems to be on a roll. Syria recently joined Egypt as the junior partner in a United Arab Republic. Now a Nasserite Iraqi general, Abd al-Karim Qasim, has taken over Baghdad by gunning down the pro-Western prime minister and his royal backers. Lebanon is teetering—this would soon become the site of the first American military deployment into the Levant—and Jordan could fall too, encircling Israel by a Nasser-controlled, Soviet-supported hostile ring.

That long-forgotten episode is an interesting case study in crisis management—although King Hussein ultimately survived yet another plot (and went on to rule for 40 additional years), and Qasim turned out to be an Iraqi nationalist, who put Iraq's national aspirations ahead of Cairo's and Moscow's. The danger of a ring of hostility was abated. Thanks to declassified top-secret minutes of Israel's cabinet sessions, Ben-Gurion's approach to the intelligence operations policy nexus is now publicly available. It provides context for what would take place 15 years later—the role of assessment error ("low probability") in the failure to brace properly for the Yom Kippur War.

Yom Kippur is etched in memory as Israel's Pearl Harbor, but the lessons learned by American leaders, first in Congress and then in the Executive Branch (with Truman, the senator-turned-president playing successive roles in both), were turned upside down by the Israeli system of having two or three ministers in charge of various agencies.

In Washington, the separate intelligence entities of the Departments of State, War, Navy, and the FBI (whose beat was the Western hemisphere) were shown to need integration; hence the creation of the Central Intelligence Agency. In Jerusalem, the argument was that intelligence was too centralized in the run-up to the 1973 Yom Kippur War, with skeptics drowned out by an almighty, overbearing Directorate of Military Intelligence.

Following that war, the Agranat Commission of Inquiry found fault in the alleged total

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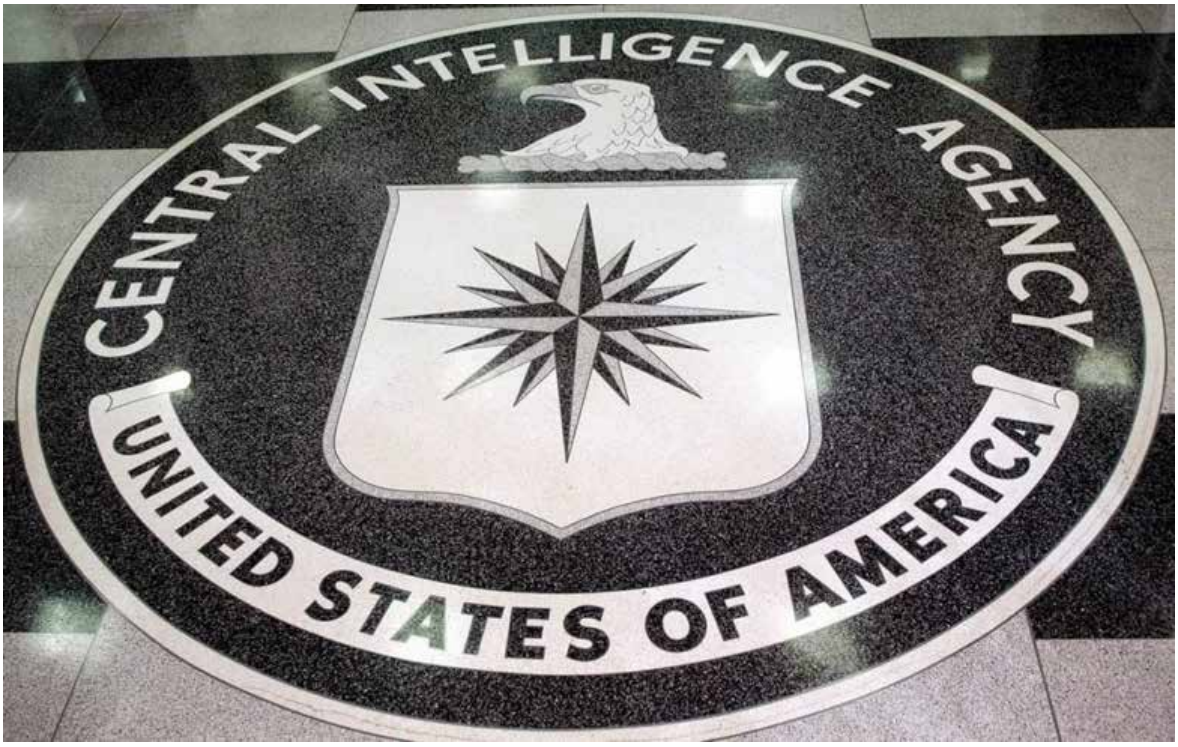

In Washington, the separate intelligence entities of the Departments of State, War, Navy, and the FBI needed integration. Photo credit: REUTERS

reliance on the DMI and recommended a fundamental reform. The two major tenets would be bolstering the analytical role of other members of the intelligence community (a newly established research function in the Mossad and the Foreign Ministry's political research center) and creating the position of intelligence advisor to the prime minister.

Five decades later, with enough data to measure the success of this reform (forced on reluctant governments), one should first go back to Ben-Gurion's doctrine, as revealed in that 1958 brain-storming among Israel's leaders.

"This goes to show you," as Israel's Prime Minister and Defense Minister Ben-Gurion stated, "that Intelligence—both British and American—is worthless. They knew nothing until the last moment, that such a thing was being planned."

Education Minister Zalman Aran, who earlier had led the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee—a key supervisory organ in the Israeli system of government—echoed Ben-Gurion's sentiments: "As you noted, all of the Intelligences went bankrupt. When do you know that someone went bankrupt? Once the bankruptcy is announced. That's why I want to draw your attention to what could come next," a reference to his fear of an Arab revolt within Israel.

That contingency aside, Ben-Gurion focused on the main issue, posed to him by another minister: "If this spreads further, do you think they could soon dare to do harm to Israel?" To which Ben-Gurion's response was, "I can't say what they are going to do. I have to see the potentially most severe development. This is how I go about it at all times. If it does not happen, great, but one has to be prepared for the worst eventuality. The human being is not a rational creature. You don't know what forces push on, what awakens on certain moments.

I can't rely on a theory, what would happen if we do something or not. I may have a basis for an assumption, but will not build on that, not endanger our existence through a theory. One has to assume the worst option."

In other words, he was arguing in favor of a worst-case decision maker and of zero complacency, when the stakes are so high that national survival may be in the balance. Yet this in itself does not mean any particular action—mobilization, prevention, diplomacy. The immediate need is for awareness of options, risks, opportunities, and timelines. The professional intelligence mechanisms are only one part, albeit an essential one, in this system.

The emerging State of Israel was fortunately not dependent on strategic intelligence gathered by its underground collection service, which was tactically adapted to Jewish–Palestinian fighting (and to giving support to Zionist diplomacy) but was not useful for assessing Arab governments, their capabilities, and their intentions.

Thus, in 1948, and for the next two decades, the key role of strategic assessment was played by the foreign ministers—Moshe Sharett, Golda Meir, or Abba Eban—always among the three most influential members of the government led by Israel's then ruling Mapai Party (later to become the Labor Party). They were all experienced diplomats, assisted by able foreign service officers in embassies and at the Jerusalem head office. It was ludicrous to portray a military man briefing the Cabinet on political developments. Ben-Gurion hardly ever invited officers under the level of the chief of general staff to attend ministerial meetings.

Ironically, considering the later call for multiplicity of intelligence assessments, in earlier years there was no dearth of conflicting interpretations of data collected by the various arms of the Israeli government. While DMI heads rotated in and out, a competing power center emerged in the person of Isser Harel, whose authority spanned both the Mossad for external intelligence and the General Security Service, better known as the Shabak, for internal intelligence. On two major occasions, Harel challenged the DMI's relative optimism following the veiled threat of Soviet Premier Bulganin to strike Israel unless it withdrew from Sinai in 1956 and when German rocket scientists were recruited to help Nasser against Israel in the early 1960s.

The secretive Harel went by the unofficial title "ha-Memune," which can be roughly translated as "the Supervisor." After Harel's falling out with Ben-Gurion over the German scientists episode and subsequently being forced to resign, one Israeli minister wondered aloud what Harel was actually supervising—did he really have official authority over both civilian intelligence agencies?

Just before he left office, Ben-Gurion appointed two respected officials to examine the structure of the intelligence community and recommend reforms, if necessary. The two were retired General Yigal Yadin and long-time Cabinet Secretary Ze'ev Sherf. Their report was submitted to then Prime Minister Levi Eshkol,

In a perfect world, political decision makers would have shared everything with those officers and these heads of intelligence organizations would always be accompanied by a person from within their bureaucracy who dissented from the chief's assessment. Perfect, perhaps, it is, but in one word, impractical.

who implemented some of the proposals, including moving the Shabak from the Defense Ministry to the Prime Minister's office—an important act that ensured that the two agencies would no longer be run by the same person. But Eshkol did not fully embrace the other major recommendation, to appoint an advisor on intelligence affairs who would serve as a sort of director of national intelligence (as established in the US after 9/11), but without an organization of his own, yet competing with the established chiefs by virtue of seniority and proximity to the prime minister. This would have been a recipe for friction, and Eshkol was averse to friction.

For a while Eshkol had what he euphemistically called "a general advisor"—first Sherf, then Harel—who chaired, or at least participated in, meetings of the big three intel chiefs, sometimes also attended by senior officials from the Prime Minister's Office, the Foreign Ministry, and the National Police. But the human explosive charge named Harel detonated, with shrapnel hitting his rivals, as well as Eshkol. The advisor's position was eliminated, Sherf and Harel went into politics, and Eshkol, as well as his successor Golda Meir, did just fine by relying on the DMI for analysis at the national level and on the Mossad for international espionage and other chores.

And yet Yadin (who was also a famous archeologist) had not said his last word. After the 1973 failure, he was invited to serve as the leading military authority in the five-member commission of inquiry led by Shimon Agranat, then the chief justice of the Supreme Court. There Yadin again pushed his pet project, pluralism writ large. Let a thousand flowers, or at least three, bloom. No longer will the DMI reign supreme. The Foreign Ministry and the Mossad, reinforced by officers taken out of the same limited reservoir, will offer their political and defense superiors a variety of assessments. A menu of analysis will be provided, rather than an à la carte meal cooked in one kitchen.

This was a simplistic proposition even when first unveiled. To begin with, the DMI's head office was not the only organization offering intelligence assessments. In the narrower realm of their particular turfs, the intelligence divisions of the Air Force, the Navy, and the Territorial Commands could offer their independent assessments, although they were more junior and not privy to all national sources of information. Thus, on the eve of the 1973 War, the director of Naval Intelligence issued a war warning to the naval fleet, approved by the Navy chief, based on unusual patterns of Egyptian ship movements. These departments were rightfully upgraded and more listened to, and a "devil's advocate" was set up to present an alternative assessment. Still, the DMI held the abiding responsibility for assessments at the national level.

In fact, politicians actually prefer clear-cut intelligence judgements. Snide remarks crept into the councils of war. Responding to a remark by Chief of Staff David Elazar that "[the DMI] says that the Iraqis are not in Damascus yet," Defense Minister Moshe Dayan quipped, "DMI says no, but in its paper it writes yes. Maybe there are several DMIs." This was a fair critique of the practice where the intelligence briefer does not conform to the document painstakingly produced by others, to the point of giving the opposite impression. The intelligence organization then stands accused of trying to hedge its bets, in an either-or fashion.

Dayan, however, was the last person with a legitimate claim in this regard. Three days before the war, with warnings coming in but not yet substantiated (as well they could not, because only on that very day did Egypt's Anwar Sadat bring the Syrian High Command in on his plan for joint action), Dayan told his colleagues that he was not worried about an Egyptian attack, primarily because the Suez Canal was quite an obstacle and even if crossed, Israel proper was another hundreds of kilometers eastward. Dayan, Ben-Gurion's protege and political heir, forgot the worst-case scenario.

As soon as the wartime director of the DMI, Eli Zeira, was replaced by Shlomo Gazit,

the chilling effect was immediately obvious. Tensions were still high between Israel and Syria, while US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's Damascus–Jerusalem shuttle went on. There were indications that the Syrian Army would attack. Then again, maybe not. Gazit heaped all "18 options" to choose from on Dayan, lest he be charged once again with being recklessly optimistic.

One of Zeira's main rebuttals to the Agranat report was that his political superiors denied him crucial information regarding secret diplomatic contacts between Meir, Kissinger, and Sadat. Meir kept it to herself and three or four confidants, excluding her intraparty rival Dayan and his subordinates, among them Zeira. How can an estimate be wholesome and relevant, when a key piece is withheld?

Moreover, the intelligence professional is never steeped in political culture in quite the same way as his customer—a prime minister or president. A seasoned politician who has reached the top of the greasy pole knows the difference between a plan, even one bolstered by a sincere wish to execute it, and an actual decision to go ahead. So many plans—reported openly in the media or secretly by spies—have never come to fruition. The intelligence product is but one input of many considered by the policy maker. In 1977, when Dayan served as foreign minister in the newly formed Begin government and was in touch with Sadat's emissary in Morocco, Gazit was kept out of the loop, unable to comment intelligently on prospects of a new Egypt–Israel war.

In a perfect world, political decision makers would have shared everything with those officers who were expected to come up with both raw information and finished intelligence products, and these heads of intelligence organizations would always be accompanied to high-level briefings by a person from within their bureaucracy who dissented from the chief's assessment. Also invited would be a cross-section of the community. In the Israeli case, this would not only be the directors of the Foreign Ministry's research center and the Mossad's Intelligence Division, but also the seniors from the DMI as well as their dissenting juniors. Perfect, perhaps, it is, but in one word, impractical.

Multiplicity of views is no panacea. The Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, and the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research were all wrong about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (but were right four years later about Iran's).

The "intelligences," as that member of Ben-Gurion's cabinet collectively called the CIA, the British MI6, as well as the DMI and Mossad, can never fully satisfy their customers' appetite for the right menu, based on the right diet, at the right time. Placement of quality personnel who are immune to ideological kinship and ulterior motives will get better results than exercises in re-organization.

