

## Hybrid CoE Research Report 5

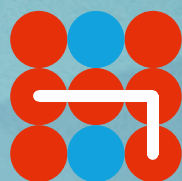
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MARCH 2022

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# Hybrid threat activity in the MENA region: State and non-state actors seeking status and expanding influence

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Hybrid CoE



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**Hybrid CoE Research Reports** are thorough, in-depth studies providing a deep understanding of hybrid threats and phenomena relating to them. Research Reports build on an original idea and follow academic research report standards, presenting new research findings. They provide either policy-relevant recommendations or practical conclusions.

This report was edited by Jarno Välimäki and Anna-Kaisa Hiltunen at Hybrid CoE. Language editing by Lynn Nikkanen. Graphs and layout by Tuuli Aule.

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**The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats** tel. +358 400 253800 [www.hybridcoe.fi](http://www.hybridcoe.fi)

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The responsibility for the views expressed ultimately rests with the authors.

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# Introduction

This edited collection of case studies highlights how different state and non-state actors operate in the hybrid threat environment in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The case studies focus specifically on Europe's southern neighbourhood, including the Levant and North Africa. These areas are an important focus of analysis as security concerns arising from and existing in MENA pose challenges to both the EU and NATO, as well as their member states. The region is particularly important strategically as it lies at the crossroads of Africa, Asia, and Europe. Moreover, understanding these hybrid threat actors' activities in this region can also enhance knowledge of their overall strategic goals and the tools they use to achieve them.

The case studies in this collection were previously used as background material for Hybrid CoE Trend Report 7, *Trends in MENA: New dynamics of authority and power*.<sup>1</sup> This trend report highlighted four trends in regional political and strategic dynamics: eroding state authority, new dynamics of power competition, decreasing respect for legal agreements and norms, and the shrinking space for a democratic model of governance.

## What are hybrid threats?

The overarching concept in this collection is that of 'hybrid threats'. As characterized by Hybrid CoE, the term refers to an action conducted by state or non-state actors whose goal is to undermine or harm a target by influencing its decision-making at the local, regional, state or institutional level. Such actions are coordinated and synchronized and deliberately target democratic and democratizing states' and institutions' vulnerabilities. Coordinated and synchronized activities are conducted using a wide range of tools, and are designed to remain below the threshold of detection and attribution.

Hybrid threat activities are conducted using multiple tools targeting different domains. *The*

*Landscape of Hybrid Threats: A Conceptual Model*, a joint work between Hybrid CoE and the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, explains domains and tools in the framework of hybrid threats as follows: "Hybrid threat activity targets a state in multiple domains by applying combinations of tools. Each tool targets one or multiple domains, or the interface between them, by creating or exploiting a vulnerability or taking advantage of an opportunity."<sup>2</sup> As per this conceptualization, there are 13 domains: infrastructure, cyber, space, economy, military/defence, culture, social/societal, public administration, legal, intelligence, diplomacy, political, and information.

## Why were these case studies chosen?

The hybrid threat actors chosen for these case studies are Russia, China, Iran, and ISIS. Russia, China, and Iran are the main states conducting hybrid threat activities in the region. The three have differing goals in the region, but all three aim to strengthen their own position at the expense of the West. Similarly, all three use hybrid threat activities to achieve these goals, albeit with different tools. To cover non-state actors as well, ISIS was chosen as it exemplifies the rise of Islamist extremist movements and is a hybrid threat actor that is not dependent on any state as a patron. In the case study on Iran, Hezbollah is a non-state actor that also acts as a proxy for a state.

The specific case studies were chosen as they represent the core parts of each actor's regional focus, but also cover the region from the western parts of North Africa to the Levant. Russia is most active in Libya and Syria, where it has already escalated its activities to include military intervention. China has longstanding political and economic ties with Algeria, which it continues to strengthen. Lebanon plays an important role in Iran's goal of gaining access to the Mediterranean, while Hezbollah

<sup>1</sup> Hybrid CoE, *Trends in MENA*.

<sup>2</sup> Giannopoulos et al., 'The Landscape', 26.

in Lebanon remains Iran's most important proxy. Finally, ISIS has concentrated its activity in Iraq and Syria, but North Africa is also considered due to ISIS's increased presence there.

