

THE CARAVAN

A Publication of the Hoover Institution on Contemporary Dilemmas in the Greater Middle East

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS IN THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST



THE MIDDLE EAST: THE STRATEGIC LANDSCAPE FOR THE NEXT ADMINISTRATION

by **Russell A. Berman**

Whatever the outcome of this extraordinary presidential election may be, the next administration will face significant challenges, especially in the Middle East. The challenges are objective, in the sense that they will have to be addressed by any occupant of the White House, and they pertain to the larger strategic setting and the capacity for the United States to project its power in the region. With this in mind, the *Caravan* has turned to a group of distinguished military experts to provide succinct accounts of the opportunities and threats relevant to the ability of the US to safeguard its interests in the region. The Middle East has become the site of complex and multiple conflicts, in which major powers, local powers and non-state actors compete with each other for their heterogeneous goals. The next President will have to make his or her way through this thicket to pursue policies that best serve the national interest. The contributions here may serve as a guide.

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Admiral Gary Roughead, the Robert and Marion Oster Distinguished Military Fellow at the Hoover Institution, opens this *Caravan* with a lucid and encompassing account of the maritime significance of the Middle East. In the context of accelerated globalization, the seaways of the world are all the more important, and this certainly holds for the eastern Mediterranean, the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. US power has had a preeminent naval history in most of this region. Yet the US is hardly the only sea power at work. Other navies are pursuing their own ambitions: China, Japan, India and Iran. At stake for the next administration is the development of a strategic plan to maintain American naval primacy.

In the second *Caravan* contribution, David A. Deptula, a retired U.S. Air Force Lieutenant General and Dean of the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, addresses the history and strategic significance of airpower in the Middle East. He demonstrates how airpower has served successfully as a vehicle to reach strategic goals, but he also criticizes the tendency since 2001 to treat airpower merely as support for ground operations. This diminishment of airpower has placed the US at a disadvantage, even as Russia has relied significantly on an air campaign to pursue its goals in the Syrian war. If it is the case that the national mood remains apprehensive about “boots on the ground,” then the next administration will have to reassess the strategic role of airpower.

The *Caravan* will continue with a third essay, by Benjamin Runkle, former Professional Staff Member on the House Armed Services Committee and a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Runkle pulls back from the headlines of the day and reports on individual conflicts to remind us of the core strategic interests of the US region: to ensure that the region not be dominated by a force hostile to the US and to combat the spread of terrorism that can harm Americans. He presents clear distinctions between these primary objectives and the secondary concerns

that follow from them. With equal clarity he names the failings of current American policies relevant to these objectives: the administration’s choice to ignore Iran’s adversarial ambitions and the missteps, in Iraq and Syria, that contributed to the incubation of ISIS.

This *Caravan* wraps up with a contribution by two Israeli scholars, Ehud Eiran and Aviad Rubin, who provide a multidimensional account of naval power in the eastern Mediterranean. They describe the rising Chinese presence—thereby echoing one of Gary Roughead’s main points—as well as the Russian flotilla. In addition, Hezbollah and other Islamist groups have been able to impact military and commercial shipping. Yet their core point is that in between the great powers and the sub-state actors, national navies continue to play an important role, especially in the cases of Turkey, Israel and Egypt. Despite accounts of the collapse of the nation system in the region, these nations at least continue to deploy significant naval capacity. For the US to maintain preeminence, these allies are significant assets. However, the next administration will inherit strained relationships with each of them that will need tending.

Together the four essays in this *Caravan* provide a compelling map of the significant challenges the US faces in the region as well as the opportunities to pursue a strategy to reestablish and maintain preeminence.



Russell A. Berman

Russell A. Berman, the Walter A. Haas Professor in the Humanities at Stanford University, is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and a co-chair of the Working Group on Islamism and the International Order.