AMIR OREN

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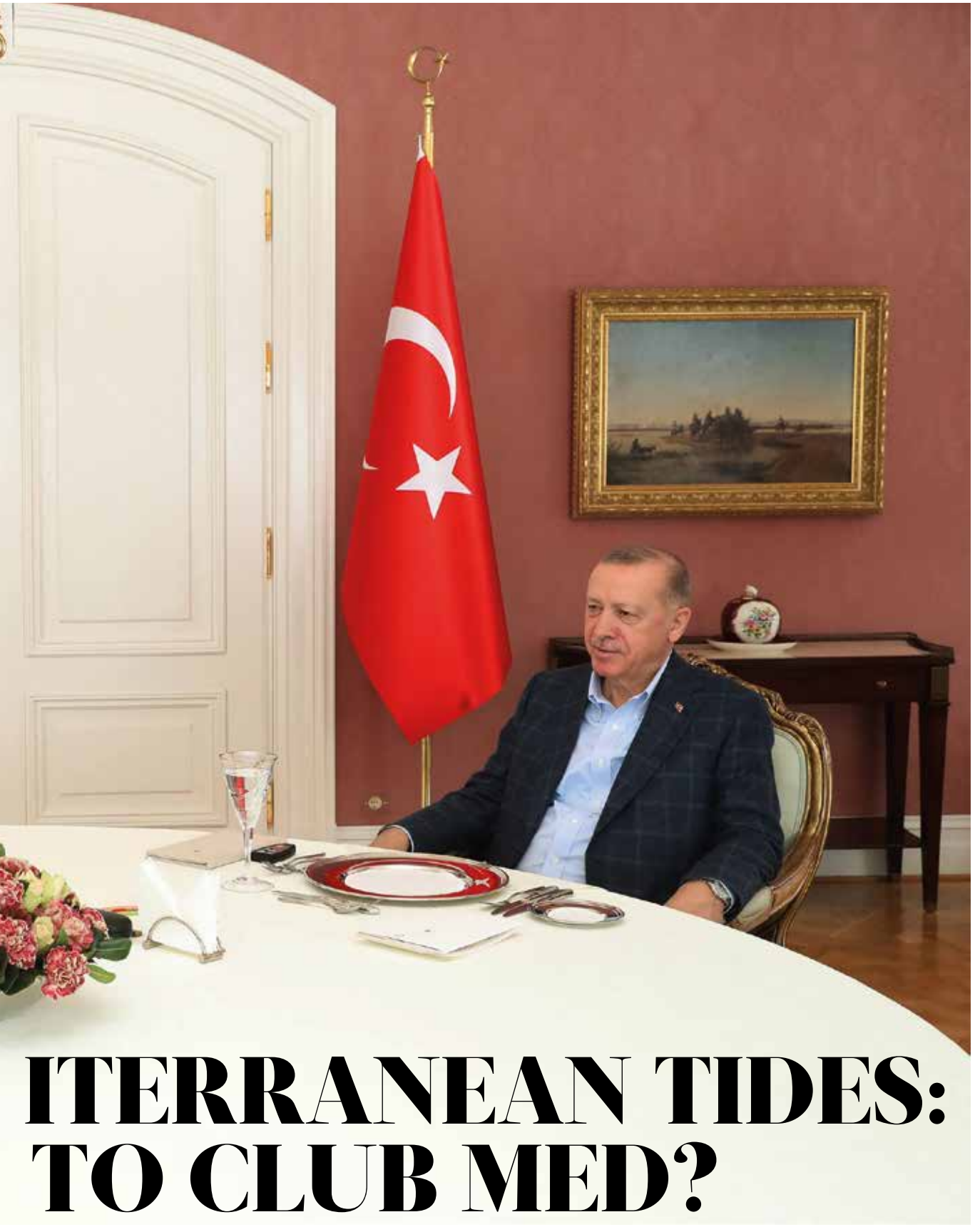
Turkish President Erdoğan meets with Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis in Istanbul, March 2022. Photo credit: via REUTERS

SHIFTING EAST MED FROM CONFLICT



ITERRANEAN TIDES: TO CLUB MED?

by David Pollock

We are now in the midst of a transition in the geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean: away from conflict and toward coexistence, if not cooperation. How and why has this shift accelerated and expanded in recent months? What makes it likely to continue, at least for a while? In offering answers to these questions, this essay examines the big picture of this regional transformation.

The single most significant factor behind this positive shift is the change in Turkey's position, broadly signifying the triumph of domestic politics over foreign policy. At the same time, all politics aside, global energy, climate, and economic factors also play their part. The perceived short-term relative value and the preferred destinations of the Eastern Mediterranean natural gas resources have changed, generally making confrontations about them less likely in the near term.

To appreciate just how different this seascape appears today, one must look back a bit, only as far as 2019–2020. During much of these two years, the region witnessed continual mini crises over competing drilling, exploration, maritime claims, and actual naval military operations all over the Eastern Mediterranean, from the Libyan coast all the way to the Lebanese one. In sharp contrast, the past year and a half have seen much less of this behavior. Leading the pack in both categories, for worse in the recent past and for better today, is Turkey.

TURKEY AND ITS CHANGE OF POLICY

As is often the case, the source of Turkey's change of policy (if not of heart) toward its neighbors can be found at home. President Erdoğan will be up for reelection in about a year, and the Turkish economy is sinking around him. The lira is depreciating, inflation is running around 40%, Turkey's credit rating has been degraded to junk, and now, having lost elections in the major metropolises, the ruling AKP's provincial middle-class base has also been hard hit.

So Erdoğan needs an economic lifeline, badly, and soon—sooner than any offshore energy riches could become available. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are obvious candidates as benefactors, but for a price: Make up with us, with Egypt, and even with Israel, along with their new Mediterranean friends. Senior Gulf, Egyptian, Greek, and Israeli officials are now visiting Turkey for the first time in years, with the former promising tens of billions of dollars in

aid, trade, bank deposits, and investments—with an eye to isolating Iran and other threats.

In response, Turkey is cutting back its support for the Muslim Brotherhood. It is cooperating to a greater extent with peacemaking efforts in Libya—where it had only recently sent an audacious military expedition in support of one side of that civil war and claimed large swaths of the Mediterranean as its price. It is also signaling a new willingness to negotiate with rather than bully all its Mediterranean neighbors on maritime border delineation.

Israel is a special case in point. For all the animosity between Erdoğan and Israel, it has been over a decade since any overt violent confrontations of the notorious Mavi Marmara kind off the coast of Gaza. At the opposite, positive extreme, on February 4, 2022, Erdoğan very publicly broke new official ground in this area, telling Turkish reporters that, "We can use Israeli natural gas in our country, and... we can also engage in a joint effort on its passage to Europe."

This is actually more of a pipe dream than a serious prospect, but that is for economic and logistical reasons rather than political ones. The key point here is that the political will now exists in Ankara for a Mediterranean rapprochement, for domestic political and economic drivers that will probably persist over the next few years.

The political will now exists in Ankara for a Mediterranean rapprochement, for domestic political and economic drivers that will probably persist over the next few years.

LEBANON

The past year has also witnessed much discussion about bringing Lebanon on board. One item is a scheme to bring East Med natural gas to Lebanon, by a very roundabout overland pipeline route via Jordan and Syria, with the gas originating in Egyptian and Israeli waters. This complex project is being mediated by Washington, with the stated goal of easing Lebanon's dire economic straits.

Another unstated objective is to encourage progress, or at least resumed negotiations, over the disputed Israeli–Lebanese maritime border. In early 2022, Lebanon's Hezbollah-dominated government finally agreed to return to those talks, also mediated by Washington. Even though an agreement does not appear on the horizon, just some prospect of one is likely to prevent tensions from escalating.

Although development of Lebanon's offshore gas potential, after an agreed delimitation with Israel, would take years, it would eventually promise a significant windfall for a truly hard-pressed national economy. Moreover, it may also provide a disincentive for actions against Israeli assets at sea; the Lebanese, even Hezbollah, fully understand that no corporation would invest in a war zone.

Yet Hezbollah seems in no great rush to finalize either deal. This obstructionism represents the triumph of politics over economics, in sharp contrast to the Turkish case. For its own ideological and self-interested reasons, Hezbollah would rather preside over a disintegrating economy than anger Iran or acknowledge any agreement with Israel. Although in this Hezbollah remains an outlier in the new East Med configuration, it is also deterred from instigating a severe direct clash with its southern neighbor.

ISRAEL

At the heart of Israel's contemporary Mediterranean policy lies a paradox. Israel is keen to amass as many regional partners as it can and welcomes deconfliction among

the relevant rival claims. Thus, Israel is responding cautiously but favorably to the latest overtures from Ankara for maritime and energy coordination, while maintaining close liaison with Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt (as well as the UAE, which is involved in various Mediterranean ventures). The Israeli government has also quietly signed on to the transit of Egyptian and Israeli offshore gas through Jordan to Syria and Lebanon.

Yet the new Israeli governing coalition is subject to serious cross-pressures from environmentally minded elements, particularly as its minister of environment hails from the left. For that reason, it has put on hold several major pertinent projects. These include a proposed UAE oil and gas pipeline expansion, from Eilat on the Red Sea to Ashdod on the Mediterranean, as well as any large-scale new offshore oil or gas exploration and drilling. Adding to this uncertainty is the fragility of Israel's current government, which hangs by the thread of one seat in the Knesset.

Alongside this Israeli hesitancy, a new obstacle arose in early 2022: The US announced that it no longer will back the construction of Israeli (or Egyptian) undersea energy pipelines to Europe. Nevertheless, the EU has just come up with a partial workaround—which the US supports—that promises to be more economically, environmentally, and technically feasible: a subsea electricity cable to Europe from Egyptian, Cypriot, and/or Israeli production, with approximately $700 million in actual proposed investment. If this project really does materialize, it will literally lay more concrete foundations for cooperative cross-Mediterranean multilateral relations of this nature.

GREECE AND CYPRUS

A detailed account of Greek or Cypriot policy on East Mediterranean issues is beyond the scope of this overview. Suffice it is to say that both governments have welcomed the new warmth in Turkey's posture, including high-level visits, conciliatory official statements, some agreements on various secondary matters, and—most important—the near absence of provocative actions.

Still, none of the core controversies at stake has been resolved, nor is likely to be any time soon. A final, formal settlement of the division or unification of Cyprus remains elusive—along with the conflicting maritime claims entailed. Similarly, there is but little progress on expanding the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum to include Turkey. In effect, then, the most plausible near-term prognosis is for relative calm but not conflict resolution nor much active cooperation.

EGYPT

One clear beneficiary of these new East Med alignments is Egypt. It no longer faces danger from Turkey, whether offshore, in Libya, or in domestic political terms. It is an eager candidate for several of the new multilateral energy proposals, all with outside funding. And it enjoys the enhanced and largely effective global and regional interest in the security of transit through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean, in which it may take on a modestly increased role.

Meanwhile, Egypt is free to pursue additional bilateral or multilateral East Med deals of its

Israel is responding cautiously but favorably to the latest overtures from Ankara for maritime and energy coordination, while maintaining close liaison with Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt.

Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias meets with his Israel and Cyprus counterparts, in Athens.
Photo credit: REUTERS

own, with an eye at least as far afield as Syria. None of this, however, promises a really major infusion of cash or investment in the country's continually on-the-edge economy. And Cairo is distracted by simmering unrest on other fronts, whether in Ethiopia or Sudan.

So, while Egypt's overall role in the region is under gradual restoration, it is unlikely to become the lead initiator or instigator of earlier times. Instead, for calculated reasons of its own interests, it is likely to reinforce the new general inclination toward stability and conflict reduction. That alone can be considered a valuable contribution to the common good.

A significant aspect is Egypt's place in Mediterranean migration or refugee flows. Despite high levels of poverty and population pressure, now at well over 100 million and counting, Cairo keeps remarkably tight control over this traffic. The continuing flow to Egypt of EU and US aid and investment is surely, in some measure, the other side of this tacit bargain.

While Egypt's overall role in the region is under gradual restoration, it is unlikely to become the lead initiator or instigator of earlier times.

SPOILERS AND WILD CARDS: IRAN, HAMAS, RUSSIA, AND CHINA

A few others merit very quick consideration here. Hamas controls Gaza, but not its coast, which is under constant Israeli patrol. To be sure, arms and other smuggled items still get through to a certain extent. Yet none of that is enough to create a significant offshore threat. During the May 2021 ten-day skirmish between Hamas and Israel, the former fired thousands of rockets and missiles, but only a handful even attempted (without success) to target Israel's ships or offshore platforms.

Israel's nearby Mediterranean port of Ashdod and key facilities (the pipeline terminal, power station, and desalination plant) in Ashkelon, by contrast, did come under serious attacks from Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, yet most were off-course or intercepted by the Iron Dome and other defenses. For the foreseeable future, the combination of Israeli deterrence and self-defense, plus enhanced Egyptian coordination in containing Hamas, can be expected to limit this threat, at least in the direct Mediterranean theater.

Iran, by comparison, already has significantly greater capabilities, and correspondingly much larger ambitions, in the same arena. It has some access to ports in both Syria and Lebanon and occasionally transits the Suez Canal as well. Still, it has only once or twice reportedly acted directly against Israeli maritime targets in the Mediterranean, where its power position remains relatively weak.

Iran does supply both Hamas (as well as its sidekick, Palestinian Islamic Jihad) in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon with weapons, money, and training. In the event of any major renewed military confrontations, some of that supply would certainly be used against Israeli coast and offshore installations once more. For the moment, however, Iran is more focused on other fronts and, of course, is concerned about Israeli retaliation; Iran therefore appears likely to prefer restraint by its clients—unless it needs them to respond to Israeli actions against its own (nuclear) infrastructure.

Russia, too, is more focused these days on other fronts: Central Asia, Syria, Turkey, Europe in general, and above all Ukraine. It is thus more actively engaged in the Black Sea than in what Arabs call the White Sea, i.e., the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, Russia is also a Mediterranean power, with major port access in Syria and continual fleet exercises well beyond it. Its mercenaries are deeply engaged in Libya, and it is trying hard to increase its arms sale and overall profile in Egypt and elsewhere. In general, though, all these activities do not appear likely to threaten or undermine the more stable relations currently prioritized by the regional powers.

Much the same can be said about China, which is sharply increasing its own presence and profile all over the world, including the Mediterranean, from Israel to Egypt to Morocco. The East Med, in particular, is a key terminus of the "Belt and Road Initiative," which has become central to Chinese overseas policy. Much of that, unlike the Russian case, still lies in the commercial, cultural, and infrastructure/investment spheres, rather than the military realm. In any case, China typically tries (and succeeds) to avoid entanglement in regional disputes, by refusing to take sides. For these reasons, China's inroads along the Mediterranean, while well worth watching, cannot reasonably for now be considered destabilizing.

CONCLUSION

The big moving picture of East Med geopolitics is staying on the more stable course first charted over a year ago. This is not, however, a tectonic shift toward enduring or comprehensive practical cooperation. In part, the relevant economic, technical, and environmental inputs for cooperation ironically have become more constraining, just when the political ones have opened up. A final irony is that all this economic uncertainty and environmental caution, along with political

An Israeli Navy vessel patrols along the shores of the Gaza Strip in the Mediterranean sea. Photo credit: REUTERS

upheaval on other continents, have actually dampened investment and driven energy prices through the roof again in recent months.

In some other world, economic uncertainty and environmental caution might have made major new East Med oil and gas ventures, including creative joint ventures among erstwhile regional rivals or corporate competitors, appear more feasible and profitable. But few foresaw the current calm in the region—and none can confidently count on its continuation. As a result, while the worst-case major conflict scenarios of a few years ago are in abeyance, the best-case ones of transformative cooperation are also still out of reach. ✳

DAVID POLLOCK

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"RESTRAINT" IN ACTION: AMERICA AND THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

US President Joe Biden at the White House.
Photo credit: Jim Watson / AFP

by John M. Koenig

A year can seem like a long time, especially if it is 2022. It is easy to forget that one of the Biden administration's first foreign policy crisis was in the Eastern Mediterranean: the return of violence to the Israel–Palestine conflict in May 2021. Some saw in it a pattern indicating how President Biden and his team would approach international challenges—with detachment bordering on diffidence and a desire to conserve resources and avoid commitments. For me, having spent most of two decades as a US diplomat in the Eastern Mediterranean, the episode merely conformed to the pattern of gradual American disengagement from a region that was once vital to US interests.

Calls for foreign policy "restraint" are mounting as America searches for ways to cope with new challenges and set aside bad habits of the past. As a general matter, I share the views of Andrew Bacevich and others associated with the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, the flagship of restraint policy advocacy (though I am not personally affiliated with the Institute). The Eastern Mediterranean has evolved over the past decade as an illuminating, if imperfect, experiment in American restraint. A marked diminution in US vital interests in the region over more than 20 years, combined with competing priorities elsewhere and the presence of two reliable allies, Israel and Greece, created suitable conditions for exercising restraint.

The experiment was not neatly designed. Many in the foreign policy establishment (aka "the Blob") will call it a failure, pointing to Syria, Libya, and the growing Russian, Chinese, and Iranian presence. I disagree. Despite regional calamities, the experiment has been a success. Where we went wrong in the region was because

Measured against the evolution of US action and policy in the region, Washington's aloofness during last May's clashes is neither surprising nor disappointing. It continues a pattern over more than two decades to deprioritize the Eastern Mediterranean region.