Naturally, these case studies are not exhaustive. There are other hybrid threat actors in the region, and the actors considered in these case studies are active in other states of the region as well. Moreover, they may also use tools that are not explicitly mentioned in this edited collection. However, the range of actors, target states, domains, tools, and phases of operations described in this collection provides a valuable and broad study of hybrid threats in the MENA region.

### Structure of the edited collection

The first case study looks at Russia's involvement in post-2011 Libya. The case study highlights four main domains of Russian hybrid threat activity in the country: economic, military, political, and diplomatic. It argues that increased Russian activity in Libya has often been opportunistic, taking advantage of dissonant policies by the West, which give Moscow the opportunity to expand influence in the Middle East, seek great-power status, increase access to oil fields, and secure post-conflict reconstruction contracts. Private military companies such as Wagner have been a major tool in this context because they offer low cost and deniability, particularly when coupled with disinformation operations.

Continuing with Russian actions, the second case study turns to the Syrian civil war. Russia has used escalating hybrid threat activity, ranging from pre-war priming activities designed to shape the environment in Moscow's favour to direct military intervention accompanied by political, diplomatic and information operations. The case study argues that Russia has been largely successful as it has become an indispensable player in Syria and, by extension, a major player in the region in general. Relations with the West remain difficult, but Russia has also managed to force the US to include it in negotiations regarding Syria. Moreover, Russia has been able to reinvigorate its presence in the Mediterranean and to preserve its naval base in Tartus.

In this edited collection, two case studies focusing on Russia were chosen due to the interlinkages between Russian operations in Syria and Libya. Russia's firm support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria was partially due to the NATO-led toppling of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. The subsequent resurgence of Moscow's activity in Libya then coincided with its decisive military intervention in Syria, both of which helped Moscow in its quest to return to great-power status in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, there have also been direct interlinkages at the military-operational level. For example, Russia has transferred private military contractors from Syria to Libya.

China is another authoritarian state often recognized as a hybrid threat actor. Due to the country's pronounced interest in the Middle East and North Africa region and its longstanding close relations with Algeria, the third case study focuses on Sino-Algerian relations, particularly in the 2000s. It argues that China and Algeria have maintained long-standing political, diplomatic, economic, military and trade relations since the war of independence in the 1950s, but that the economic cooperation has accelerated since the early 2000s. Particularly noteworthy are Chinese infrastructure and hydrocarbon projects and weapons trade. For China, Algeria is critical due to its strategic location and its political weight in the Mediterranean and in the African Union.

Iran is also a hybrid threat actor, particularly in the Middle East, and hence the fourth case study turns to Iran's strategic goals in the Mediterranean in general, and in Lebanon in particular. It argues that since the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, Tehran has been determined to "never be alone again". Lately, this has taken the form of its expansionist aim of reshaping the Middle East to preserve gains. The main method of achieving this has been the usage of the "Hezbollah model": devising and managing Shia militant groups in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and others. Through Hezbollah in particular, Iran can simultaneously project power and deter its opponents while maintaining plausible deniability. As part of this, Hezbollah also provides cultural and social welfare services to Lebanese Shiites and disseminates propaganda, making soft power attempts to influence Lebanese politics.



The final case study turns to a non-state actor, focusing on the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) since the early 2000s. ISIS has aimed at establishing, governing, and expanding a caliphate originally in Iraq and later in Syria, and then in provinces across South-East Asia and Africa. ISIS rejects the international state-based system and exploits governance and security vacuums to increase influence, recruits, and control of territory through simultaneous and phased activities in multiple domains. ISIS has also been highly flexible and adaptive, de-escalating and re-escalating when necessary.

### **Main findings from the case studies**

Taken together, the five case studies show the breadth and depth of hybrid threats in the MENA region. There are multiple hybrid threat actors, including but not limited to Russia, China, Iran and ISIS. These actors are in different phases of their operations, from mostly priming the target state (e.g. China in Algeria) to full military escalation (e.g. Russia in Syria). The case studies demonstrate that the phases can change quickly, or can even cover decades. A deciding factor is often the success of the operation in the earlier phase. While Russia has needed to escalate its hybrid threat actions, China has seemingly already achieved its goals in an earlier less advanced phase.