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SEA CHANGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

by Admiral Gary Roughead

America's view of the Middle East today is shaped by our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the rise and reach of ISIS, a grinding conflict in Syria, the region as a source of wider ranging terrorism and staggering outflows of refugees that are changing the political calculus in Europe. The images that characterize and shape American involvement there are of arid landscapes and rubble from wanton destruction, our soldiers and marines in desert camouflage and videos of surgical airstrikes. However, the image of the beginning of our involvement in the Middle East is a rarely viewed February 1945 photo of President Franklin Roosevelt meeting with Saudi King Abdul Aziz aboard the *USS Quincy* in the Suez Canal. As our strategic role in the Middle East began with a meeting on the water so, too, are consequential changes there taking place at sea – the domain in which the U.S. has enjoyed unfettered access and dominance for over seventy years. Assuming continued uncontested American maritime dominance in that vital region is a grave strategic misstep – key Asian powers have turned to the sea, they understand fully what is at stake, and they have come to play.

Globalization and trade policy and initiatives are taking a pounding in our current political season but they remain the fuel of the global economy, particularly Asian economies. Contrary to our presidential candidates' rhetoric, globalization and trade are leading drivers of Asian national security strategies. From Suez to the East Asian littoral the sea lanes and the resources and goods that move on them matter greatly. While not

insignificant, we preoccupy ourselves with tactical moves in the South and East China Sea or Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) harassment of our ships in the Persian Gulf. Four countries - China, India, Japan and Iran are taking a longer strategic view. Today, none of their navies matches ours in the Middle East but what they do and we do, or *do not do*, will change the maritime calculus.

CHINA

China is very clear in its ambition to become a great maritime power. Long focused on the Asian landmass, its most recent military strategy document recasts priorities by stipulating that the “the traditional mentality that land outweighs the sea must be abandoned” and that “it is necessary for China to develop a modern military force ... so as to provide strategic support for building itself into a maritime power.” But that is only one aspect of China's national strategy. The blending of its military strategy to the economic thrusts of One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiatives, the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and China's change of direction regarding permanent bases and assured access to purpose-built ports in other countries, most notably Djibouti, all contribute to a string of relationships to enable persistent operations and influence along the sea lanes of Asia, the Indian Ocean, Africa, the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean Sea. China's pursuit of strategic support goes beyond its growing navy. It operates the largest fishing fleet in the world and is the world's largest shipbuilder.

INDIA

India's economic growth will depend upon that which moves on the sea lanes of its namesake ocean. For the next few decades oil from the Middle East will be transported to meet the demands of China, Japan and Korea. The resources and goods from and to the growing economies of East Africa will also travel the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean. The thousands of ships that enter and leave the Suez Canal likewise will transit those same lanes. India's competent and professional Navy will grow and expand its capabilities to assure its control of Indian Ocean sea lanes. As strategic competitors on the Asian continent, India-China friction will intensify at sea and both countries will be intensely keen to assure Middle East energy flows.

JAPAN

The very capable Japan Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF) is a new and consequential factor in the maritime Middle East. Competent and well equipped for anti-submarine warfare, air and missile defense and sea control the JMSDF, as a result of changes in legislation allowing expanded support to other nations' forces and increased geographic reach, is going to be more present in the Indian Ocean and Middle East. Like China, Japan is highly dependent on Middle East oil and gas and it will do what it must to guarantee those flows. Its rivalry with China will carry into the Indian Ocean and the Middle East. Japan's growing strategic relationship with India and the latter's desire for Japanese technology for economic growth will enhance Japan's presence in the region. Similarly, Japan's defense industry, no longer constrained by law in selling defense equipment to other countries will be a source of high end defense equipment for India's military.

IRAN

The more local maritime influence will be Iran. It will be two-dimensional. In 2007 Iran apportioned maritime responsibility inside the Persian Gulf to the IRGCN and outside the Gulf to the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy which has diminished capability and capacity because of the impact of sanctions and the favored status of the IRGCN. That geographic apportionment will likely remain, however the fortunes of the navy have changed.

Lifting of sanctions means money and technology will now be available to recapitalize the navy, and the lifting of moratoriums on development of advanced systems will enable their navy to become more consequential beyond the approaches to the Persian Gulf. Although the relaxation of technology restraints is a few years away, within a decade the Iranian Navy will be a very different force. Russia will see Iran as a market for its advanced naval technology (showcased effectively in the conflict in Syria) and European firms will see opportunity there as well. This portends continuous significant Iranian naval presence in the North Arabian and Red Seas that will enable Iran to present a credible naval presence to the east, south and west of its regional rival Saudi Arabia. Moreover, a navy that can range to the southern approaches of the Suez can move into the Mediterranean to support its client Syria and challenge its enemy, Israel, from the sea.