Joe Biden, as U.S. Vice President, speaks as Cypriot President Anastasiades and Former Turkish Cypriot leader Eroglu look on, in Nicosia, 2014. Photo credit: REUTERS/Stringer

we did too much, not too little; this is certainly the case in Libya and arguably in Syria as well. With an economy-of-effort approach, the US has been able to protect and even advance its limited interests.

The benefits of restraint stand out more clearly against the massive failures of Iraq and Afghanistan. Given the persistent activism of America's militarized foreign policy over recent decades, restraint proponents ordinarily can criticize only past US national security decisions, arguing for the path not taken. Quincy Institute scholars, for example, have written extensively about US policy failures in the Middle East. In the Eastern Mediterranean, however, the path was taken, and restraint has generally prevailed. This makes the region a rare example of a different kind of American engagement, with potential relevance to other regions moving forward.

A LONG GOOD-BYE

Measured against the evolution of US action and policy in the region, Washington's aloofness during last May's clashes is neither surprising nor disappointing. It continues a pattern over more than two decades to deprioritize the Eastern Mediterranean region. Steven Simon's excellent article on Syria in the recent issue of the Jerusalem Strategic Tribune highlights an interesting example. Syria animated pundits and the foreign policy establishment for years but never truly engaged the US government and no longer engages the public mind. America's

desultory involvement in 21st century efforts (such as they are) to resolve Israeli–Palestinian differences is another case in point.

The pattern of disengagement is more evident still in Libya and Cyprus, where I was personally engaged as a NATO official and American diplomat. Libya is the poster child of Obama's "lead from behind" approach. Though the term is apocryphal, it was a fair moniker for American policy from the outset of the 2011 bombing campaign until today. As political advisor to the NATO commander overseeing the Libya operation, there was no mistaking Washington's intent to do only as much as necessary to ensure tactical success. Mission creep took hold as the operation went on, facilitated by the lack of real, unified control as various stakeholders maneuvered NATO into advancing their divergent aims. We never stopped to seek a political arrangement such as a ceasefire; as far as I know, the US never seriously even considered one. Yet once Muammar Gadhafi had been overthrown in what had become a regime-change operation, there was no will in Washington—or Europe, for that matter—to lead a follow-on mission, helping to set the stage for a civil war that still simmers and has made Libya a breeding ground for migrant smuggling, Islamist terrorism, and other regional security problems.

Perhaps most important for this discussion, however, is just how little the Libya catastrophe has affected core American interests. Seen locally, from the Libyan or regional perspective, US policy has been a disaster. Seen from Washington, it hardly mattered at all—apart from the partisan political hay made of the death of American ambassador Chris Stevens and three others in Benghazi in 2012 at the hands of Ansar al-Sharia terrorists. Outside Washington, it left at most a faint mark as yet another US blunder in the Middle East.

If Libya shows the limited effect on the US of its failures in the Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus demonstrates the diminishing rationale for American activism. As political counselor at the US embassy in Nicosia in the 1990s, and even more as US ambassador to Cyprus in 2012–2015, I did all I could to support reconciliation on the island and a negotiated settlement. Under peculiar circumstances—Cypriot President Anastasiades had effectively expelled the UN Cyprus negotiator, former Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer—I was called upon to finalize the February 2014 Joint Statement by Anastasiades and his Turkish Cypriot counterpart that launched the last, and possibly final, serious effort toward a federal political solution. Although we had the Joint Statement, the UN-sponsored negotiations that followed broke down in 2017, owing largely to Anastasiades' recalcitrance.

Did it make any difference at all? One can argue that failure to advance a Cyprus solution damages American interests, but after almost 60 years of intercommunal discord on the island and 48 years of relative peace since Turkey's invasion and de facto partition, the matter is too academic to merit much attention from policymakers. Indeed, as it is the government in Ankara rather than Greek–Turkish tensions that poses a significant threat to NATO, the strategic significance of the Cyprus conflict for Washington has practically vanished. Turkey's drive toward an independent—even anti-Western—role in the region has rendered the intractable "Cyprus problem" entirely marginal to US interests in the Eastern Mediterranean.

A WINNOWING OF AMERICAN INTERESTS

American policy debates on Eastern Mediterranean issues typically focus on individual problems, such as Syria, maritime boundary disputes, migrant flows, or Hamas. These discussions occur in a sort of vacuum, where US national interest is assumed or only vaguely defined, trade-offs with other priorities and resource limitations are sidelined or ignored, and risks are conservatively assessed. In other words, they replicate the dreadful flaws of most US policy discussions of the past two decades. Unsurprisingly, many protagonists

had a hand in our Iraq and Afghanistan policies, having drawn few lessons, it seems, from the disasters of the recent past. In the meantime, the Blob's preoccupation with great power competition agitates concerns that Russia, China, Iran, or even Turkey will supplant US influence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

A healthier policy discussion on the Eastern Mediterranean should begin with a dynamic assessment of American national interest. Old shibboleths that held sway during my career have eroded or even crumbled:

✷ NATO's southern flank has shifted northward, is less sensitive to Greek–Turkish tensions, and is not as central to American policy than it was during the Cold War or even the war in Iraq. Turkey no longer acts as an ally in the NATO sense.

✷ Sea lanes of communication in the Eastern Mediterranean are less important than they once were, particularly to the US. The American 6th Fleet is stretched thin to cover diverse responsibilities across a vast geographic region as pressure mounts to move naval assets to the Western Pacific.

✷ Terrorism was the dominant Eastern Mediterranean issue for most of my career and one that long antedated September 11, 2001. Clear back in 1986, while serving in East Berlin, I helped trace links between the Libyan People's Bureau and the La Belle disco bombing in West Berlin that killed an American soldier and a local woman. Terrorism remains a threat, but it is no longer centered in the Eastern Mediterranean as it was in the 1970s and 1980s, or even as recently as four or five years ago.

Newer truisms regarding the US and the Eastern Mediterranean also need review considering America's diminished international standing and competing priorities, both domestic and international:

✷ Migrant flows from the region over the past decade have caused human suffering and, as a second-order effect, have fostered right-wing populism in Europe, although their direct impact on US interests has been limited.

✷ Great power competition in a more multi-polar system is increasingly important in the Eastern Mediterranean, but it is not in itself an element of national interest. An interest-based approach might well yield different answers than one focused on competition for its own sake.

TWO VITAL INTERESTS, TWO KEY PARTNERS

As other US interests have receded, two vital interests in the Eastern Mediterranean remain: the security of Israel and the survival of NATO.

✷ Israel's security is a vital US interest for several reasons, most importantly the strong emotional attachment of Americans to the well-being of Israel. The erosion of this support in America's intensely polarized political environment is a cause for concern, but it has not changed the fundamental US commitment to Israel's security in a broad sense.

✷ Although the US interest to preserve NATO and, more generally, the post-Cold War order in Europe extends well beyond the Eastern Mediterranean, it is linked to the region in at least two important ways. First is access to the Black Sea, for which NATO has undertaken to reinforce its defense capabilities in the face of Russian threats. Second is America's recently enhanced and intensified partnership with Greece.

Over the past five years, Greece and Israel have emerged as twin "security pillars" for Washington, reminiscent of the role the Nixon administration foresaw for Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf. Turkey has drifted away from America and Europe; the Egyptian regime is problematic, and in any case, Egypt works in close cooperation with both Israel and Greece. While US intelligence and security cooperation with Israel is well known, covering everything from counterterrorism to missile defense, the partnership with Greece has quietly grown in key areas, including the basing of forces, intelligence sharing, and port development. In a classic realist move, the US looks increasingly to Greece and Israel as critical

partners in a region where it seeks to limit direct exposure. In other words, Greece and Israel have facilitated the successful US restraint experiment in the Eastern Mediterranean.

EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN ENERGY SHOWS THE WAY

The evolution of the Eastern Mediterranean's offshore natural gas has demonstrated the value of American restraint. A decade ago, amid sky-high global gas prices and seemingly limitless demand, dreams took flight of a natural gas-driven transformation of the region's economy and politics. The US promoted this vision as late as 2014, during then Vice President Biden's visits to Cyprus and Turkey. Even now it clings to life in untethered rhetoric and drawing-board projects like the East Med gas pipeline.

The Eastern Mediterranean gas reality is quite different than expected. For years now, global market conditions have dampened investors' interest. Gas did not sweep away the region's political conflicts; instead, it sharpened them, serving as an accelerant for Turkey, in particular, to press its claims. Although the door has remained closed for the region's gas to serve as a strategic source of supply for Europe, a window has opened for constructive (as opposed to transformative) regional cooperation. Israel has played a leading role in this arena, selling gas to Jordan and utilizing Egypt's gasification facilities to monetize its offshore resources. Egypt is working to send gas to Lebanon via Jordan and Syria. The East Mediterranean Gas Forum has developed in parallel with such concrete forms of cooperation. For all its limitations, including an anti-Turkish optic, the Forum is a promising new framework for regional consultation and cooperation, alongside the trilateral summits and high-level coordination structures (Greece–Cyprus–Israel and Greece–Cyprus–Egypt).

How did the Eastern Mediterranean gas "show the way" for US restraint? It did so by deflating Washington's unrealistic expectations and repositioning gas as a regional issue of moderate interest rather than a strategic issue of intense US interest. This dampened the activist impulse of the foreign policy establishment, allowing regional cooperation to develop in response to market forces and local initiative, relatively free from American meddling.

Naturally, then, natural gas is no longer a major focus of Washington in the Eastern Mediterranean. But America remains interested. Washington has encouraged initiatives like the Israel–Jordan gas agreement and has joined the East Mediterranean Gas Forum as an observer. Such measured engagement aligns with America's limited interests in the region. On natural gas and a wide range of other issues in the Eastern Mediterranean, American support for regional initiatives is more realistic and helpful than "American leadership." Such measured engagement, based on realistic assessment of the stakes, can serve the interests of the region and the American people, now and into the future. ✳

JOHN M. KOENIG

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GREECE IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN: FROM COLLECTIVE ENGAGEMENT TO ACTION

Greece's Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis during a pre-election rally in Athens. Photo credit: Angelos Tzortzinis / AFP

by Antonia Dimou

The Eastern Mediterranean is on the frontlines of a struggle for peace and economic development at a time when maritime delimitation disputes have increased the likelihood of confrontation. Greece is a regional country that has demonstrated its commitment to conflict resolution and management and to cooperative partnerships, thus turning itself practically into a source and provider of solutions.

Greece, in fact, pursues dynamic foreign and defense policies to counter Turkey's expansionism and the so-called "gunboat diplomacy" that undermines regional stability and good neighborly relations. Gunboat diplomacy centers on the employment of naval power in Turkey's pursuit of the "blue homeland" doctrine of controlling the Mediterranean and implying the threat of war, should Turkish claims over vast sections of the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas not be accepted.

To counter Turkish assertiveness, Greece has enhanced engagement with the US, France, and the regional countries. Athens has expanded its bilateral strategic dialogue with the US to include all major pillars of the Greece–US partnership, ranging from energy and investment to defense and people-to-people contacts. Athens and Washington signed an extension of the Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement, which contains a clause that affirms both countries' determination to mutually safeguard and protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the other against actions threatening peace, which include armed attacks or threats of the use of force against the other's territory.

This extended defense agreement shields Athens against Turkish expansionism and its threat of war with Greece. It also allows US forces to train in additional locations throughout Greece, providing the proper context for Washington to invest defensively in the country as it withdraws from other parts of the region. Alexandroupolis is located in the broader region of Thrace and has been transformed into an advanced facility, which not only allows the stationing of US forces but also the cementing of an emerging axis toward Bulgaria. The latter has become highly valuable for Washington's and NATO's strategic planning as an alternative route to the Straits of Bosphorus, given the importance of the Black Sea.

On a parallel level, Greece has solidified relations with France and has signed a defense agreement that not only upgrades its geopolitical footprint in Europe but also strengthens Greek deterrence capabilities, with the purchase of three state-of-the art French Belharra frigates by 2025. Greece is shielded against military actions, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean, as the agreement contains a mutual defense assistance clause in the event of an attack against one's territory. It is noteworthy that Article 42 (7) of the Treaty of European Union on the mutual defense clause becomes substantial through the Greece–France defense agreement. A similar

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Malta's Prime Minister Robert Abela, and French President Emmanuel Macron at the MED7 Mediterranean countries summit, in Athens, Greece. Photo credit: REUTERS

mutual defense clause is also contained in the defense agreement that was signed between Greece and the United Arab Emirates in early 2021.

Additionally, Athens actively participates in multinational air and naval exercises for defense-oriented purposes that are conducted frequently across the Mediterranean Sea. For example, the air forces of France, Germany, Greece, India, Israel, Italy, UK, and the US participated in Israeli-hosted joint exercises, code-named Blue Flag in October 2021. The goal of the exercise was to strengthen international cooperation, the coordination of fifth- and fourth-generation fighter jets in a challenging operational environment, and to enhance the operational capabilities of the air forces of the countries involved in the exercise.

In principle, Greece is committed to dialogue with neighbors and to resolving disputes peacefully through diplomacy and in accordance with international law. Athens signed in good faith maritime delimitation agreements with Italy and Egypt in 2020 and has repeatedly stated its readiness to resume negotiations with the rest of its neighboring countries, including Turkey and Libya, aiming at concluding similar agreements, in full respect of the provisions of the UN Convention of Law of the Sea. The partial delimitation agreement with Egypt is the outcome of 15 years of negotiations, which, in accordance with the UNCLOS, recognizes all the rights of coastal states in their maritime zones. The agreement disregards the Turkish assertion that Greek islands do not have an exclusive economic zone and abides by Article 121 of the UNCLOS, which specifies that islands have a right to territorial sea, contiguous zones, EEZ, and continental shelf in line with provisions applied in mainland areas.

The benefits that Egypt, Greece, and the region will reap from the delimitation

Greece receives its first Rafale fighter jets from France. Photo credit: REUTERS

agreement, including—but not limited to—attraction of international investment in oil and gas exploration within demarcated maritime areas; prevention of Turkey from drilling in Libyan maritime areas that extend to Egyptian waters; facilitation of infrastructure projects; and the execution of electricity interconnectors that will link the power grids of regional countries to Europe. Electricity interconnections will enable excess power to be traded and shared between countries, and Greece plays a critical role in this regard. The EuroAsia interconnector will connect the national power grids of Israel, Cyprus, and Greece through a subsea cable, along with the EuroAfrica interconnector that will export surplus Egyptian electricity to Europe.

On the strictly bilateral level, Greece stands solidly behind the resolution of disputes with Turkey through dialogue for settling the only bilateral difference, which is the demarcation of the continental shelf and the respective maritime zones. But resolution of differences entails commitment to international principles. That said, the declared Turkish position that islands in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Greek islands in particular should carry no weight in determining the maritime boundaries, especially because the Aegean Sea is semi-enclosed, is null and void. Greece has 3,100 islands of which 2,463 are in the Aegean Sea. By comparison, Turkey has only three islands in the Aegean. The Turkish argument that Greek islands cannot create maritime zones because the Aegean is a semi-enclosed sea is invalid especially when considering that Ankara delineated its EEZ with the former Soviet Union in the Black Sea, which is semi-enclosed on the equidistance method. Specifically, in 1986, Turkey unilaterally proclaimed a two-hundred-mile EEZ in the Black Sea in accordance with the provisions of UNCLOS, which Turkey—paradoxically—has never signed. All this exposes Turkey's double standards

and selective enforcement of international law and takes Ankara further down the pathway of unreliability.

