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Major Power Competition in Troubled Waters of Middle East

By Amin Tarzi

The Integrated American Naval Power (IANP) represented by the US Navy and the US Marine Corps is to be a key enabler of the United States' strategy to prevent China and Russia from controlling the Eurasian rimland and its adjacent seas and protecting the sea lines of communication between the United States and its allies and partners. While the South China Sea and the Arctic are regarded by many as the next points of military confrontation in the maritime domain, it is in the Middle East region where both China and Russia have their only overseas naval military bases. This fact coupled with an increasingly aggressive Iran and an array of hybrid actors—some state-sponsored—that are available to engage in activities normally reserved for legitimate states, complicates an already contested maritime domain. Furthermore, Russia is attempting to present itself as an alternative geopolitical security partner to Middle Eastern states by showcasing its steadfast commitment to Syria's government under Bashar al-Assad and providing and, when necessary, helping to design and produce countermeasures to weapons it supplied to Iran. Moscow has also become part of the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean energy politics and disputes. China's economic and military investments are providing a region that traditionally has partnered with the United States the potential for a longer-term ally who would safeguard their economic growth—of course, linked with China's own ambitions. In this environment, how the US employs its naval assets and partnerships in the Middle East is crucial to achieving its stated strategy.

Rising tensions and steep competition

The Middle East is central to the major power debate. The significance of Middle Eastern hydrocarbon production and trade in regional and international security calculations cannot be understated for local and external players in the Middle East. Five of the top ten countries with proven oil reserves and four of the top ten with natural gas are in the Middle East. Also, other countries in the Middle East are poised to have additional hydrocarbon reserves, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf. This, on one hand, increases the region's

MES Notes

On 5 November 2019 Middle East Studies (MES) at the Marine Corps University (MCU) Brute Krulak Center hosted a panel for the Marine Corps War College (MCWAR) entitled "Iran's 'Active Resistance' vs. the United States' 'Maximum Pressure': How Will it End?". The speakers included, Dr. Adnan Mazarei, Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics; Mr. Alex Vatanka, Senior Fellow at the Middle East Institute; and Dr. Amin Tarzi, Director of Middle East Studies at the Marine Corps University Brute Krulak Center. A podcast interview with Mr. Vatanka and Dr. Tarzi will also be available soon as part of the Eagles, Globes, and Anchors Podcast Series, accessible via the MCU website at www.usmcm.edu.

Information about MES events and publications is available on the MES website at: www.usmcm.edu/mes, or you can contact Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or adam.seitz@usmcm.edu.

MES at MCU Disclaimer

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energy value and economic power; on the other hand, it has the potential of igniting regional disputes and with the involvement of revisionist powers. Additionally, the Middle East region hosts four of the seven strategic chokepoints for commerce and military movements. These sea lines of communication are critical elements of security calculations of the major powers and regional and other international players. When considering energy transportation alone, the Strait of Hormuz accounts for the largest transport channel for crude oil and petroleum liquids. The Suez Canal (including the SUMED pipeline through Egypt) and Bab al-Mandab are the third and fourth transportation points in terms of volume. Finally, the Turkish Straits comes in sixth. Major consumers of Middle Eastern crude oil are in the Asian market (e.g., China, Japan, India, Republic of Korea, and Singapore). Almost 80 percent of the crude oil that passes through the Strait of Hormuz is destined for Asia, making the Middle East crucial for that region's energy security.

International players are already positioning themselves, in some cases seeking a more permanent presence. The Chinese and Japanese navies are already present in this contested environment, and Beijing has more ambitious plans as part of the "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) economic strategy announced in 2013. There are reports of Russia's growing interest in using Chabahar, Iran's only oceanic port, or a port in Iran's gulf coast for expansion of its hydrocarbon trade or even military use.

The Middle East maritime domain is experiencing both energy trade cooperation and competition not only between major powers but also increasingly among smaller regional and external players—including both non-state actors and proxies of states. Energy trade denial through sanctions—particularly in the case of United States and Iran—is affecting the global energy market and raising the potential for conflict at sea. In May 2019 there was a subsurface drone attack against four tankers belonging to Norway, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the Gulf of Oman. While no one has claimed responsibility, the Norwegian insurer assessed that Iran's Islamic Revolution Guard Corps was "[highly likely](#)" to have facilitated the attack. In September, Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais were attacked, with Iran being the most likely culprit. This raises the specter that hybrid actors such as state proxies or semi-independent organs within states can cause major disruptions, potentially provoking a wider, unintended conflict.