These developments mean a very different future for the maritime Middle East than that which evolved from FDR's 1945 meeting on the *USS Quincy*. The investments by others and *strategic* moves taking place there to assure maritime interests and power are underway at a time when the U.S. is seen as challenged in maintaining a credible, persistent naval presence in the Middle East. Our presence, or lack thereof, translates directly into perceptions of our national interest, commitments to long-standing regional relationships and our global staying power. The next administration and Congress must force themselves to look seaward in the Middle East, recognize sea control there translates into real military and economic power in the broader Indo-Pacific region and determine and make appropriate investments for continued American maritime and strategic influence in that vital region.



Admiral Gary Roughead

Admiral Gary Roughead, USN (Ret.), the Robert and Marion Oster Distinguished Military Fellow at the Hoover Institution graduated from the US Naval Academy in 1973.



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AIRPOWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST— A CONTEMPORARY ASSESSMENT

by David A. Deptula, Lt Gen USAF (Ret)

Since the introduction of airpower as a military force just over 100 years ago, it has played a key role in shaping the geopolitical posture of the Middle East. The first example is the success of the Royal Air Force (RAF) in exerting strategic control by the use of aircraft over regions of British interest in Mesopotamia in the 1920s. A handful of RAF squadrons and a small force of troops successfully subdued rebellious tribes in Iraq.

More well known are the defining air battles between Israel and its neighbors. In their 1948 war of independence; the Six-Day War of 1967; Yom Kippur War of 1973; Beka'a Valley air campaign of 1982; and multiple examples of air strikes since—for a variety of tactical, operational, and strategic purposes—the Israel Air Force evidenced airpower's central role in defining the geopolitics of the Middle East.

The Desert Storm air campaign (Jan-Mar 1991) initiated a change in the character of modern conflict. Twenty-five years since that air campaign redefined the proper use of airpower, expectations of conventional western conflict have been ones of exquisite precision and relatively low casualties—on both sides. By introducing stealth, precision, and an effects-based planning and execution process, those elements collectively enabled the paralysis of the 4th largest army in the world,

rendering it ineffective, and yielding strategic control over the entire country of Iraq by airpower. 1991's Operation Desert Storm was an air war that lasted 43 days. Only in the campaign's last four days, did allied armies close with Iraqi ground troops, which resulted in a great prisoner round up of an Iraqi army crushed by airpower. In some cases, Iraqi Army forces attempted to surrender to drones.

The subsequent air exclusion zones of Operations Northern and Southern Watch effectively contained any aggression outside the borders of Iraq by Saddam Hussein for over 12 years (1991 to 2003)—without the combat loss of a single coalition individual. This innovative application of airpower demonstrated its enormous strategic value.

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in 2001 initiated coalition attacks to destroy Al Qaeda sanctuaries in Afghanistan. The opening phase of OEF saw a measured application of modern airpower in conjunction with a light footprint of special operations and other government agency personnel on the ground acting as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) sensors, partnering with the Afghan Northern Alliance ground forces. This joint combination achieved what the Northern Alliance ground forces without airpower had

been unable to accomplish in the previous five years—the removal of the Taliban regime. Simultaneously, the Al Qaeda sanctuaries in Afghanistan were eliminated. Airpower, once again, was the key force.

In the three-week major combat phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, kinetic effects were imposed entirely from the air until the allied land component closed on Baghdad during the campaign's brief endgame. Platoon leader Nathaniel Fick at the leading edge of the push to Baghdad by the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, wrote: "For the next hundred miles, all the way to the gates of Baghdad, every palm grove hid Iraqi armor, every field an artillery battery, and every alley an antiaircraft gun or surface-to-air missile launcher. But we never fired a shot. We saw the full effect of American air power. Every one of those fearsome weapons was a blackened hulk." Similarly, then Col William Grimsely, 1st Brigade Commander, 3rd Infantry Division regarding his unit's move into Iraq on to Baghdad stated, "We never really found any cohesive unit, of any brigade, of any Republican Guard Division."