One thing should be crystal clear, that in case Greek–Turkish talks do not reach a common ground in due time, then the issue of the continental shelf should be referred to the International Court of Justice, which, as the leading UN judicial entity, can produce binding rulings in disputes between states that have agreed to appeal to it. The ICJ has settled differences between states over delimitation of their continental shelf, the most prominent being the delimitation of the maritime boundary in the Gulf of Maine in 1981, the demarcation of the Black Sea in 2007, and the North Sea continental shelf cases in 1969.

Another avenue for settling maritime differences between Greece and Turkey is arbitration before the Permanent Court of Arbitration. The PCA facilitates arbitration and dispute resolution between countries over legal issues, including territorial and maritime boundaries. The arbitration case between the Philippines and China over the South China Sea can serve as a model for the settlement of competing EEZ claims between Greece and Turkey due to the apparent similarities between the competing claims of the countries involved.

Overall, Turkey's expansionism into the waters of the Eastern Mediterranean over the last several years not only rekindled maritime differences with Greece over the delineation of their maritime zones but also caused Ankara's tense relations to surface with almost every country in the region and with the EU. Turkey has moved from the so-called "zero-problems with neighbors" concept to the practice of "problems with almost every single neighbor." The Turkish strategy is perceived as preventing regional countries from monetizing their energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean while enabling Ankara to expand its military footprint in Northern Syria, Northern Iraq, Qatar, Mogadishu, Somalia, and Libya. This transformational shift is attributed to the Turkish leadership's worldview that Turkey, as the legitimate successor of the Ottoman Empire, should be the focus of reestablishing the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean regions.

Against this backdrop, regional countries that advocate for good neighborly relations and maintain common principles and values intensify their cooperation mechanisms in the Eastern Mediterranean to collectively address common challenges and explore opportunities. The East Mediterranean Gas Forum falls in this category. The Forum, a regional cooperation platform of dialogue between governments, has become both an avenue of communication between states and the energy industry and a clearing house for ideas and plans for mutually beneficial energy development in the region.

All things considered, Greece, a uniquely positioned country in the Eastern Mediterranean, is committed to peaceful resolution of differences with neighbors. Greece advocates for economic opportunities, as well as for the development of energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, which must be a cooperative enterprise rather than a zero-sum game. As the region's geopolitical ground is shifting rapidly, this is a path that Athens will continue to pursue for the safeguarding of its national security and regional stability. ✳

Greece, a uniquely positioned country and constructive member of the international community, is committed to peaceful resolution of differences with neighbors and advocates for economic opportunities.

ANTONIA DIMOU

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TO THE MIDDLE EAST AND BEYOND! ISRAEL'S NEW CONNECTIVITY

Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed receives Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett at his residence in Abu Dhabi.
Photo credit: AFP PHOTO / UAE's Ministry of Presidential Affairs

by Ehud Eiran

After decades of limited contact, Israel is connecting with its region at the strategic level. It seems safe to assume that more is yet to come.

Largely rejected by its neighbors for decades, Israel accepted its separateness; a "villa in the jungle" according to former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, or an "island state" to use Foreign Minister Yair Lapid's framing. Even the peace accords with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994), as well as a short period of formal and open relations with a few other Arabs states in the 1990s, did not alter this reality. The flow of goods, people, and ideas between Israel and its neighbors remained nonexistent for decades. Israel was always an endpoint—a spoke—but never a hub or a place of transit; indicatively, as late as 2003, Israel's main international airport did not have any infrastructure for transit passengers.

There were, of course, some breaches in the great wall between Israel and the region. In some cases, Israeli and moderate Arab leaders (in countries which did not have formal relations with Israel) communicated "under the table" (often a crowded place in Middle Eastern affairs) and, at times, openly. There was certainly intelligence sharing, even military assistance in some cases, and significant, albeit clandestine, levels of trade with the Gulf states, despite the prohibitions of the Arab boycott. Even Iranian goods ended up in the Israeli market, and vice versa, despite the Israeli law that disallowed "trade with the enemy." A trickle of Israeli tourists did visit Jordan and Egypt after both countries signed peace accords with Israel, but even congressional incentives to encourage Israeli–Egyptian and Israeli–Jordanian joint business ventures (QIZs) could not produce intensive economic contacts.

Against this dismal background, the last few years, especially since the 2020 Abraham Accords, saw Israel connecting to the region as never before. The formal relations with Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Morocco led to an unprecedented flow between Israel and the three nations: national, military-to-military, and civil society agreements for cooperation, massive tourism (which in Morocco was significant even before the agreements), and multiple business and cultural interactions

The last few years, especially since the 2020 Abraham Accords, saw Israel connecting to the region as never before.

Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades welcomes Israeli President Isaac Herzog at the Presidential Palace in Nicosia. Photo credit: REUTERS

all took shape and left their mark despite the constraints of the pandemic. Even countries that did not "go formal" with Israel are helping to connect it to the region: Since 2020, Saudi Arabia has been allowing Israeli air traffic over its territory, after decades of blocking it.

Connectivity also evolved on Israel's Western flank. The Mediterranean Sea, once an afterthought in Israeli strategic thinking, turned out to be an important space for new connections. Israeli gas from the sea is exported to Egypt and Jordan, and the three nations together with Greece, Cyprus, Italy, and the Palestinian Authority launched in 2019 a new regional organization, the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), which in 2021 was joined by France (with the US as an observer) and recognized as a regional compact by the UN. Gas is also one of the cornerstones for an Israel–Greece alignment that involves a wide spectrum of exchanges from education to security. This alignment also has an aspect of foreign direct investments: A Greek company owns some of the Israeli gas fields, and an Israeli company is part owner of a Cypriot field. The three nations have ambitious energy connectivity visions: laying a pipe that would connect Israeli and Cypriot gas to Europe, or—as the US now suggests—an electricity project that would connect their grids to Europe, aptly named the EuroAsia Interconnector (a similar cable now connects Algeria with Southwestern Europe).

Israel now serves as a transit hub as well. For the past decade, Turkish trucks have been

shipped to the port of Haifa and then driven through Israel to Jordan and to Iraq, since the more direct land route between Turkey and the two Arab nations became blocked by the fighting in Syria and related disruptions in northern Iraq. Israel and the UAE agreed that Emirati oil is to be piped from Israel's Red Sea port of Eilat to its port on the Mediterranean near Ashkelon (using a pipeline originally designed to carry Iranian crude). Finally, the Chinese were looking into developing a train line on a similar Red–Med route to serve as an alternative route to the portion of the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) that goes through the Suez Canal.

Encouraged by this opening, planners are already offering even more ambitious connectivity visions. In 2017, Israel's Minister of Transportation Israel Katz proposed "tracks for peace," the development of an advanced train network that would connect Israel to Saudi Arabia. Katz also proposed the development of an artificial island that would serve the Gaza Strip, as others floated an idea for an offshore international airport for Israel and a new pipeline that would deliver Israeli gas to the Gaza Strip.

This new reality is, in fact, a "back to the future" moment. After all, the land is dotted with postmarks attesting to the centrality of connectivity in its history. Prehistoric sites in Israel, offer glimpses into 1.5 million years of early human migrations out of Africa via the Levantine corridor into Eurasia. Later, ancient traders (dating back at least to the Bronze age, some 3,500 years ago) passed through the land on two ancient routes: Via Maris and the King's Road. In the 13th century, the Mamluk Sultanate created the postal road, a vital artery of communication that stretched between Cairo and Damascus. The 20th century introduced modern forms of connectivity. Indeed, the "tracks for peace" initiative echoes older times. In the early 20th century, the Ottomans—who ruled over an open and connected Middle East—laid the tracks for the Hijaz train, which ran from Damascus to Medina, with a small offshoot to the now Israeli port cities of Akko and Haifa. By 1934 oil was piped from British-controlled Iraq to British-controlled Israel/Palestine, processed in the port city of Haifa, and exported to markets away from the region.

Connectivity offers multiple economic opportunities, as trade, energy, and people pass through the land.

Connectivity was not confined to the transport of goods. In its day, it not only economic interactions but also ideational and human ones. Christianity was born out of a small Jewish sect in Israel/Palestine, and traveled far, becoming the dominant religion and culture by the middle of the first millennium in Europe.

Even local products carried the vernacular. Jaffa became nearly synonymous with oranges. As for gauze, the thin fabric now mostly used for medical dressing, it took its name from the Israel/Palestine region where it emanates: Gaza.

As late as the 1940s, the region was more integrated. The Israeli construction company Solel Boneh operated in Iraq, Egypt, the Emirate of Transjordan, and even Bahrain. Jews from Palestine sought educational opportunities in the region. Russian-born Eliahu Eilat, Israel's first ambassador to the US and later the president of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, was a graduate of the American University of Beirut. European Jews who sought to immigrate to Palestine in the late 19th century, ended up in the larger centers in Egypt, such as Cairo and Alexandria, integrating into business and social life. Leia Nadler, the daughter of an Egyptian (Jewish-Romanian born) candy magnate family, married Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the famous Egyptian diplomat and former secretary-general of the UN. From today's perspective, the old epithet "Levantine" has become a badge of honor, not an insult.

These lessons of the past are encouraging. Connectivity offers multiple economic opportunities, as trade, energy, and people pass through the land. Past "connectors," such as the Mamluks developed significant infrastructure in the 13th century to support their "postal road." Two of the bridges that were built for this purpose, in Lod and in Yavne, still served

The Israeli Ministry for Environmental Protection is trying to stop the Israel–UAE oil connectivity deal. Eilat-Ashkelon Pipeline Co. (EAPC) oil storage containers. Photo credit: REUTERS

local transport needs well into the 21st century, over 700 years after they were built. Being a connector also strengthens one's status, as it creates leverage vis-à-vis the parties that are interested in the flow of goods. Connections can also create economic interdependence, thus decreasing the chances for violence between these former foes.

Over the years, Israel developed a unique identity that mostly does not correspond with the characteristics of the region. Among its core aspects are a close cultural, political, and economic connection to Europe and North America.

But the new connectivity comes with costs. Energy connectors can damage the environment. Indeed, despite the obvious geostrategic gains, Israeli activists warned against the delivery of oil from Israel's Red Sea shore to its Mediterranean shore on account of the increased environmental risk. Their plea was heard, and for now, the Israeli Ministry for Environmental Protection is trying to stop the Israel–UAE oil connectivity deal.

Connectivity had also become a competitive arena in the great power's strategic rivalry. The US perceives Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative as threatening to American global interests. Even if the construction of a Chinese rail in Israel would serve the latter's economic interests, the securitization of connectivity may limit Jerusalem's ability to move ahead as Washington is expected to oppose the move.

Looking into the future, the new connectivity raises at least three questions. First, how durable

The new connectivity offers a more inclusive framework for engaging with a region that once rejected Israel. Trade, tourism, and investment will lead to greater interaction, educational exchanges, and the flow of ideas and people.

is it? As history shows, the area went through periods in which it was connected to the region, and moments in which it retreated inward. At times, leaders displayed both tendencies, by shaping the connectivity they desired. As noted, the Mamluks built an impressive ground route through the territory, but also took special care to destroy all ports on the Mediterranean, lest Western invaders would come again, like the Crusaders did on ships from Europe.

Second, how will this new connectivity affect Israel's relations with its immediate Arab neighbors? Much of what was described above takes place between Israel and the Mediterranean states, and Israel and the Gulf and North African states. Can these new relations make Israel closer, more accepted, by the Egyptians and Jordanians, and maybe later by the Lebanese and Syrians? One glimpse of how this could unfold was the 2021 deal between Israel and Jordan with the UAE's financing, for a solar powered desalinated water swap between the first two nations.

Finally, will the new connectivity affect Israel's identity? Over the years, Israel developed a unique identity that mostly does not correspond with the characteristics of the region. Among its core aspects are a close cultural, political, and economic connection to Europe and North America, and a set of political institutions and norms that draw both on Judaism and democracy. Israel also defines itself as the nation-state of the Jewish people. With some half of the Jewish world residing in North America and Europe, Israel was bound to look West, not East.

The new connectivity bears with it the promise of change. It offers a more inclusive framework for engaging with a region that once rejected Israel. Trade, tourism, and investment will lead to greater interaction, educational exchanges, and the flow of ideas and people. Growing numbers of Israelis are now retiring to cheaper (and close-by) locations in Cyprus and Greece, while some Israeli businessmen are seeking residency in the UAE to avoid the heavy taxation at home. One appealing framework that has yet to take hold in Israel is its redefinition as a Mediterranean country: a liminal identity that offers a commonality between Christian-European nations such as Cyprus, Arab Muslim nations such as Egypt and Morocco, and the Jewish state. At a deeper symbolic level, such an identity could focus less on Israel's specific locality and the weight of association with its holy sites, and more on mobility, movement, and exchange. Some Israelis think it is the only way ahead. Author AB Yehoshua wrote in 2014 that if Israel "wants to ensure itself a lasting existence... it must find a path of renewal by deepening its Mediterranean identity."

Over the generations, Jews were highly effective in rising to the challenge of reshaping their identity. Will regional connectivity usher, not only riches and maybe security, but also a new ideational reincarnation? ✳

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Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi at the "Golden Parade" in Cairo.
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ABDEL FATTAH RE-PHARAONIZ

EL-SISI AND THE ATION OF EGYPT

by Eran Lerman

What do the following events have in common? A new capital is being built in Egypt —"the Administrative" (al-idariyyah) for lack of a better name as yet—replete with architectural symbols of both stark modernity and references to pharaonic Egypt. On April 3, 2021, an extravagant "Golden Parade," combining the use of ancient Egyptian attire and ceremonial objects, as well as dressed-up modern military vehicles, saw 18 mummified kings and 4 queens solemnly moved from the old site of the Egyptian museum in the heart of Cairo to its new location a few kilometers away. At the diplomatic level, during the opening ceremony of an international energy conference in Cairo on February 14, 2022, Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi made a beeline to the wheelchair of Israel's Minister of Energy Karine Elharrar, an unprecedented gesture. And on March 28, Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry was among the six participants of the "summit" in a hotel near Kibbutz Sde Boker in Israel (alongside the US, Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco); again, this was a highly unusual step by a country that in the past did not hide its resentment of any Arab rapprochement with Israel.

The answer to the opening question may lie in the complex conjunction between grand strategy and identity politics. As el-Sisi consolidates his rule—with all that this implies, in terms of the authoritarian uses and abuses of power—he is also taking steps to reorient Egyptian national strategy and symbolically redefine Egyptian identity. True, Egypt is still the proud host and leader of the Arab League, created by Egyptian politicians for Egyptian needs back in 1944–1945, and turned into a vehicle of ambitious pan-Arabism during the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser. True, it is and will remain an Arab country in terms of language and a Muslim majority nation in terms of religion. True, el-Sisi himself is a practicing Muslim, whose wife wears the hijab (or *tarha* as the Egyptians call it), and which may have accounted for the willingness of the Muslim Brotherhood, during their brief year in power, to trust him with the control of Egypt's all-powerful military machine; it was a choice they came to regret.

Egypt's current grand strategy requires a new and different kind of regional integration. Egypt's return to the roots and symbols of its ancient identity serve to enhance the prospects of such a regional reorientation.

In terms of identity politics, despite all the caveats above, el-Sisi is increasingly acting to put Egypt's unique claims to fame as the oldest civilization—the *umm al-dunya* (mother of the world), with 7,000 years of recorded history and powerful symbols of grandeur and governance, such as the pyramids, familiar to all—back at the center. By necessity, this reduces the role played in the past by the slogans of pan-Arabism, which marked the Nasserist legacy, as well as the revolutionary pan-Islamism central to the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan or brethren). Thus, the mummies' parade may have been, to some extent, a spectacle designed to attract the tourist trade after the disastrous period of the COVID-19 collapse; but it was also a sign of el-Sisi's pervasive perception of what is his country's place in the history (and geography) of the world. Similar imitations of pharaonic rituals have become common also in Egyptian military ceremonies. Given the traditional Islamic abhorrence of all that reeks of pre-Muhammadan practices, associated with the age of *jahiliyya* (ignorance), the choice of such symbolism is highly significant and so are the architectural signatures that mark the new capital.