Other threats add to the rising tensions. Piracy off the coast of Somalia continues, albeit to a lesser extent than between 2008 and 2011, when it made this area the most dangerous commercial shipping lane. While it has been under control despite a very slight uptick in 2017, it has never gone away. The multinational Combined Maritime Forces, headquartered in Bahrain, has met with success in countering piracy in the region; however, further erosion of states such as Yemen and Somalia and the morphing of local terrorist groups into new outfits, often with intended or unintended foreign patronage, have the potential of increased guerilla warfare—including piracy—at sea.

In the twenty-first century, power and influence are diffused among a range of state, non-state, and hybrid actors that have not traditionally held that position. This has allowed regional actors in the Middle East a greater range of strategic options, such as deniability of actions and the increased use of the maritime domain beyond their traditional defensive posture. Local actors can more easily access advanced weapons systems, cyber capabilities, and improvised explosive devices to disrupt maritime commerce, in particular the flow of energy. Some of the hybrid actors are functioning like states, controlling defined territory and exercising a monopoly over the use of violence therein, of course, without legal international standing. Two among several examples are the Houthis of Yemen and the Hezbollah of Lebanon. Additionally, strategic aims of local actors as well as those from outside the region with interest therein include increased competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the war and peace duality, also known as "gray zone" competitions that can lead to hybrid wars. These are characterized by ambiguity about the nature of strategy, opacity of the parties involved, or uncertainty about the relevant policy and legal frameworks. In a shift from the past, some states in the region are playing host to naval facilities from competing local actors and great powers. In the absence of a local hegemon and with the frequent and intense maritime territorial disputes, there are myriad local states that are expanding their maritime reach in both trade and military presence, including establishing naval bases beyond their own borders. However, overall, the maritime domain for Middle East states is mostly for commercial exploitation, and their naval forces serve to defend coasts, offshore energy infrastructure, and shipping lanes. There are a few, but critical, exceptions.

The Islamic Republic of Iran's navies completed a decade-long reorganization in 2017, out of which the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) gained sole responsibility for the Arabian Gulf and works with the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN) to monitor both ends of the Strait of Hormuz. The latter was tasked with an offense-defense strategy centered on conducting blue water operations to take warfare farther from

the Iranian coastline. The IRIN has managed to sail to out-of-area ports as far east as Zhanjiang in China and within the region to Djibouti, Port Sudan in the Red Sea, and Latakia in the Eastern Mediterranean. The IRGCN's main doctrine is based on asymmetry, allowing it to fight and defend against a larger naval force and project power in the Arabian Gulf. The asymmetric strategy is based on naval mines, coastal defense cruise missiles, small boats armed with a variety of weapons, naval Special Forces, and naval aviation. Iran is one of the few regional states with a submarine force, but it does not have naval bases outside of its own territory.¹

Beyond-Iran sponsored proxies, other non-state and hybrid actors continue to utilize the maritime domain. In the literature of terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates in Egypt, there is clear evidence these groups understand the value of operating at sea or close to the shore. The focus for al-Qaeda's stated strategies has been Bab al-Mandab. The attack on the USS *Cole* in 2000 remains a blueprint not only for terrorists but also for some states in the region that lack the required naval assets to confront the forces of major powers.

Furthermore, the maritime operational environment of the Middle East is becoming more opaque due to border security concerns, humanitarian crises, and challenges to terrestrial sovereignty and, thus, vulnerable to misunderstanding and miscalculations with much wider and direr consequences.

Major Power Competition in the Middle East Region

Globally, there is an increasingly confrontational stance among the major powers. The United States is, of course, seeking to remain the global leader. China and Russia are seeking to redefine the norms of the entire international system on terms more favorable to them.