In the ensuing counterinsurgency operations following the major combat phases of Operations Enduring Freedom (2001) and Iraqi Freedom (2003), the ground commanders in command reverted to the use of airpower as a force in support of ground operations instead of using it as a force with the capability to achieve strategic effects. This kind of application of airpower in the Mideast has been going on for over 15 years now. Most active duty airmen today have only experienced airpower application in the context of support of ground forces. This has further eroded the understanding of how airpower can be used to achieve strategic effects.

Today, the paradigm of how major nation states apply airpower in the Mideast has been inverted. Historically, the Russians (or their proxies like Iraq under Saddam; Egypt under Nasser; Syria under Assad) have primarily employed airpower for tactical purposes—in support of ground forces. The U.S. and Israel have realized optimal use of airpower when it was used to achieve strategic effects (e.g. Six-Day War, Operation Desert Storm, and the initial phases of Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom). Paradoxically, it has taken the Russians to illustrate to the world how airpower can be used to achieve strategic effects, while the U.S. has all but forgotten how to do so.

The Russian's recent use of airpower in the region has achieved strategic effects by radically shifting the

geopolitical balance of power in the region. Specifically, the Russian's impressive deployment of aviation assets, in conjunction with airpower projection from the Russian homeland—recently, from Iran as well—and its calculated use, has led to the reestablishment of Russia as a major influence in Mideast geopolitics.

The Russians are acting in accordance with their National Security interests. That should not be a surprise to anyone. They want to re-establish their influence in the Mideast that the U.S. removed over 40 years ago—and they are succeeding.

Russia is taking advantage of a less than robust U.S. led military effort against the Islamic State. As Henry Kissinger recently stated, "Russia's unilateral military action in Syria is the latest symptom of the disintegration of the American role in stabilizing the Middle East order that emerged from the Arab-Israeli war of 1973."

Even though the U.S. has enormous military advantages over Russia in terms of airpower at a tactical level—force structure, tactics, techniques, and procedures—Russia today is besting the U.S. at the strategic level. Mr. Putin recognized that President Obama's actions in Syria were anemic, and that Obama would not do anything to counter Russian intervention.

The U.S. feeble military action against the Islamic State is what allowed Russia to dramatically up their game in the Middle East. In over two years the average number of U.S. air strikes per day in Syria is about six—compared to over 1200 a day for the 43 days of Desert Storm.

The difference is that the U.S. is adhering to a ground-centric counterinsurgency fight paradigm that sub-optimizes the potential of airpower. A U.S. ground commander is leading the current "air campaign" against the Islamic State. President Obama's policy is no U.S. combat force on the ground; the only direct force application is airpower; yet the commander of the U.S. fight is Army. Joint warfare means using the right force at the right place at the right time. If you want to win a football game would you use a swimming coach to lead the football team? Both are expert at what they do, but leadership and expertise matter if you want to win.

The recent Russian airpower intervention in the Mideast throws the entire regional chessboard upside down—Russia basing out of Iran; coordinating with Iraq;

Syria; and even the Israeli Defense Force. Additionally, Russian actions in the Mideast diverts attention from their other adventures in Ukraine and the Arctic, showing the Russians can walk, chew gum, and play chess simultaneously. Meanwhile, the current U.S. administration foreign and military policy of underplaying their airpower advantage is yielding dramatic advantage to others in the Mideast.



**David A. Deptula, Lt Gen
USAF (Ret)**

David A. Deptula, a retired U.S. Air Force Lieutenant General, is dean of the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies.



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SIMPLIFYING U.S. STRATEGY AMIDST THE MIDDLE EAST'S MAELSTROM

by Benjamin Runkle

Anybody who follows foreign affairs and social media has likely seen some version of a chart entitled “A Guide to the Middle East Relationships.” The graphic shows a hopelessly tangled web of arrows illustrating the often contradictory strategic associations in the region, i.e. the United States and Iran support opposing sides in the Syrian civil war while fighting on the same side in Iraq against the Islamic State (ISIS); Turkey opposes Bashar Assad’s regime yet attacks the Kurdish militias fighting his army; Saudi Arabia and Qatar both support Syria’s Sunni rebels yet hold diametrically opposing views on Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood, et cetera.