This use of such symbols is not new. In the early years of Egypt's independence (or rather, semi-independence, given the residual functions retained by the British until the Treaty of 1936, and indeed until their final evacuation in the 1950s), art and literature in Egypt often reflected the notion that this was a reborn pharaonic nation. In the 1920s, several factors gave impetus to such nontraditional perceptions—including the nonconfessional aspect of the Wafd Party's uprising in 1919; the template offered by the dramatic secularization of Turkey (and the abolition of the caliphate) under Mustafa Kemal; and even the international stir caused by the discovery of King Tutankhamon's spectacular grave, which reminded Egyptians of what made their country so significant in the eyes of the West.

As the leading Egyptian intellectual of his age, Taha Hussein, pointed out in his 1938 work, "The Future of Culture in Egypt," this interpretation of Egyptian history also entailed recognition of the links forged through the ages with other Mediterranean lands and cultures. For Hussein, the ancient Greeks, whose role in generating the modern ideas of democracy and free thought he greatly admired, were of much greater importance for Egypt's identity and future than the Arab and other neighbors to the East. Today, in a range of ways—from the ongoing series of tripartite summits with the leaders of Greece and Cyprus and the creation and promotion of the EMGF (Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum), to youth conferences with a Mediterranean regional theme—the Egyptian government seeks to build up its role as a strategic player in a Mediterranean alignment.

The tensions with Erdoğan's Turkey, which until recently held a position de-legitimizing el-Sisi's rule and actively supporting Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood as well as Egypt's enemies in Libya, clearly played a role in making el-Sisi more attentive to his country's Mediterranean interests; but as argued above, this was also in synch with Egypt's re-emerging historical identity. The same can be said about the new dynamics of the Egyptian–Israeli relationship: they serve specific interests (such as the common cause against Islamic State terrorism in Sinai) but they also fit in with redefinition of identity away from pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism. Egypt's current grand strategy requires a new and different kind of regional integration. Egypt's return to the roots and symbols of its ancient identity serve to enhance the prospects of such a regional reorientation. ✳

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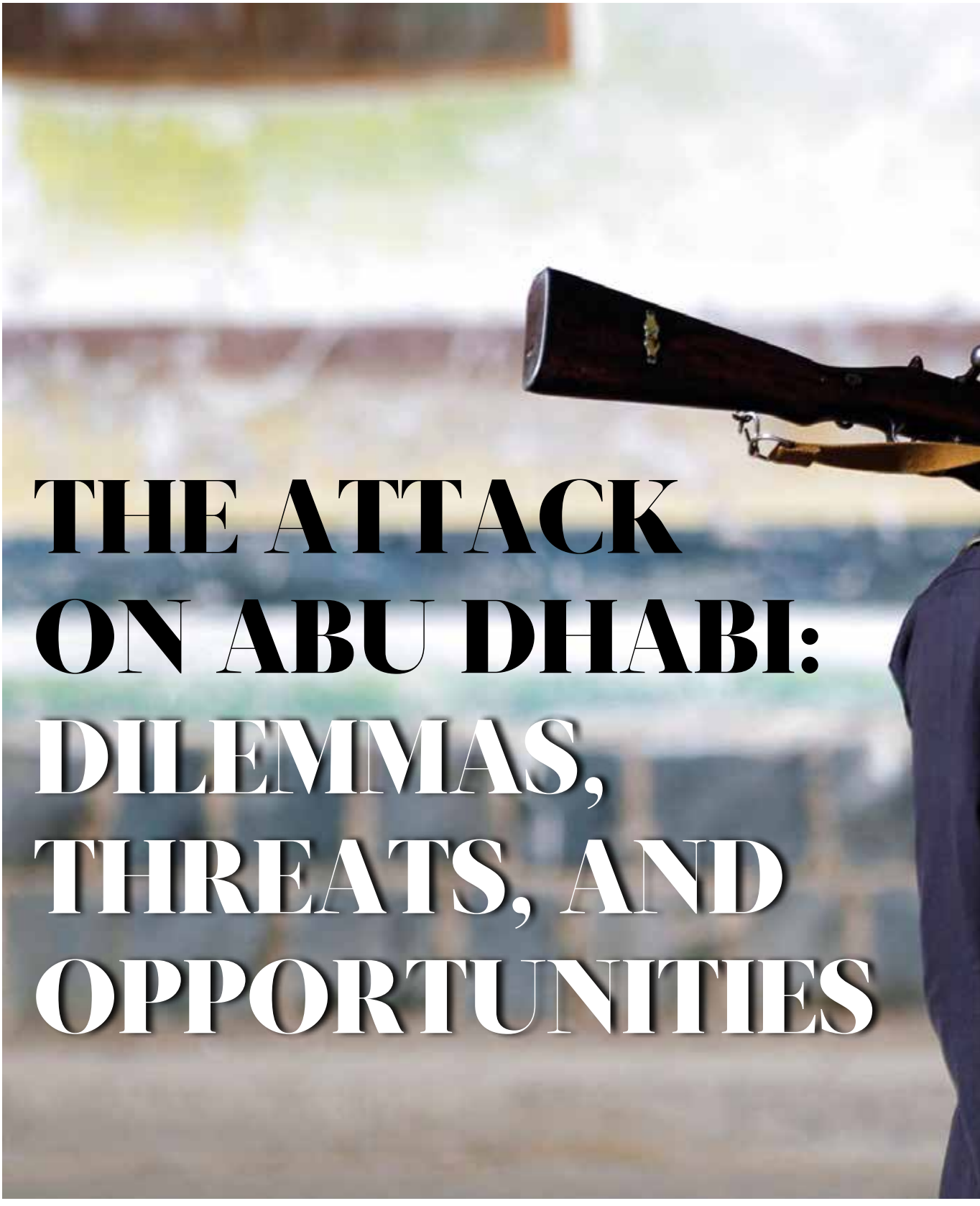

THE ATTACK ON ABU DHABI: DILEMMAS, THREATS, AND OPPORTUNITIES

A Houthi supporter holds a weapon in Yemen. Photo credit: Mohammed Huwais / AFP

by Amos Yadlin

Three global hot spots are developing in early 2022. In Europe, the crisis in Ukraine overshadows all else; in the Far East, the crises of Taiwan and the South China Sea threaten to boil over; and in the Gulf, the nuclear crisis and the conflict in Yemen are dangerously linked. While world attention is focused upon the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we need not forget that the confrontation between the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen and the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia is once again escalating. Given the blunt Houthi threats, the potential for missile strikes on Burj Khalifa in Dubai, the tallest building in the world, could take us back in time to 9/11—thousands dead, a tower collapsing, and possibly an intensified and longer war would follow.

Since the beginning of 2022, the Houthis have launched four significant attacks on the UAE. On January 17, Abu Dhabi, the UAE's seat of governance, was attacked. As part of the attack, three fuel tanks were damaged and exploded in an industrial area near the warehouses of the national fuel company, ADNOC. Another hit was at a construction site at the Abu Dhabi International Airport. Two Indians and Pakistani residents of the UAE were killed. The Houthi (or by their own name, Ansarallah) regime, now in control of large parts of Yemen and backed by Iran, claimed responsibility and threatened to conduct further attacks if Abu Dhabi continued to support their rivals in the war in Yemen (UAE-backed forces have indeed made significant gains on the ground).

Indeed, another attack took place on the night of January 23, when two ballistic missiles were fired at Abu Dhabi—missiles intercepted by an American system—the first successful operational interception by the THAAD missiles. On January 30, another shooting was carried out in Abu Dhabi, timed precisely during the official visit of Israeli President Isaac Herzog. The missile was intercepted and the launch facility in Yemen was destroyed. Iran's proxies did not lie idle either. The next day, seven UAVs were launched from Iraq into UAE airspace, all of which were successfully intercepted.

The Houthis want to deter the UAE from continuing to support militia operations in Yemen. As of this writing, however, it seems that the Houthi deterrence strategy has not worked out well.

Missiles and drone aircrafts are seen on display at an exhibition at an unidentified location in Yemen in this photo released by the Houthi Media Office. Photo credit: REUTERS

An analysis of all recent attacks illustrates that the first barrage surprised Abu Dhabi. About 20 Quds-2 cruise missiles and UAVs made in Yemen were launched and possibly also "Dhulfiqar" ballistic missiles made in Iran. In past cases, the Houthis' threats of widespread attack did not come to pass. But at the same time, the January 17 attack is reminiscent of the decisive Iranian attack in September 2019 on the main oil rig in Abqaiq in Saudi Arabia. This attack was also initially attributed to the Houthis in Yemen, but later it became clear that the cruise missiles and UAVs were launched directly from Iran by the Air Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. In all, the attacks on Abu Dhabi have the potential to affect all regional actors and their relationships, as well as to provoke Washington to rethink the US disengagement from the Middle East.

WHY THE ATTACKS ON THE EMIRATES?

In recent weeks the war in Yemen has undergone a certain turnaround. The Saudi-led coalition and its Yemeni allies captured Shabwa province from the Houthis and also started contesting parts of Marib, an energy-rich province that the Houthis had conquered from the Yemeni government. As part of what appears to be a joint strategy of the UAE and Saudi Arabia to continue to support Yemen's legitimate government, Abu Dhabi has also stepped up its support for anti-Houthi groups, such as the "Giants' Brigades," which played a key role in the reoccupation of Shabwa district. In addition, the Saudi Air Force has stepped up its airstrikes on the Houthis in response to the ongoing weekly barrage of missiles and drones on Saudi Arabia. The relative success of the Saudi-led coalition on the battlefield has

provoked the Houthis, who have now chosen to respond directly against the UAE, apparently to raise the price of UAE actions in Yemen and to force them to withdraw from their commitment to local forces (bearing in mind that the UAE withdrew its forces from Yemen in 2019). Given that Saudi Arabia does not give the ongoing Houthi attacks much publicity, having already grown accustomed to them, the Houthis have been tempted to point their long-range weapons at the UAE—an economic, commercial, and tourist center far more sensitive and fragile than Saudi Arabia.

The Iranians, for their part, who are behind the Houthis' campaign, are encouraged by their ability to simultaneously negotiate in Vienna and act militarily against their enemies in the Middle East (US, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the UAE), without the latter (except Israel) retaliating. Furthermore, it seems that the UAE's senior role in the Abraham Accords peace agreements with Israel has also motivated the Iranians to prod their proxy into launching blows against the UAE.

A SURPRISE? NO. AN ESCALATION? YES

The attack on Abu Dhabi did not come as a surprise—not to the UAE, Israel, or anyone who is following the war in Yemen. The capabilities of the Houthis in Yemen to deploy large-scale force using long-range unmanned missiles and aircraft, built on the basis of Iranian technological and financial assistance, are known to Israeli, American, Saudi, and Emirati intelligence. The intention to launch at the UAE was also not a surprise as the Houthi spokesman had threatened to do so a few days before the attack. In the Middle East, however, not every threat materializes, and the intensity of the attack has certainly exceeded the Emirati expectations and constitutes an escalation of the conflict.

The UAE will have to decide whether to increase their activity against the Houthis in Yemen or, alternatively, reduce their activity as they did in 2019.

The international community condemned the attack, including the UN secretary-general, who condemned indiscriminate attacks on civilians, European countries, and even China and the Taliban in Afghanistan. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken even called his Emirati colleague, Abdullah bin Zayd, to express support for the UAE, and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan has vowed to support the UAE and hold the Houthis accountable.

It is important to remember the UAE's disappointment with its ally, the United States, both over the delay in arms deals (due to disputes over the UAE's defense relations with China) and over the fact that the Biden administration's first step in the Middle East was to remove the Houthis from the terror list. But at the same time, it is important to note that after the first attack by the Houthis, the Americans did take an active part in defending Abu Dhabi and even sent a naval and air force task force to strengthen the UAE military capabilities in case of escalation.

THE STRATEGIC DILEMMAS OF THE PLAYERS

The attacks on the UAE create strategic dilemmas for all players. At its core, this is a practical matter: How to manage the tension between deterrence and escalation.

The Houthis want to deter the UAE from continuing to support militia operations in Yemen. As of this writing, however, it seems that the Houthi deterrence strategy has not worked out well. Less than a day after the January 17 attack, coalition airstrikes targeted Sanaa, the Yemeni capital, which has been under Houthi control since 2014, killing dozens. In one of the attacks, with the help of accurate intelligence, key Houthi officials were killed, including the commander of the Houthi Air Force in Sanaa, Brigadier General Abdullah Qassem al-Junaid, who was responsible for building the power of the unmanned vessels in Yemen, after having been trained in Iran and Lebanon. Missile launch bases and launchers of Shiite forces were also attacked, and the coalition airstrikes

apparently managed to cause significant damage to the Houthis' launch capability.

The UAE will have to decide whether to increase their activity against the Houthis in Yemen or, alternatively, reduce their activity as they did in 2019. The damage to the UAE's economy—based on financial institutions, tourism, aviation, and mainly dependent on stability and security—will be a major consideration in managing the tension between deterrence and escalation. But the more important strategic dilemma facing the UAE is its relationship with Iran.

Abu Dhabi's "strategic compass" in the past year has been "zero problems with the neighbors—calm and reconciliation," including with Iran. Thus, the two countries have conducted high-level contacts in recent months in order to alleviate regional tensions. The Emirates are now asking themselves whether Tehran nevertheless had a direct role in the attack. Given the substantial support they receive from the IRGC, the Houthis often make decisions that are not in Tehran's interest. At the same time, however, any Iranian attempts to deny their involvement may be undermined by reports suggesting that senior Houthi negotiator Muhammed Abdul-Salam met in Tehran with President Ebrahim Raisi and Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani shortly before the first attack. President Raisi's planned visit to Abu Dhabi next month, or its cancellation, may be an indicator of the strategic direction chosen by the Crown Prince (and effectively the ruler of the UAE) Mohamed bin Zayed.

American recognition of the Houthis as a terrorist organization is important to the UAE leadership, which probably feels frustrated by the Biden administration's indecision in this regard.

The United States also plays a key role in the Gulf conflict. The dilemma in Washington is related to the war in Yemen. The US administration had hoped the war would end in negotiations between the parties and begin to effectively address the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, considered the most severe one so far of the 21st century. Moreover, the Americans, who are interested in reaching a nuclear agreement in Vienna with the Iranians, do not want an escalation in the Gulf.

At the same time, however, US credibility in the Middle East is at an unprecedented low. Washington's failure to defend its allies and the apparent willingness to abandon them to Iranian-sponsored terrorism could further undermine American credibility. A lack of American diplomatic and military support may encourage Arab allies to seek sponsorship in Russia or China, hoping to have better support. Therefore, the Americans must clarify to their allies two things: first, whether they are capable of defending their allies and their own forces from the Iranian drones and cruise missile barrages; and second, whether they are able to rehabilitate their deterrent credibility, which has been severely damaged by attacks on their forces in Syria and Iraq and on their allies in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Washington will also have to resolve the dilemma of how to continue negotiations to end the war in Yemen and provide humanitarian assistance to millions of Yemeni civilians affected by the war and, at the same time, in light of the attack in Abu Dhabi, to re-list the Houthis as a terrorist organization, a decision previously made by the Trump administration and overturned by the Biden administration. In fact, American recognition of the Houthis as a terrorist organization is important to the UAE leadership, which probably feels frustrated by the Biden administration's indecision in this regard.