The case studies also show that the four hybrid threat actors use a wide variety of tools in multiple domains in the MENA region. Even China, which most clearly focuses on the economic domain, also acts in the military and diplomatic domains, for example. Iran, on the other hand, invests heavily in the military domain by itself and through Hezbollah, but also engages in significant activity in the political, economic, and social/societal domains, for instance. Russia and Iran perhaps demonstrate the widest spectrum of domains, ranging from infrastructure and economic to military and intelligence, as well as legal, information and others.

However, as is common for hybrid threat actors, the case studies also highlight that such actors often try to operate under the radar and in the grey zone, blurring the situational awareness of those monitoring them. Thus, there is likely to be hybrid threat activity in the MENA region that has not even been detected yet. Nonetheless, in analyzing current hybrid threat activity, the case studies also guide the reader in monitoring those aspects that may allow undetected activity to be identified more easily.

The concluding part of this edited collection of case studies will further compare the different actors and the tools and domains they use, as well as provide some recommendations for NATO, the EU and their member states based on the findings.

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# Russia's post-2011 resurgence in Libya: A four-pronged hybrid intervention

Samuel Ramani

## Introduction

Since the inception of President Vladimir Putin's third term in May 2012, Russia has transformed itself from a peripheral player into an indispensable geopolitical stakeholder in Libya. Russia has provided military support for Libyan National Army (LNA) chieftain Khalifa Haftar's offensive against Tripoli, regularly engaged with Libya's warring factions and regional powers on devising a peace settlement, and established itself as a pivotal investor in Libya's oil industry. Russia's resurgence in Libya coincided with its decisive military intervention on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's behalf and facilitated Moscow's return to great-power status in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean. Although Russia's rising influence in Libya has been welcomed by close US partners, such as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, Moscow's actions are viewed dimly by the United States and European officials. In May 2020, Brigadier General Gregory Hadfield, the Deputy Director for Intelligence of the US Department of Defence AFRICOM branch, condemned Russia's violations of Libya's sovereignty and accused Moscow of repeating the playbook it had used in Ukraine and Syria.<sup>1</sup> On 15 October 2020, the European Union followed the US lead by imposing sanctions on Putin ally Yevgeny Prigozhin for actions that "threaten the peace, stability or security of Libya".<sup>2</sup>

Due to its deployment of private military contractors (PMCs), use of diplomacy as a tool of leverage, and aggressive disinformation tactics,

Russia is often accused of carrying out hybrid warfare operations in Libya. A September 2020 Institute for the Study of War (ISW) report listed Libya, along with Belarus, Ukraine, Syria and Venezuela, as a key theatre of Russian hybrid war.<sup>3</sup> Even though the term "hybrid war" is contentious, due to its ambiguous scope and partial alignment with Russian military capabilities,<sup>4</sup> it is undeniable that Russia's actions in Libya constitute a multi-pronged hybrid threat to the stability of the North African country. This chapter will outline the multiple hybrid threats emanating from Russia's expanded geopolitical influence in Libya. It will begin by providing a brief historical context for Russia's involvement in Libya from the Muammar Gaddafi era to the present day. It will subsequently outline Russia's current objectives amidst Libya's ongoing civil war and examine four domains of Russian power projection in Libya: the economic; the military (which includes PMCs); the political influence and the diplomatic domains. The chapter will briefly conclude with a recap of its principal themes and a forward-looking assessment of Russia's future power projection strategies in Libya.

## The evolution of Russia's policy towards Libya

Prior to Muammar Gaddafi's death in October 2011, the Moscow-Tripoli bilateral relationship vacillated between transactional indifference and cautious alignment. The Soviet Union immediately recognized Gaddafi's legitimacy after his September 1969 coup and offered economic assistance