While the chaotic graphic conveys a sense of irony, the underlying events that inspired it lie closer to tragedy. Hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed and millions more displaced by civil wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen; ISIS’s proto-state has committed unspeakable atrocities in the region while simultaneously expanding its terrorist activities in the West; and Iran’s nuclear program has been legitimized even as Tehran seeks to further, and exploit, the region’s destabilization. Meanwhile, U.S. Middle East strategy appears to have become trapped in a downward spiral reacting to the latest disastrous headlines emanating from the region.

One way for U.S. policymakers to maintain their strategic bearings amidst the current maelstrom is to simplify the problem by returning to first principles. Specifically, there

are two vital interests in the region that should inform U.S. strategy: First, since 1948, when George Kennan included the Middle East amongst “those areas of the world which . . . we cannot permit . . . to fall into hands hostile to us,” U.S. policymakers have sought to prevent another power from disrupting the free flow of the region’s energy resources that underpin the Western economic order. This has meant deterring and sometimes combatting aspiring regional hegemony, whether the Soviet Union, revolutionary Iran, or Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Although the fracking revolution reduces American dependence, our trading partners still rely upon Middle Eastern oil, and without this supply potential adversaries such as Russia would gain increased influence over world events.

Second, America seeks to counter extremist movements originating in the Middle East that target U.S. citizens at home and abroad. Although there have been radically violent interpretations of Islam dating back to the 7th Century Kharijites – who believed all non-Muslims were inherently enemies and assassinated the Umayyad Caliph, Muhammed’s son-in-law Ali, because they deemed him to be an apostate – , before 1979 such movements were generally confined within the region. Now both Tehran and various Salafist jihadist groups – including al-Qa’ida and ISIS – employ terrorism against Western targets in pursuit of their ultimate objective of reestablishing the Islamic Caliphate.

Virtually every other important U.S. interest in the region derives from these two overarching objectives. Whereas preventing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation in the region is an important policy goal, WMDs themselves are not the problem. America does not object to Israel's nuclear program, yet such a capability becomes threatening in the case of a revisionist state seeking to dominate the region, or potentially falling into the hands of terrorists intent on killing Americans. Similarly, beyond the moral absolute of preventing genocide, promoting human rights and democracy in the Middle East reduces the grievances that make Muslim populations sympathetic to – or actively supportive of – Islamic terrorist groups. And although many Americans support Israel for reasons stemming entirely from identity or ideology, this support also strengthens our vital interests in the Middle East: guaranteeing Israel's qualitative military edge deters other states from obtaining military capabilities that would enable them to threaten regional stability, and not pushing Israel into unbalanced diplomatic agreements prevents extremists like Hezbollah or Hamas from claiming that terrorism works as a negotiating tactic.

Unfortunately, America's primary strategic interests have suffered significant setbacks of late. The Obama administration has willfully misread Iran's objectives: rather than merely seeking a "rebalance", Tehran has made clear its intention to reclaim its pre-modern status as the Middle East's dominant power. Its efforts to destabilize the region through support of proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Gaza have continued unabated despite – or arguably because of – the 2015 P5+1 nuclear agreement. American strategic interests are further threatened by the reintroduction and legitimization of Russian military intervention in the region. And despite operational successes against al-Qa'ida in the decade following the 9/11 attacks, America's withdrawal from Iraq and reluctance to fully commit to a clearly defined strategic objective in Syria enabled ISIS to establish a terrorist proto-state from which it has unleashed its terror campaign against the West.

There is, however, a silver lining in this seemingly unremittingly cloudy sky. These rising threats are partly a reflection of U.S. strategic paralysis, so the next Administration will have an opportunity to reinvigorate the defense of these vital interests. To do so, whoever occupies the Oval Office next January 21st must shed two misconceptions. First, the enemy of our enemy is not always our friend. Instead, the threats Iran and

ISIS pose to U.S. interests are mutually reinforcing as Salafist jihadist groups exploit Iranian expansion in their recruiting propaganda. Yet just as ISIS was unable to gain traction with Iraq's Sunnis when U.S. influence kept Baghdad's worst sectarian instincts in check, countering Iranian destabilization throughout the region will weaken the Salafists' appeal to vulnerable Sunni populations.