Above all, the strategic objective for Washington is the need to strengthen the credibility of their policies in the world, especially after the problematic message conveyed by the manner in which the US withdrew from Afghanistan. Active aid to the UAE, following the assassination of the

ISIS leader in Syria, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, has returned some color to American cheeks. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Americans now prefer to concentrate on the crisis in Ukraine, with Russia under Putin's leadership posing a more significant challenge than Iran and its proxies in the Middle East.

China is also in a dilemma after the Houthi attack on the Emirates, a place where 200,000 Chinese live and 6,000 Chinese companies operate. Furthermore, the UAE is China's largest logistical trade hub, as more than 60% of Chinese goods in the region transit through it. Despite its ties with all sides in the Gulf, China has condemned most of the Houthi attacks against the Emirates. Yet China's silence following the attack on American targets in the UAE may imply that Beijing aspires that American interests in the Gulf will continue to be harmed. Hence, it is not inconceivable that China would prefer to see the US slowly lose its grip in the Gulf. With China being partners with both sides in the Yemen conflict, a state of relative stability in the region is important to Beijing.

The Iranian dilemma is simpler. Since Trump's departure, Iran feels more secure and recognizes all too well that the Americans are unwilling to escalate the situation. Thus, Tehran perceives that Washington is not even interested in responding in a measured way to their provocations—the lack of American retaliation to the attacks against their forces in Iraq and Syria sent a clear message to the Iranians that there was no risk in unleashing their proxies against US targets and those of the American allies. The Iranians may believe that an assassination like that of Qasem Soleimani will not repeat itself, and that the strategic trend of expelling the Americans from the Middle East and weakening its Arab allies can be continued. Nevertheless, one of Tehran's tactical pillars is the preference of proxy warfare over direct activity that can lead to conflicts that Iran is not interested in risking. In addition, Putin's aggression toward Ukraine is playing in favor of the Iranians—giving them leverage in the energy market, diverting attention from their negative activities in the Gulf, and in general further weakening the US position.

Finally, the Israeli dilemma is related to the Jewish state's willingness to help countries that have chosen to normalize relations with it. However, Israel is currently reluctant to transfer air defense weapons to the UAE. This reluctance stems from Jerusalem's desire to maintain the unique technologies of its defense systems, as well as preventing a precedent of eroding its qualitative advantage—a move that has already begun in light of its consent to sell F-35 aircraft to the UAE.

This reluctance can be overcome, however, and an important strategic step that will provide better air defense to the Emirates and even to Saudi Arabia is still possible. There are two benefits to this step. Firstly, it will greatly strengthen the sense of the residents of the Arabian Peninsula that the alliance with Israel improves their situation, and does not just bring condemnation and perhaps future military attacks of the kind experienced recently. Israel also needs to study the characteristics of the attack from Yemen to Abu Dhabi, especially since the distance from Sanaa to Abu Dhabi is similar to the distance from Sanaa to Eilat. Israel, of course, has much better intelligence, detection, and interception capabilities—but even these capabilities do not guarantee hermetic protection. Secondly, it will inject a lot of resources into Israel's defense industries and may help accelerate the more efficient Laser Air Defense system, which Israel's Prime Minister Naftali Bennett recently announced that Israel is developing and would deploy in the future.

Following the attacks on Abu Dhabi, Bennett sent a letter to the heir to the throne, Mohamed bin Zayed, in which he offered "intelligence and security assistance, to protect the Emirates' citizens from similar attacks." Bennett also wrote that he instructed "the Israeli security forces to provide their counterparts in the United Arab Emirates with any assistance that may be required." The determination of Abu Dhabi to continue promoting relations with Jerusalem, despite the concrete prices and potential risks paid, is also worthy of appreciation and requires a mutual move on the part of Israel. The warm public welcome to Israeli President Herzog, despite the shooting from Yemen, is an important gesture that

Saudi-led coalition spokesman, Colonel Turki al-Malki, displays the debris of a ballistic missile which he says was launched by Yemen's Houthi group towards the capital Riyadh. Photo credit: REUTERS

constitutes another important pillar in relations between the two countries.

Similar to his visit to the UAE in December 2021, Bennett's visit to Bahrain in February 2022 also strengthened the relationship between Israel and the Gulf states. Bennett's visit, as well as Defense Minister Benny Gantz's visit to Manama when the Iranians apparently launched UAVs to Israel—which were intercepted in Iraq by the Americans—reinforces the need to establish a Middle East Air Defense Treaty (MEADT) against the Iranian threat. This regional defense partnership against Iran's air and missile threats could well be achievable and perhaps develop as a Middle East Air Defense Alliance. Certain indicators following the historic foreign ministers meeting in Sde Boker on March 28, 2022 seem to confirm that this option is under active consideration.

Beyond words, it is time for action. There is a historic opportunity here to strengthen the Abraham Accords and perhaps to lay the foundations for a joint Israel–US–UAE air defense alliance, extended in the future also to Saudi Arabia, against the threat of Iran's precision attacks, with advanced missiles and UAVs. ✳

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Demonstrators raise portraits of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Paris, France. Photo credit: Apaydin Alain/ABACA via Reuters Connect

IS THERE AN OPTION FOR A NEW ISRAELI POLICY TOWARD SYRIA?

by Itamar Rabinovich

The civil war raging in Syria since 2011 ended 20 years of Israeli efforts to resolve the conflict between the two countries. Despite the hopes recently raised in some quarters, the prospects of a rift between Bashar al-Assad and his Iranian protectors are slim. It would have been preferable, therefore, to work for Assad's ouster and Iran's removal. But Israel would need US support for this effort and Biden's policy preferences do not lend themselves to such an ambitious undertaking.

From 1991 to 2011, Israel's relationship with Syria was conducted on a dual track. An effort to resolve the conflict and reach a political settlement was conducted alongside a continuing direct and indirect armed conflict, primarily through Syria's alliance with Iran and support for Hezbollah in Lebanon. The diplomatic effort to resolve the Israeli–Syrian conflict was launched at the US-sponsored Madrid Conference in October 1991 and led to several rounds of serious negotiations conducted with Syria's presidents, Hafez al-Assad and then with his son and heir Bashar. Several Israeli prime ministers engaged in this effort: Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, Benjamin Netanyahu, Ehud Barak, and Ehud Olmert. During these negotiations, Israel offered several times a conditional, hypothetical willingness to withdraw from the Golan in return for a satisfactory package of peace and security. Syria agreed in principle to peace, a certain degree of normalization, and adequate security arrangements with Israel. But these tentative agreements were never translated into an actual deal. In between these rounds of negotiations, and sometimes while negotiations were taking place, Syria continued its military pressure on Israel, primarily by supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon in cooperation with, and subsequently in the service of, Iranian policy.

The last attempt to reach a Syrian–Israeli deal was conducted in the years leading to and right up to the eve of the Syrian civil war, which broke out in March 2011. It consisted of a mediation conducted by US diplomats Frederic Hof and Dennis Ross. The motto of this effort was "territory for strategic realignment." In exchange for Israel's withdrawal from the Golan, Syria was to reciprocate by making peace but primarily by distancing itself from its close relationship with Iran. Both US mediators felt that Netanyahu and Bashar al-Assad were conducting a serious negotiation, but it is quite possible that neither intended to go through with any deal and rather were interested in participating in these diplomatic exercises

Getting Iran out of Syria, thereby reducing the threat to Israel and weakening Hezbollah in Lebanon, would be a major geopolitical achievement. But this cannot be achieved by Israel alone.

primarily to stave off US pressure on other issues. In any event, this initiative ended with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, which has transformed Syrian realities and has led Israel to adopt new policies for coping with these new realities.

As I wrote in an article in *New/Lines Magazine,* published on March 22, 2021, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and then its persistence presented Israel with an initial policy dilemma. Israel could, in theory, decide to support the uprising; Bashar al-Assad was, after all, a dangerous enemy, an ally of Iran and Hezbollah, and a leader who has been willing to go to the point of seeking to develop a nuclear weapon—acquiring from North Korea the facility that Israel had destroyed in 2007. Moreover, the severity of the challenge faced by Israel during the Second Lebanon War in 2006 had demonstrated the dangers presented by "the axis of resistance"—Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah. But a different line of thinking influenced Israel's policy in 2011 and in the next few years: Bashar al-Assad was "the devil Israel knew." The alternative was not a moderate, liberal government; instead, it was an Islamist or jihadist regime on Israel's northern border. The lessons from the failed intervention in Lebanese politics in 1982 shaped Israel's cautious attitude.

As I wrote previously in *New/Lines Magazine,* "The policy adopted by the Netanyahu government kept Israel on the sidelines of the Syrian conflict with three important exceptions: Israel was willing to offer discreet humanitarian help; it would fire back in the event of firing or shelling into its territory; and it would discreetly interdict the transfer of sophisticated weapons to Hezbollah." Moreover, Israel's nightmare was—and still is—that weapons of mass destruction might fall into terrorist hands. "This initial Israeli policy underwent several modifications reflecting the major developments in the Syrian crisis. Thus, Israel began to launch unadvertised attacks on Iranian shipments as Iran and Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian civil war increased in 2013. Israel also began to offer significant humanitarian help to the population of the Syrian Golan and subsequently, as Iran and Hezbollah tried to embed themselves in that part of Syria, Israel offered support to some local opposition groups by providing them with weapons."

This fundamental policy had to be adapted to meet three major developments: The rise of ISIS and the establishment of its "caliphate" on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border; Russia and Iran's military intervention on the side of the Syrian regime; and their contribution to the regime's military victory in Aleppo at the end of 2016. As it turned out, the challenge of ISIS was temporary and from Israel's point of view, peripheral. But the establishment of a long-term Iranian and Russian military presence in Syria and Bashar al-Assad's ability to survive the civil war have presented Israel with new challenges. Russia's military presence in Syria and its increased influence over the Assad regime and in the country turned out less traumatic for Israel than the initial Israeli concern at having Russia and its air force too close for comfort. Russia has not been interested in a conflict with Israel, and both countries have found ways of avoiding direct conflict. (In one case, Russia initially accused Israel of downing a Russian reconnaissance airplane while Israel claimed that Syrian air defenses shot it down by mistake. The Russians soon realized that this was the case and resumed its liaison with Israel.)

Iran's presence and activity in Syria has presented Israel with a much more serious threat. Iran has been supportive of the Assad regime from the early days of the civil war, first indirectly and then by dispatching troops and pro-Iranian militias. Iran has been busy trying to build its own military infrastructure in Syria, deepening its influence in the country and building its overland bridge through Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean. Iran has a huge number of rockets and missiles held by Hezbollah in Lebanon as a deterrent against Israel and has sought to directly control additional offensive capacity in Syria against Israel. Israel is determined to prevent this from happening and since 2018 has been conducting the "campaign between the wars," aerial defense operations to destroy this Iranian effort.

Beyond these issues is the question of Israel's view of Syria as a country and as a state. Assad survived the civil war but has not been able

Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi meets Syria's Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad in Tehran, Iran, December 6, 2021. Photo credit: REUTERS

to rebuild the Syrian state's authority over its national territory. Assad controls only 60% of Syria's territory; the rest is controlled by Turkey, the Syrian Kurds, and Islamist and jihadi militias in the province of Idlib. Russian and Iranian military are present in Syria as well as Shiite militias cultivated by Iran.

Assad's prospects of returning Syria to a normal state of affairs are dim. He is unlikely to receive the huge amount of funds required for economic rehabilitation from Western or international institutions as long as such projects do guarantee the return of a large portion of the five million Syrian refugees who live in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Turkey has practically annexed a large strip along its border with Syria; the US is likely to maintain its small expeditionary force in Syria and to support its Kurdish allies; Turkey prevents Assad and Russia from conquering the province of Idlib; and Russia and Iran are likely to maintain their military presence and influence in the country.

Although a swift and radical transformation of this situation is unlikely, Bashar al-Assad has been steadfast and persistent in his effort to survive and gradually normalize the situation in this country and expand his regime control, first in the part of the country under his authority and then over additional areas. He has seen some successes, most importantly the willingness of some of the Arab world to accept Syria again as a legitimate member of the Arab League. Relations with several Arab countries have been restored, and some money has been transferred to Syria from the Gulf states. This development has led to a policy debate in Israel predicated on the question of whether Israel should continue to focus on the Iranian challenge in Syria and view Assad as an illegitimate enemy, or whether Israel should seek to improve its position through a change of policy. For example, Meir Ben-Shabbat, Israel's former national security advisor, who—based on his dealings with Russian officials during his tenure—stated in an article published by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy that "there is a shared view between us and the Russians, beyond what is publicly exposed... the Russians are striving

for regional stability, particularly in Syria. I believe they would agree that Iran is the force challenging that stability."

More broadly, the Israeli respectable commentator on national security affairs, Alon Ben David, argued in the Israeli daily *Maariv* that given indications of Assad's unhappiness with Iran's massive influence in his country and the Arab world's growing willingness to accept Assad, Israel should reconsider its own policy toward Syria's president and his regime. Israel, according to Ben David, through mediation by either its interlocutors in Russia or its new friends in the Gulf, should negotiate with Assad, offering to support economic aid in return for limiting Assad's relations with Iran and Iran's position in Syria. "There is no debating the fact that at issue is one of the greatest villains of the 21st century," writes Ben David, "and yet Assad's desire to return to the family of nations and to be considered a legitimate leader can today be converted into a strategic tie-breaker. It is not certain at this moment that legitimacy can be built for him in the West, but if we help him return to the Arab nation, large parts of which are now our allies—we will dismantle the Shiite axis, give our Lebanese neighbors a persuasive presentation of the advantages of ousting the Iranians, and maybe even lay the foundations for a future resolution of the conflict with Syria."

Ben David may well have written his column on his own or he may have been influenced by conversations with Israeli officials and policy makers, but the alternative he proposes to Israel's current policy is not quite realistic. To begin with, Russia, who could be a key to limiting and maybe even ousting Iran from Syria, is not a real partner for such an effort unless it becomes part of a comprehensive Russian–American deal. Such a deal is not in the offing and Russia, despite an element of competition with Iran in Syria, still regards Iran as a partner. More importantly, all indications of Assad's unhappiness with Iran are questionable, and even if he concluded that it would be better for him to rid Syria of Iran's presence and influence, he does not quite have the means required for implementing it. Furthermore, there is little prospect of an Israeli–Syrian peace deal. Earlier attempts by Israeli leaders to come to terms with Syria had met with stiff opposition in the country. Given the Trump administration's recognition of Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights and the understandable opposition to a deal with a character like Bashar al-Assad, it is hardly likely that an Israeli government would be willing or able in the foreseeable future to negotiate any "land for peace" deal with the Syrian regime as it is.

Clearly, an alternative to the current policy—that passively accepts the overall status quo in Syria and focuses on Iran's military presence—would be desirable. Getting Iran out of Syria, thereby reducing the threat to Israel and weakening Hezbollah in Lebanon, would be a major geopolitical achievement. But this cannot be achieved by Israel alone. It can only be achieved through a combined effort with the United States. In 2012, the Obama administration missed an opportunity to try to topple the Assad regime by offering substantial aid to the Free Syrian Army. By toppling the Assad regime, the US could conceivably undermine Hezbollah's position in Lebanon and threaten Iran's whole posture in the Middle East. Given the difficulty of negotiating a new nuclear deal with Iran, the Biden administration could conceivably switch to an effort to curtail Iran's regional ambitions. A different policy toward Assad's regime in Syria would be a cardinal element in such a policy. But given the contours of the Biden administration's policy in the Middle East and its reluctance to undertake massive new initiatives in the region, it is unlikely that Israel will have such a partner for a different Syria policy in the foreseeable future. ✳

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A security woman checks the temperature of a woman in Saudi Arabia. Photo credit: REUTERS

COVID-19 IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE CRISIS THAT WASN'T

BY JON B. ALTERMAN

Two years ago, it was easy to get the impact of the coronavirus pandemic wrong. I certainly did. While no one had much of an idea back then what course the disease would take, Middle Eastern governments in particular seemed ill-equipped to succeed. Most seemed unable to do much to halt the spread of the virus, and their economies did not show many signs of resilience. With many already in poverty and lacking formal employment, populations across the region were living on a knife's edge. We had a good sense that COVID-19 would disrupt economies, slash incomes, and demonstrate governmental ineptitude. To me, and to others, it seemed poised to throw the region into chaos.