Within the Middle East maritime domain, Moscow is becoming a major player from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Arabian Gulf despite persistent deficiencies in the Russian Navy. Moscow does not need hydrocarbon energy resources from the Middle East region; however, it seeks dominance of the trade routes. Through its coordinated policies, it has become a player in regional energy politics and an arms supplier. It maintains its position by safeguarding the political realities in Damascus with unrestrained use of force, lack of interference in local politics or promotion of ideological stances, concluding arms deals without political caveats, and overall predictability and sustainability of action. And it is working. Russia's naval base in Tartus, Syria, has been used by Moscow since the 1970s. However, in 2017, Damascus granted Russia a long-term fee-free lease and sovereignty of the base where Moscow is engaged in a large-scale modernization plan. Additionally, Russia is in talks with Sudan to establish what is termed a naval resupply base on the Red Sea. Should Russia secure access in Chabahar or in a port on Iran's gulf shores, the ability of Moscow to present itself as an alternative geopolitical security partner to hereto US partners would strengthen. Additionally, it would increase Russia's influence over Europe, as it would ensure that transportation of hydrocarbons to Europe has Russian pressure points on them.

Likewise, in 2017, China officially began operating its sole overseas base in Djibouti after using the base as a counterpiracy facility. Djibouti, which rejected Moscow's request to establish a base, also hosts bases from its former colonial power—France, German, Italy, Spain, and the United States, and it hosts Japan's only foreign military base. Through the OBOR initiative, China's maritime presence is growing in the Arabian Sea. Additionally, China is expected to increase its presence in one of the Pakistani ports of Gwadar or Jiwani. This would provide Beijing a strategic maritime presence—with a likely military component—close to the entrance of the Arabian Gulf without the chokepoint limitations.

Potential Roles for the Marine Corps within the US IANP vision

In the near term, because of continued global reliance on hydrocarbons and natural gas and its location along the global trade routes, the Middle East region will figure prominently in geostrategic dialogue and posturing. The maritime domain in the Middle East region will remain central to hydrocarbon transportation and new explorations as well as to the freedom of movement of both international commerce and security forces. The geostrategic competition for influence and basing in the Red Sea will continue as states try to outmaneuver rivals from these strategic bases using any and all available economic leverage. The Arabia Gulf security complex will likely vacillate between intense to confrontational competition with the potential for

planned or accidental conflicts. In the Eastern Mediterranean, Russian posture should be expected to become more assertive and China's presence more visible, initially through port managements and trading outposts. That said, there is no crystal ball, and these are just predictions based on the current context, which could change overnight.

As such, the US needs to consider how to position its naval assets in the Middle East to counter major power pressures, military threats, and the impact of regional humanitarian crises and natural disasters and to bolster its regional partnerships. The opaque and ever-changing nature of threats in the Middle East maritime domain requires an agile and dynamic force with maritime and littoral capabilities. The US Marine Corps through its partnership with US Navy and as part of the IANP is uniquely suited to both provide that dynamic force and to assist partner states in maintaining conventional forces that are concurrently on the maritime and terrestrial domains and are trained with at levels below armed conflict. Additionally, while the United States does not need to have a large footprint in every potential target area, a swift and responsive Marine littoral force can respond to threats, serve as a deterrent to potential adversaries, and provide assurances to those partners who may question the commitment of the United States to their security concerns. Continued presence and partnership will help ensure that sea lines of communication between the United States and its allies and partners remain open and our allies in the region remain just that.

Notes:

¹ See Amin Tarzi "Les espaces maritimes du Moyen-Orient: De la compétition pacifique à l'affrontement?" in *Ramses 2020* (Paris: Dnuod, 2019), pp. 82-87.

Farewell to Adam C. Seitz

By Amin Tarzi

It is both with pride and sadness that we bid farewell to Mr. Adam C. Seitz. Adam has served as MES's Research Assistant Professor at Middle East Studies since September 2009. Adam has been one of the two wings of MES almost since its inception and has helped carry the mission of this small but far-reaching center from a PowerPoint slide to a focal point of PME and research on the Middle East and its maritime domain. Adam's quest for and dedication to learning have led to his move to the Pentagon for which MES@Krulak Center is very proud. In his decade of service to Marine Corps University, Adam has taught classes, lectured, and prepared/participated in wargames throughout the PME continuum in Quantico, within the operating forces, for sister services, and in foreign countries. Additionally, he has been the organizational engine behind ten years of the MES Lecture Series and the myriad guest speakers MES has brought to MCU and responsible for publishing MES' various publications, including MES *Insights*. This issue completes the tenth volume of MES *Insights*. It is fitting that this is Adam's final issue, closing out his decade of service. In all of his efforts, Adam has consistently displayed unparalleled integrity and dedication to service and to the role of education in advancing the United States Marine Corps' mission to be America's force in readiness. While I am very proud of what Adam has achieved and will go on to achieve, he will be greatly missed. We wish Adam fair winds and following seas.



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