Second, although America can achieve its policy objectives in the near-term, our interests are enduring and will require long-term maintenance. America and its regional allies still enjoy a favorable conventional military balance in the region compared to the rising Iran-Russia axis. This merely needs to be accompanied by greater clarity regarding Tehran (and Moscow)'s intentions and – in the wake of President Obama's failure to enforce his "redline" on chemical weapons in Syria – the reestablishment of U.S. credibility in the region. Similarly, America and its allies *will* eventually drive ISIS from its safe heavens. Yet just as "Bin Ladenism" outlived al-Qa'ida's founder, ISIS's murderous theology will continue to be propagated via social media and the Dark Web long after the Islamic State has been wiped off the map. Policymakers must recognize that although necessary, the reconquest of Mosul and Raqqa will not be sufficient to end the threat that ISIS poses to U.S. interests.

Like a garden, the defense of a country's national interests requires constant tending and nurturing. The United States successfully prevented a hostile regional hegemon from emerging in the Middle East for over sixty years, and by waging war against al-Qa'ida rather than treating it as a law enforcement effort in the decade after 9/11 dramatically reduced the threat of terrorist attacks against the homeland. Despite recent setbacks, the next Administration can achieve these operational objectives. Even then, however, U.S. leaders must resist the temptation to conflate operational success with strategic victory and remember that just as our interests are eternal, so too must be the efforts to defend them.



Benjamin Runkle

Benjamin Runkle, PhD, is a former Defense Department official, Director on the National Security Council, Professional Staff Member on the House Armed Services Committee, and a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom.



EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN: DO NOT WRITE OFF STATES JUST YET

by Ehud Eiran, Aviad Rubin

Do not write off states as power brokers in the Eastern Mediterranean maritime arena just yet. It is easy to do so. Great powers (past, present and aspiring) as well as non-state actors seem to have eroded the centrality of regional state actors in shaping the region's maritime security environment in the last few years. Russia - both a past and an aspiring great power - revived the Soviet era fifth Eskadra (flotilla), which includes a permanent force of 10-15 vessels. Moscow further announced that it would be sending its sole aircraft carrier in the fall for a few months to the region. The deployment supports the Russian mission in Syria. It also allows Moscow to show off its technological prowess. On December 8, 2015, the improved Kilo Class diesel electric submarine *Rostov on Don*, operating in the Mediterranean, was the first-ever Russian submarine to fire operational Kalibr submarine-launched cruise missiles (SLCM) while submerged, targeting Raqqa, the ISIS de-facto capital in Syria. More broadly, coupled with Russia's energized relationship with Egypt and Israel and recently with Turkey, the deployment signals Russia's reemergence as a regional power broker. The United States offered a response of sorts, by deploying for the first time in years, two carrier Strike Groups – *Truman* and *Eisenhower* - in the region for several weeks in the summer of 2016.

In the meantime, China continues its slow maritime advance in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the routes leading to it. Beijing strengthened its civil and naval presence by buying, building, and operating port facilities in Greece, Israel, and Egypt, in the last few years. China

is also building its first overseas naval station in Djibouti. These moves are part of Beijing's ambitious new Silk Road vision, and will allow it to further secure its crucial sea line of communications to Europe. China's maritime actions in the region signal that it accepts the responsibilities of a rising world power. In the spring of 2015, its naval forces evacuated not only hundreds of Chinese citizens, but also hundreds of other nationals from war-torn Yemen. There are also early signs of a more direct Chinese military and naval involvement in the region. In August 2016, a Chinese admiral visited Syria, and a month earlier China completed the delivery of a third corvette to the Algerian Navy. The Chinese also conducted a joint drill with the Russians in the Mediterranean in May 2015.

Global superpowers like China and Russia are not the only ones to pose a challenge in the Eastern Mediterranean. Several sub-state armed groups share the stage. Back in 2006, the Lebanese Hezbollah damaged an Israeli naval vessel, killing four sailors, when it effectively fired a land-sea c-802 missile at the Israeli flagship Saar 5 Class corvette *INS Hanit*. In recent years, Islamist groups have attacked a merchant ship in the Suez Canal and Egyptian navy vessels on the Mediterranean coast. A senior NATO official expressed concern earlier this year that an even graver threat will evolve in the central Mediterranean, following the expansion of ISIS in Libya.