All these things happened, except for the last one. After two years, the pandemic has not thrown the region into chaos—at least not yet. In fact, the pandemic's political fallout has been relatively modest everywhere around the world. If anything, the effect of COVID-19 has been to deepen political patterns rather than to shift them. Where governments in the Middle East had firm control over the populations, that control seems even firmer today. We certainly did not see a reprise of the Arab Spring, where populations united to force accountability on governments whose performance they considered to be inadequate. For communities committed to understanding political economy, global security, and the drivers of political change, the pandemic's modest political punch in the Middle East requires explanation.

If there is a poster child for a government's ineffective COVID-19 response in the Middle East, or almost anywhere in the world, it is Iran. It was hit early and hard by the pandemic. For many months, Iranian infection rates were among the highest in the world. Early on, Iranian officials downplayed the seriousness of the disease, and already-low public trust in government hobbled whatever response the government sought to muster. In the last two years, the country has suffered through five waves of deaths, each one larger than the last. To this day, vaccine hesitancy is high, not least because the government keeps trying to push a domestically produced vaccine, and so many Iranians distrust their government.

Iran's economy was already reeling before COVID-19 hit, and its GDP was falling. The pandemic accelerated that decline, shrinking global oil demand and greatly reducing global energy prices. Even though Iran's energy exports are hobbled by sanctions, the country still sells hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil per day on global markets; lower prices depressed the economy even further. Inflation began running at almost 50%.

It would seem like a perfect storm for an unpopular government. The mistakes handling the pandemic domestically combined with the global effects of COVID-19 to compound the consequences of the government's strategy of confrontation with the West. It could all combine to bring the whole system down.

Yet when Iran held elections last June, the population did not rally to demand a different

A volunteer from the IRGC militia forces sanitizes a bus station amid the coronavirus disease fears, in Tehran, Iran. Photo credit: WANA/Ali Khara via REUTERS

path forward. In fact, Iranians didn't rally much at all. The elections had record low turnout, but it didn't mean that Iranians had become passive. Iran was roiled by protests last summer, over water and electricity shortages. The government cobbled together a response that provided some temporary relief but failed to address the systemic problem in which demand continues to outstrip supply.

Unprecedented failures by the government to control the coronavirus and a series of self-inflicted wounds that compounded public distress were not enough to get the Iranian public to demand a new leadership. Instead, the Iranian public opted to work within the existing system on longstanding grievances having to do with water and electricity, protesting as they had done before, and obtaining the same result: palliative measures that did little to address the underlying problems.

At the other end of the spectrum in the Middle East is Israel. The country was aggressive in protecting the health of Israelis, and then Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made a deal with Pfizer-BioNTech to secure early vaccines for all Israelis in return for

comprehensive clinical data. As a consequence of this innovative agreement, Israel was the first country in the world to vaccinate a majority of its population (and later, one of the first to mandate boosters). It provided the public with early opportunities for a return to normalcy in the spring of 2021—months before other countries—and it highlighted the effectiveness of the Israeli health system. The Israeli government response seemed a shining example of visionary deal-making and leadership competence.

Yet in Israel, too, the pandemic seemed to lack political traction. Netanyahu had won victories in three closely decided elections in the two years prior, but he narrowly lost his election in March 2021. While Netanyahu had appeared persistently vulnerable, his vulnerabilities had stayed steady, and he was able to eke out a win repeatedly. Yet at precisely the time when the biggest news in the country was Netanyahu securing vaccines and pointing a way out of the pandemic—or so Israelis thought—it did him no good.

Elsewhere, the pandemic did have more of an effect on political careers, but not on basic policies. In Japan, perceived bungled efforts to balance economic growth with the preservation of public health helped force the resignation of Prime Ministers Shinzo Abe in August 2020 and Yoshihide Suga in September 2021. At issue was public frustration that lockdowns were too harsh and that infection levels were too high—essentially, people expected superb performance from their government. The prime ministers' departures did not change much, as their Liberal Democratic Party remained in control; the change was minor at best.

In places where politics are less open, some governments appear to have been able to turn the pandemic to their advantage. For example, the wealthier Gulf monarchies were especially proactive. They secured vaccines, mandated their administration, and pushed their publics to use smartphone apps that revealed vaccine status and user location. Those apps allowed governments to contact people, trace them, enforce bans on movement, and more generally keep close tabs on users. Meanwhile, they pumped billions of dollars of stimulus payments into their economies.

Other authoritarian governments were similarly proactive. China is the most well-known. It has pursued a "zero-COVID" strategy that has involved large-scale lockdowns when infections are present, and it has also used smartphone software to verify identity and vaccination status, as well as to control people's movement. If there are signs of public resistance, they are not visible.

Tunisia represents a more complicated case. There, the pandemic deepened economic distress over the summer of 2021. Parliament was already under pressure. A relatively inexperienced body that had been re-imagined after the 2011 revolution, critics charged it had become a collection of preoccupied, self-interested, and self-serving politicians who were incapable of meeting the country's challenges. Tunisia's president, Kais Saied, seized on popular discontent to dismiss parliament and argue for a new constitution. So far, he appears to enjoy widespread popular support, presiding over a majority that had come to distrust democratic rule.

Less complicated cases are in countries that have descended into conflict. Syria, Yemen, and Libya are among the most uncertain in the region, with central governments that lack control over large swaths of their territory. In these countries, access to any kind of healthcare can be a chancy endeavor, and combatants

After two years, the pandemic has not thrown the region into chaos—at least not yet.

have used access to medicine as a political instrument. Even so, evidence suggests that the health consequences of violence are greater than those of the pandemic, and the pandemic itself doesn't seem to have shifted the balance of power or changed the nature of these conflicts.

Scanning the horizon, we see a varied picture. In mature democratic countries, there is no distinctive "COVID effect." One could argue that Donald Trump's lackluster coronavirus response was responsible for his defeat in November 2020, but one could claim just as firmly that Trump's loss was a consequence of his broader approach to governing, his instinct for polarization, or his relentless use of Twitter. COVID-19 may have made the environment slightly more politicized than it has been, but not much. For example, in Europe, political polarization seemed to be in motion before the virus, and it neither seems to have halted nor accelerated that movement. Boris Johnson's current political problems may stem more from how his inner circle handled the coronavirus than how his government handled the country. Despite the fact that COVID-19 has touched the lives of everyone in these countries, their politics have proven too complicated and too interwoven to center around the pandemic Although COVID-19 may have driven disaffection, it is harder to see what the public want from their governments in absolute terms. Instead, what democratic societies seem to want is generally defined in relative terms, namely that they want things to be relatively better than they are.

COVID-19 also appears to be a relatively impotent force in less democratic spaces as well. In the Middle East, a certain sense of fatalism among the publics—perhaps inflected by religious belief—can be added to the frustration felt that the efforts of 2011 to enact political change had backfired. The often-lackluster performance of Western governments, which in many cases proved unable to stanch their own waves of infections, surely reduced expectations that developing country governments could do better than they did.

But the pandemic also suggests that authoritarian governments still have a number of tricks up their sleeves. While central bankers helped to keep economies afloat amid diminishing economic activity, security services and information ministries worked overtime. It is becoming clearer that identity—be it sectarian, religious, or national—can be constantly reinvented, and people remain receptive to calls to rally in the face of threats. In the face of the pandemic, authoritarian governments became more outspoken about their enemies, and citizens are wary of being seen in opposition. Security services have also grown more sophisticated and more skilled.

Although it seemed that the Middle East came together a decade ago driven by utopian visions of the Arab Spring, often united against governments, now, governments appear to have grown more skillful at holding their countries together, feeding on fears of what might be. They appear to be bringing their publics along. While the strategy may serve governmental interests in the near term, it is hard to see it serving public interests in the longer term. ✳

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Photo credit: Shutterstock

YOU BETTER BELIEVE THAT AFRICA MATTERS

BY CHARLES RAY

For too long in the West, primarily the United States and Western Europe, the continent of Africa has been viewed as peripheral to world affairs. It was thought of only in terms of the natural resources that could be extracted from it or as a place of poverty, violence, and disasters—natural and man-made. As a diplomat who has served in Africa, a journalist who has photographed and written about the continent, and now as a think-tank analyst who studies Africa, this view of Africa is short-sighted and needs to be revisited.

Although Africa is home to some of the most strategic minerals on the planet, such as gold, copper, cobalt, and oil, it does have more than its fair share of problems—some of them self-inflicted, but others either not of its own making or exacerbated by the actions of outsiders. Nonetheless, the continent is far more dynamic and diverse than most Westerners realize and for a whole host of reasons it does matter.

RESOURCE RICH YET STILL POOR

Africa's resources, including people—during the height of the global slave trade—have always been both a curse and a blessing to the continent. Because it possesses a significant proportion of global reserves of some strategic minerals, it has often been, and still is, a pawn in the struggles between powerful countries to gain access to and control of minerals that are vital to modern industry. Africa is estimated to contain 21% of the world's total gold reserves and 85% of platinum, just as two examples.

The competition to extract these minerals is often carried out without regard to the impact it has on the countries of Africa and on the average African who accrues little of the profit. While living standards and wages vary among the countries, and even by region within a single country, the average net salary for the continent is less than $400 per month. One in three Africans, or more than 400 million people, live on less than $2 per day and represent 70% of the world's poorest people.

PERSISTENT TROUBLES: NATURAL AND MAN-MADE

The African continent, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, suffers from serious environmental problems due to the impact of climate change, overfishing, deforestation, mining, and intense agricultural usage. Lack of resources, poor governance, corruption, and lack of respect for the rule of law by the governing elites contribute to the inability to solve these problems. Overlooked, however, is that the devastating impact of European colonization, the Atlantic slave trade, and the Cold War exacerbated a lot of these problems.

Pervasive poverty and excessive dependence on foreign assistance also contributes to Africa's problems, sometimes aggravated by foreign aid, which is often misused, despite US and European attempts to lay down conditions, and because aid from countries like China comes without obvious conditions and easily leads to abuse.

Corruption and poor governance is often considered the leading cause of poverty in Africa, and after decades of foreign aid—with and without conditions—it often appears that little has changed.

AFRICA IS NOT A MONOLITH

Taking the above into consideration, along with the increasing number of extralegal changes in government, mainly through military coups, it is understandable, though regrettable, that many Westerners think these ills are representative of the entire continent. All too often, Africa in general is both perceived and presented as a global basket case that we notice only when the next disaster strikes.

But Africa is not a homogenous place; it is as diverse as any other continent and actually more diverse than many. Composed of more than 50 countries, Africa is the second largest and second most populated continent with 1.3 billion inhabitants. Over 1,500 languages are spoken in Africa, and it is home to every major religion and hundreds of ethnic groups. By 2050, the African continent is expected to have a population of 2.4 billion people and will account for half the world's population growth. Moreover, Africa is an overwhelmingly young continent, with approximately 40% of its population under the age of 15; in some African countries, over 50% of the population is under 25.

WHY AFRICA'S DEMOGRAPHIC ISSUES MATTER

The aforementioned demographics alone should cause the world to sit up and take notice of Africa. With such a large, young population that has grown up in the digital age, it represents an immense potential consumer market and employee base—or a potential source of recruiting for extremist movements if the economic needs of this population are not met.

With such a large, young population that has grown up in the digital age, Africa represents an immense potential consumer market.

Africa is also urbanizing at a fast pace. In 1960, 80% of Africa's population was rural. Currently only 60% live in the countryside, and by 2050 that number will have fallen to 40%. This urbanization has been caused by economic privation, wars, and climate-fueled disasters. Still, the move to the cities has not solved the problems, as many of Africa's large conurbations are not equipped to deal with the negative effects of climate change, nor does the move lift the internal migrants out of poverty. Approximately 70% of Africa's urban population lives in slum conditions, lacking access to economic opportunity, education, or health care.

With 17% of the world's population, Africa contributes a single-digit percentage of global greenhouse gasses but suffers more than any other populated continent from the impact of climate change, with droughts, floods, climate-caused storms, and heat waves reducing food production and increasing health problems across the continent. Diminished food production with such a fast growing population is a recipe for disaster. Currently, heavily dependent on agriculture, Africa receives only 4% of the world's investment in agricultural research, a deficit that must be made up if Africans are to understand how climate change affects agricultural production.

Not only is Africa affected by climate change, but it also has a potentially significant impact on climate change. The Congo basin rainforest is the second largest carbon sink on the planet after the Amazon rainforest and is endangered by deforestation, caused mainly by local agriculture. With the Amazon rainforest now emitting more carbon dioxide than it absorbs, itself endangered by logging and agricultural activity, the Congo rainforest becomes even more important.

The Congo basin, where human populations are increasingly encroaching on wildlife habitats, could be the source of our next global pandemic. One shudders to imagine a viral disease that is as infectious and transmissible as COVID-19 and as deadly as Ebola; in the absence

10th Summit of the African Union, Kigali, 2018. Photo credit: Flickr/Paul Kagame

of a concerted effort to identify and isolate the zoonotic diseases native to the region, it's not a matter of if but when we will be faced with this disaster.

While Africa has not been a significant factor in global terrorism, most of the major international terrorist organizations do have a presence there and the continent has a large number of domestic extremist groups. Extremist activity has significantly increased in the past decade. Left unchecked, these groups could become a threat to countries outside Africa.

THE NEW GREAT POWER COMPETITION AND ITS IMPACT

The competition of the United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War era has been replaced in the last decade with the US–China competition. Mostly economically oriented, China is now sub-Saharan Africa's largest trade partner in mostly import-driven trade. China is also a major investor in Africa, where it is building a number of infrastructure projects. However, China has also established a military presence in Djibouti, where it built a support base (the second Chinese overseas military base) at a cost of US$590 million. Although China's largest import from the continent is oil, it also imports a number of vital minerals to fuel its rapidly growing economy, including iron ore, and cobalt from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

While Chinese investments in Africa are popular with the ruling elites and have created a degree of economic development, China's lack of governance conditions, its support for some of the continent's most authoritarian leaders,

and the debt burden its loans have imposed on some of the world's poorest countries have been controversial both on the continent and internationally. With Chinese firms—many controlled by the central government or the Chinese Communist Party—increasingly becoming dominant in African economies, the US and the West view the situation with an understandable degree of concern.

FINDING THE LIGHT THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

Looking to the future, Africa will have a significant impact on the world in a number of areas. Whether that impact is positive or negative will depend upon the actions taken primarily by Africans themselves, but also by the policy choices of the countries of the global north.

As Africa's populations increase, if economies are structured to provide adequate living standards, it will be a potentially lucrative customer base, investment destination, and source of a young and tech-savvy labor force. It also could become our worst nightmare: a densely populated region of disaffected young people who are ripe for recruitment by violent extremist groups.

If Africa cannot develop methods to mitigate the negative impacts of climate change, such as developing climate-friendly agriculture and building more resilient cities, food production will fail to keep pace with population growth and thus increase Africa's dependence on foreign assistance just to feed the people, hence perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

Population relocation due to famine, war, or other disasters will exert more pressure on already overburdened cities, with the population possibly flowing northward and putting pressure on southern Europe and the Mediterranean, ultimately affecting the rest of Western Europe and the US.