Yet, states are still important in the maritime regional security architecture. American engagement in the region has waxed and waned since their navy operated against

the Barbary pirates in the early 19th century. In the latest chapter of American naval power projection in the region, the 6th Fleet presence declined dramatically. At least for the US and China, and to a lesser extent even Russia, the eastern Mediterranean is a peripheral region, far from their core interests. Unlike great powers, local actors will remain engaged in the region due to the dictates of geography. For the regional actors, defending their shores and their sea lines of communications is a core interest: Not only because they are here to stay, but the discovery of offshore gas beginning in the 1990s raises the stakes for Egypt, Israel, Cyprus and Turkey and possibly other regional actors. Indeed, regional actors have been building their naval capabilities, including power projection abilities in the last few years. In 2016, Israel received its fifth (out of six) German-built diesel submarines. A year earlier it signed a deal with the same German shipyard to purchase four multitask corvettes. In June, Egypt took delivery of the French-built Mistral class landing helicopter dock, and is expected to receive a second one by the fall. This year Egypt also began the local construction of the first of four French-designed Gowind Corvettes, purchased marine helicopters from Russia, commissioned a missile corvette donated by Russia, and a FREMM class French-Italian frigate. Talks of a possible deal for two more French corvettes commenced in 2015. Egypt also took delivery of two American fast missile boats during the summer of 2015, completing an order for four. Cairo also purchased from the United States submerged Harpoon missiles for its submarine fleet.

Similarly, the Turkish Navy, a nine-century-old institution – continued the expansion of its power projection capabilities. In April 2016, Ankara opened an overseas military base in Qatar, which will include naval units. A Turkish shipyard began in May the construction of a landing helicopter dock (LHD) to be completed by 2021. President Erdoğan hinted that his country would move to construct a fully-fledged carrier in the next decade.

Robust regional navies suggest both risks and opportunities. On the risk side, growing naval prowess enhances the chances that an escalating regional conflict can turn violent. Turkish self-confidence on the seas, for example, can lead Ankara to take an even more assertive position over Cyprus’ gas prospecting. In turn, this can affect great powers by forcing them into conflicts they would rather avoid. A possible Hezbollah-Israeli clash, for example, might expose the American forces operating in the region to allegations that they support the Israeli effort by virtue of the American-Israeli alliance. Strong regional actors could also humiliate, and even constrain, great power activity. Back in 1968, The Israeli Airforce shot down Soviet jets over Egypt, and more recently it was Turkey

that downed a Russian jet. Both events embarrassed Moscow, and in effect, presented a constraint of sorts on its freedom of action.


Effective regional navies also create opportunities. They can serve as allies. After all, three strong regional navies – Egypt, Turkey, and Israel - have solid (though at times, strained) relations with the United States. As such, they can offer a compensation of sorts to the limited presence of the US Navy in the region. Even if not fully-fledged allies of the United States on the waters, some of the regional powers, notably Israel and Turkey, surely share America’s concern over the anti-access/area denial “bubble” the Russians created on Syria’s shores. This is fertile ground for cooperation.

Therefore, although external powers are yet again active in the waters of the Eastern Mediterranean and despite being challenged by non-state actors from below, regional states still matter in shaping the maritime security environment. The increased capabilities, and expanded reach of the Egyptian, Turkish, and Israeli navies coupled with the Russian and American presence in the region, as well as Chinese ambitions there, all create a more complex environment. In a final analysis, this complexity presents opportunities for the United States, as most of the strong regional actors are closer to Washington than to Moscow. This remains the case, even with the current glitches between the United States and its traditional allies Turkey, Egypt and Israel. If Washington plays this new iteration of a maritime regional “great game” well, it has much to benefit. However, in order to exploit the potential benefits of the relationship with regional states, Washington needs to re-build trust with these regional actors. A clear signal from Washington that the East Mediterranean remains a high priority for the United States, would be a good start.



Ehud Eiran

Ehud Eiran is an Assistant Professor and the academic co-director of the Haifa Research Center for Maritime Strategy, both at the University of Haifa, Israel.



Aviad Rubin

Aviad Rubin is an Associate Professor and academic co-director of the Haifa Research Center for Maritime Strategy, both at Haifa University, Israel.



STRATEGY AND ASSETS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

by **Russell A. Berman**

The goal of this *Caravan* has been to provide an account of the strategic underpinning of the challenges the US faces and which the next administration—whoever occupies the White House—will have to address. Five distinguished experts have explained how the historical preeminence of American military power in the region cannot be taken for granted. It can be maintained only through a clear strategic vision and the political will to act on it.

A key take-away from these *Caravan* contributions is the transformation of the Middle East into a territory of great power competition. Of course one could also regard this as a regression to the historical norm, a return to the great game of imperial ambitions. In any case, no one should assume that the US can rest on its laurels and simply lay claim to the prerogatives of a single superpower, when Russia and China are vying for influence and deploying naval assets to back up their political ambitions. Indeed, while in recent years much American attention has focused on the vicissitudes of ground campaigns and the complex competition among various local forces, state and non-state, an equally or even more important development has taken place, the reestablishment of Russia as a key player. Russia's agenda was written into the JCPOA and it has been realized through the history of the Syrian war. Putin's aspiration to reestablish the global influence once wielded by the Soviet Union is being pursued in the

Middle East, and it is hard not to understand this Russian resurgence as a direct consequence of the policies of American withdrawal. This intrusion of a force not friendly to the US into this vital geopolitical region cannot be in American interest. The next administration will have to address this challenge, just as it will have to determine how to respond to the ongoing and increasing hostility from Iran.

A further implication of these pieces is that our strategic thinking has to go beyond the simplistic binary of boots on the ground or not. As important as ground troops are, the primary focus on them in political debate has short-circuited the full utilization of US power. Naval and air assets have to be figured into the program more effectively; historically they have played central roles in the projection of US power in the region, and they could do so again. Arguably the use of drone technology has already moved in that direction, but the basic paradigm prevailing in the US efforts in the region has remained ground warfare, with air power relegated to a supporting role. A new administration's strategy could develop a more effectively multidimensional agenda. This pertains not only to American military capacity but also to the need to rebuild and cultivate productive relations with regional allies. Relations with Egypt, Israel and Turkey have all frayed somewhat, and it will be urgent for the next administration to rebuild them.

Finally the *Caravan* has pointed to the crucial importance of recognizing the connection between Iran and ISIS, or Sunni extremism more broadly: the more the US appears to endorse Iranian hegemony—beginning with the precipitous withdrawal from Iraq—the more fuel is poured on the flames of Sunni anger. The fight against ISIS in other words is linked closely to the local perception of emerging Iranian hegemony. A coherent US strategy in the region would have to keep this connection in mind. In general what the *Caravan* contributors underscore is that a correction in US policy will only be successful if a larger strategic vision is developed, one aware of the historical dimensions of the problems in the Middle East as well as

prepared to deploy the full range of US assets to pursue the national interest.



Russell A. Berman

Russell A. Berman, the Walter A. Haas Professor in the Humanities at Stanford University, is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and a co-chair of the Working Group on Islamism and the International Order.

THE CARAVAN

The Caravan is envisaged as a periodic symposium on the contemporary dilemmas of the Greater Middle East. It will be a free and candid exchange of opinions. We shall not lack for topics of debate, for that arc of geography has contentions aplenty. It is our intention to come back with urgent topics that engage us. Caravans are full of life and animated companionship. Hence the name we chose for this endeavor.

We will draw on the membership of Hoover's Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on Islamism and the International Order, and on colleagues elsewhere who work that same political and cultural landscape. Russell Berman and Charlie Hill co-chair the project from which this effort originates.

For additional information and previous issues of The Caravan visit www.hoover.org/caravan

Working Group on Islamism and the International Order

The Working Group on Islamism and the International Order seeks to engage in the task of reversing Islamic radicalism through reforming and strengthening the legitimate role of the state across the entire Muslim world.

Efforts draw on the intellectual resources of an array of scholars and practitioners from within the United States and abroad, to foster the pursuit of modernity, human flourishing, and the rule of law and reason in Islamic lands—developments that are critical to the very order of the international system. The working group is chaired by Hoover fellows Russell Berman and Charles Hill.



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Hoover Institution, Stanford University
434 Galvez Mall
Stanford, CA 94305-6003
650-723-1754

Hoover Institution in Washington
The Johnson Center
1399 New York Avenue NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
202-760-3200