Africa and the world also have to implement methods to protect and preserve the Congo rainforest. If this forest continues to be degraded, it will lead to less rainfall and will affect agricultural production in a region dependent upon it. It will most certainly induce a rise in global temperatures, which will, in turn, lead to more frequent and violent tropical storms and rising sea levels. The destruction of wildlife habitats and increased human–animal contact could lead to the emergence of a virus that could quickly turn into a serious pandemic.

Africa's 54 countries constitute the largest voting bloc in the United Nations. Having this many votes ensures a majority in the UN General Assembly. Should the Africa Union's initiative to develop an African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) become reality, thus creating the world's largest free trade area, it would promote significant reforms in Africa's political and economic governance, enhance the long-term development of African economies, and potentially turn Africa into a global economic kingmaker.

While China and the US, currently the world's two largest economies, are often at loggerheads on a number of issues, taking a pragmatic approach to US–China competition in Africa by focusing on areas of common interest, such as climate change mitigation, counterterrorism, anti-piracy, and stability, could benefit not only the two competitors but also Africa and the rest of the world.

For better or for worse, in the coming decades, Africa will matter, and we had better believe it. Our lives could depend on it. ✳

CHARLES RAY

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IRAN'S TIES TO AFRICA

Jacob Zuma, former president of South Africa and Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran. Photo credit: Wikimedia/Official website of the supreme leader of Iran

BY J. PETER PHAM

Although Iran's efforts in Africa often go unnoticed, they are an important part of the Islamic Republic's bid to expand its influence, both regionally and globally. Lifting the sanctions on Iran would make it easier for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to pursue its goals in the continent.

The US recently agreed to allow South Korea to send at least $63 million to an Iranian government-linked company, to settle overdue damages. Many commentators subsequently claimed that it is only a matter of time before the Biden administration permits the release of some $7 billion owed by Seoul for oil shipments, the payments for which have been blocked since the Trump administration exited the nuclear agreement and slapped sanctions on Tehran. Irrespective to what priorities the Islamic Republic would allocate the infusion of scarce foreign exchange, many suspect that the IRGC, especially its elite Qods Force (QF), will get a good chunk of the funds. Some have even speculated as to the mischief that the money could wreck in Iraq, Syria, and the Gulf, in addition to sustaining the Islamic Republic's nuclear program. Few analysts, however, have paid much attention to Africa, which Iran has long targeted as part of its ambitions to expand influence beyond the Middle East—and where a little bit of money can go a very long way.

SAME OLD STORY

Even if we leave aside the millennial history of Persian navigators and merchants interacting with the nations and peoples of East Africa, modern Iran has long cultivated a strategic interest in the region. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, in response to the spread of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's radical Pan-Arabism, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi increasingly aligned his foreign policy with those of the conservative, pro-Western Arab monarchies—especially after Egyptian-trained officers overthrew the monarchy in Yemen in 1962. At the same time, while Israel pursued openings in Ethiopia and the newly independent African states (see my Jerusalem Strategic Tribune article "Israel's African Comeback," August 2021), Iran sought an informal regional alliance with Ethiopia, then ruled by the Emperor Haile Selassie.

Following the overthrow of Selassie in 1974 and his subsequent execution, as well as the succession of a moderate regime in Egypt under Anwar Sadat after Nasser's death in 1970, the

Shah's policy shifted focus from countering Pan-Arabism to containing communism in an attempt to prevent the spread of radicalism within the Greater Middle East and to curry favor with the US. Thus, Iran joined Saudi Arabia and others in supplying arms to Somali dictator Mohamed Siad Barré in the 1977–1978 Ogaden War against the new Ethiopian regime, which had aligned with the Soviet Union, and the Cuban forces that fought alongside it.

During this same period—and for similar Cold War containment considerations—Iran also supported the apartheid regime in South Africa, supplying over 90% of the country's petroleum imports by 1978, the last full year of the Shah's reign. After the Shah was overthrown, the Islamic Republic of Iran reversed his policies, breaking diplomatic and commercial ties with apartheid South Africa, and proclaiming its support for the then-outlawed African National Congress, a gesture from which it continues to reap dividends four decades later—even though, in actuality, the new regime in Tehran was too consumed with its own internal challenges to do much to support the struggle against apartheid.

It was only in the late 1980s, after having fought Iraq's Saddam Hussein in a bloody eight-year war, that the Iranian regime under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was able to turn its attention again to Africa. The first major breakthrough occurred in Sudan, after an Islamist-supported military coup overthrew the elected government of Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi in 1989, replacing it with a dictatorship led by Omar al-Bashir. Notwithstanding the Sunni–Shia schism, Khartoum and Tehran made common cause; following a 1991 state visit by President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Tehran agreed to finance Sudan's purchase of some $300 million in Chinese weapons, replacing the military aid that the US had cut off. This was the heyday of the late Sudanese Islamist leader Hassan al-Turabi, who convened a series of global conferences of Islamists in the mid-1990s, a period which coincided with Osama bin Laden enjoying refuge in Sudan. Iran's investment in Sudan eventually soured, however, in the aftermath of 9/11 as the Bashir regime took advantage of the opportunity to begin improving its relationship with Washington—and as Sudan gradually realized (for various reasons, including Israeli air strikes) that the cost of the association with Iran had become too high. The leadership in Khartoum switched sides and turned to Saudi Arabia for support, and by the end of the Obama administration, the country had a roadmap to removing itself from the Americans' list of state sponsors of terrorism. The process culminated in 2017 with the Trump administration's lifting of the two decades-old economic embargo.

In efforts against its rivals, especially the Sunni Arab countries, Iran has also exploited its inroads into the small Shiite communities in the continent, whether African or diaspora Lebanese.

A similar fate met the Islamic Republic's attempt to establish a strategic beachhead in Eritrea, taking advantage of the country's political and economic isolation following its 1998–2000 border war with neighboring Ethiopia. Although the conflict itself was inconclusive, the impact on the smaller country was far more devastating than it was on its larger neighbor. After Ethiopia refused to abide by the international arbitral award of the disputed territory to Eritrea, Asmara was accused of helping Islamist militants in Somalia and elsewhere as a way to hit back at Addis Ababa. As a result, the subregional Intergovernmental

Authority for Development (IGAD) and then the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on the Eritrean regime. Increasingly isolated, Asmara was susceptible to overtures from Tehran, which led to increasingly cozy military ties, including Iranian naval vessels calling on the Eritrean Red Sea port of Assab. This, in turn, stoked fears of the strategic locale being used as a transit point for arms and other support that the mullahs were providing militant groups, ranging from Hamas in the Gaza Strip and the Houthis in Yemen. However, a regime change in 2018 brought to power a new government in Ethiopia, which, in a deal brokered by the United Arab Emirates, not only made peace with Eritrea but, indeed, also sealed an alliance whereby Eritrea agreed to provide military aid to Ethiopia against internal opponents in the Tigray region. Once again, Iran was left with little to show for the resources it had expended in securing a toehold in Africa.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH IN THE PAST TWO DECADES

While neither the Shah's efforts at a transregional geopolitical play nor the mullahs' attempts to achieve significant influence through an allied regime on the African continent panned out over the long term for Iran, Tehran persisted in its quest to break into Africa and shifted its focus in the early 2000s.

During the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013), whose very first foreign trip was to attend an African Union (AU) summit in The Gambia, Iran increasingly copied from the soft-power playbook of Western countries, using development assistance to build influence. In the wake of Ahmadinejad's meetings with AU leaders in Banjul and his subsequent visits to various African countries, both the Iranian Red Crescent Society and the Imam Khomeini Relief Aid saw their clinics and other medical programs multiply across the continent. Meanwhile, Al-Mustafa International University, a clerical institution directly controlled by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (and sanctioned by the US Treasury Department in 2020 for facilitating recruitment to the Quds Force), opened branches in a number of African countries, even in several with negligible Muslim and even smaller Shiite populations, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Ahmadinejad was not reticent about the potential he saw in Africa for advancing Iran's revolutionary agenda, telling one visiting African diplomat that "an extensive and profound cooperation between Iran and Africa will go a long way to modify international relations and regional balance."

Under Ahmadinejad's supposedly moderate successor, Hassan Rouhani, Iran took advantage of the sanctions relief it received under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to double its outgoing trade volume with Africa to $1.7 billion by 2018. Tehran offered export incentives to about 30 countries to sign large-scale trade deals to purchase Iranian liquified petroleum gas (LPG), iron, steel, cement, and other products. When the Trump administration pulled out of the nuclear deal and reimposed sanctions, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif crisscrossed Africa multiple times to strike barter deals to circumvent US restrictions on banking transactions. The diplomat was so successful that, by the time President Joseph Biden took office, one study found that "the implementation of agricultural, technical, and engineering projects accounted for the bulk of Iran's economic activities in Africa."

Countries in the Greater Middle East and beyond will need to remain vigilant against Iranian attempts to secure conventional military access in Africa.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei with Esmail Qaani, commander of the Quds Force of the IRGC. Photo credit: SalamPix / ABACA

These activities, conducted by knowledge-based companies known as Danyesh Bonyan, are technically considered private-sector, although the Iranian government invests in them heavily, and, because they are often in the development sphere, they are less vulnerable to sanctions. The extradition from Cabo Verde to the US of Columbian businessman Alex Saab, who was arrested in late 2021 during a stopover on a private plane bound for Tehran and is alleged to be the main intermediary between Venezuela and Iran, may shed more light on this shadowy barter economy.

While Iran's new president, Ebrahim Raisi, has not yet made a visit to Africa, he has already signaled his intention to continue the pursuit of opportunity there, declaring shortly after his inauguration: "In the new Iranian government, all our capabilities will be devoted to deepening cooperation with African countries."

SECURITY RISKS AMPLIFIED

Countries in the Greater Middle East and beyond will thus need to remain vigilant against Iranian attempts to secure conventional military access in Africa, especially along strategic waterways like the Red Sea approaches to the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea. This is what Iran had previously enjoyed in Eritrea. The more substantial risk to African and global

security, however, comes from Tehran's ties with extremist groups on the continent that the mullahs have quietly cultivated, using the cover of their diplomatic, economic, and developmental forays.

In this context, it is especially noteworthy that in choosing a new Qods Force commander after Qasem Soleimani was terminated in a 2020 US drone strike, Ayatollah Khamenei picked the slain terrorist's deputy, ICRG Brigadier General Esmail Qaani. Qaani was placed on the US sanctions list in 2012 because his responsibilities included "financial disbursements to IRGC-QF elements, including elements in Africa, as well as to various terrorist groups, including Hizballah." Specifically, US authorities linked Qaani to a weapons shipment seized in Nigeria in 2010 and destined for The Gambia—from where it would presumably have been distributed to militants throughout the Sahel and neighboring areas in West Africa. It consisted of 240 tons of rockets, mortar shells, grenades, and other ammunition. According to intelligence sources, Qaani has direct experience in training and mobilizing so-called "resistance forces" in Africa. Tansim, a news agency closely linked to the IRGC, made explicit Qaani's background and the linkage to Africa in a report published following his appointment:

If the IRGC-QF can transform this region into the strategic depth of the Islamic Republic of Iran, along with security interests, Iran will share the economic interests of the African continent. This is perhaps the main mission of the Qods Force during the tenure of General Qaani.

The same report went on to cite instructions from the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei given to Iranian military commanders that it was not enough "to be content with our region," but that they needed to embrace a "broad view of the geography of resistance" that included Africa. The notion is that the regime would find individuals and groups on the continent who share its enmity toward the US and other Western countries and who might ally with it, even if just temporarily, in operations that undermine the interests of these enemies or at least cause them "to dramatically increase spending in the region"—thus drawing resources away that might otherwise be used against Iran directly.

Another aim of the Iranian expansion into Africa is to counter regional rivals, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, as well as Turkey, which have themselves been increasingly active on the continent in recent years. Last year, for example, Ethiopian security services discovered a 15-member cell, armed with a cache of weapons and explosives, preparing an attack on the Emirati embassy in Addis Ababa. According to The New York Times, "American and Israeli officials say the operation was the work of Iran, whose intelligence service activated a sleeper cell in Addis Ababa [in the fall of 2020] with orders to gather intelligence also on the embassies of the United States and Israel."

A year earlier, a report by the UN-appointed Panel of Experts to the United Nations Security Council detailed how Ismael Djidah, a former member of the Séléka armed group that briefly seized power in the Central African Republic (CAR), had, together with the group's leader and self-declared CAR President Michel Djotodia, "created an armed group to carry out violent acts against Western, Saudi and Israeli interests in several African countries, including the Central African Republic, with support from the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of the Islamic Republic of Iran." The report also alleges that Djotodia met with Qods Force commanders in Iran in 2016 and agreed to help them set up a terrorist network in exchange for assistance in reclaiming power, an accusation he has denied despite two incriminating handwritten letters obtained by the UN panel.

In efforts against its rivals, especially the Sunni Arab countries, Iran has also exploited its inroads into the small Shiite communities in the continent, whether African or diaspora Lebanese. This has been cause for concern, for

Protesters hold banners calling for the release of Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky in Nigeria. Photo credit: REUTERS

example, in Morocco, which broke diplomatic relations with Iran on two occasions. Although the reasons were officially political—in 2009 due to Iranian claims that Bahrain was part of its territory, and then in 2018, because of Iran's backing of Hezbollah in aiding the Polisario separatists in Western Sahara—Morocco has been apprehensive that Iran could stir up tensions among the kingdom's Shiite minority. There is also resentment of Tehran's proselytism aimed at the Moroccan kingdom and its neighbors, where Islam has historically been guided by moderate Sunni Muslim perspectives, including the Maliki school of Islamic jurisprudence, the Ash'ari theology, and Sufi mysticism.

Perhaps the most prominent example of the potentially combustible mix of radical Shia theology and political militancy is the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), whose leader Ibrahim Zakzaky, inspired by the Iranian Revolution, seeks to replace the Nigerian government with an Islamist state, along the lines of the clerical regime in Tehran. While the group claims to be "non-violent," it has been banned by the authorities in Africa's most populous nation, and Zakzaky has been detained. Still, its protests, despite harsh repression by the government, have drawn thousands; the BBC has reported that "Khomeini remains the group's main inspiration: IMN supporters first pledge allegiance to him at their gatherings, and then to their local leader, Sheikh Zakzaky. The IMN views itself as a government, and Sheikh Zakzaky as the only legitimate source of authority in Nigeria."

Even individual Iranian activists can be effective. In late 2020, police in Niger arrested an operative who had been recruited to the Qods Force Unit 400, which specializes in covert operations, while on a pilgrimage to Iran and had subsequently traveled back to the country several times for weapons training. Under questioning, the suspect admitted that he helped build networks, gather intelligence, and bribe politicians in the Central African Republic, Chad, Eritrea, The Gambia, Sudan, and South Sudan. According to a report in The Economist, "Iran also told him to seek mining licenses in the CAR and Niger to help offset the impact of American sanctions on Iran and to fund covert operations."

CONCLUSION

Tremendous strides have been made in recent years toward peace, security, and prosperity in the Greater Middle East, especially through the Abraham Accords, which provides an overt, pro-American alliance in the Middle East and North Africa. Still, the region faces continuing challenges, particularly those posed by Iran and its proxies, in addition to the potential for escalation should the Islamic Republic receive a windfall from the nuclear negotiations in Vienna. Amidst all this, it is easy to discount events in Africa as a sideshow at best. However, with two of the parties to the Abraham Accords, Morocco and Sudan, being African states—and others having signed normalization agreements with Israel—Africa has become a part of this regional rivalry. Thus, Iran's repeated excursions to the continent require far closer scrutiny. ✳

J. PETER PHAM

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