1 Babb, 'US General'.

2 Associated Press, 'EU Targets Putin Ally'.

3 Clark, *Russian Hybrid Warfare*.

4 McDermott, 'Does Russia's "Hybrid War"?'.

to Libya, but refrained from converting these expressions of goodwill into hard commitments.<sup>5</sup> Libya imported one billion dollars' worth of arms from the USSR in 1974–75 but balanced the recruitment of Soviet technical advisors with staff from Cuba, Pakistan, and the United States.<sup>6</sup> From 1976–85, the Libya-USSR relationship strengthened greatly. Libyan officials received training in the USSR, the Soviet Union deployed up to 11,000 military personnel in Libya, and Gaddafi became a regular visitor to Moscow.<sup>7</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev's New Thinking and Gaddafi's links to transnational terrorism stalled this partnership during the 1980s and 1990s. In March 1992, Russia supported UN Resolution 748, which imposed stringent sanctions on Libya for its non-compliance with international investigations into the destruction of Pan Am Flight 103. Russia's relationship with Libya was only completely reset in April 2008, as Vladimir Putin made a historic visit to Tripoli. Following discussions between Putin and Gaddafi, Russia forgave Libya's Soviet-era debt, announced plans to construct a railway from Benghazi to Sirte, and negotiated an energy exploration deal between Gazprom and Libya's National Oil Company (NOC).<sup>8</sup>

Russia responded cautiously to the February 2011 outbreak of mass demonstrations in Benghazi and abstained from UN Resolution 1973 on 17 March, which imposed a no-fly zone on Libya. The inception of NATO's military intervention in Libya on 19 March polarized the Russian political establishment. President Dmitry Medvedev concurred with Western leaders that Gaddafi "should go" at the G8 summit in Rome in May 2011<sup>9</sup> and recognized the opposition National Transitional Council (NTC) as Libya's legitimate government in September 2011. On the other side of the spectrum, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin condemned UN Resolution 1973 as "defective and flawed", and

compared it to "medieval calls for crusades".<sup>10</sup> This division was transcended by Gaddafi's death, which was almost unanimously condemned in Moscow. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that Gaddafi's death violated the Geneva Conventions,<sup>11</sup> while Vladimir Putin openly accused the US of being involved in the dictator's demise.

Although Russia's strident condemnation of Gaddafi's death fomented anti-American nationalism at home and strengthened the domestic case for alignment with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, it severely damaged Moscow's relationship with the NTC. While Medvedev's envoy to Africa, Mikhail Margelov, stated in November 2011 that Russia would not lose any Gaddafi-era oil or infrastructure contracts, major deals, such as Gazprom's takeover and natural gas asset swap with Libya's Elephant company, collapsed.<sup>12</sup> A February 2012 Russian International Affairs Council briefing underscored Moscow's low expectations, as it stated that "any contracts that may be offered to Russia by the new Libyan authorities should be regarded as a courtesy".<sup>13</sup> The bilateral relationship reached its lowest point in October 2013, as gunmen stormed Russia's Embassy to Libya and Russian diplomats fled from Tripoli to Tunisia.<sup>14</sup> Due to its tensions with Tripoli, Russia's policy towards Libya was more restrained than its actions elsewhere in the Middle East. Ekaterina Stepanova, the Head of the Peace and Conflict Studies Unit at Moscow's IMEMO Institute, argues that until late 2015, Russia's only discernible policy in Libya was "diplomatic aversion to external military intervention", and raising awareness about the "grave consequences of state collapse" in Libya.<sup>15</sup> In February 2015, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vitaly Churkin contended that Russia and the US could cooperate against the threat of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Libya,<sup>16</sup> but Moscow only started to engage with

5 Yodfat, 'The USSR and Libya'.

6 St. John, 'The Soviet penetration', 133.

7 Fasanotti, 'Russia and Libya'.

8 Katz, 'The Russian-Libyan Rapprochement', 122–128.

9 BBC, 'G8'.

10 Bryanski, 'Putin Likens U.N.'.

11 RT, 'Gaddafi Should Not Have'.

12 Anishchuk, 'Gaddafi Fall Cost Russia'.

13 Senkovich, 'Is There an Alternative'.

14 Grove, 'Russia Says'.

15 Stepanova, 'Russia's Approach', 92.

16 Bratersky, 'Vmeste Protiv IGI'.

Egypt and the LNA on their “counterterrorism efforts” later that year.

Russia’s erstwhile detached approach to the Libyan crisis transformed in late 2016, as Moscow strengthened its relationship with Khalifa Haftar. On 8 November 2016, *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed* reported that Russia had supplied 4 billion dinars to Libya’s Haftar-aligned Tobruk-based government and dispatched technical experts to eastern Libya.<sup>17</sup> Russia’s alignment with Khalifa Haftar can be explained by the LNA’s control over the strategically valuable region of Cyrenaica, which includes the port of Benghazi, and seizure of critical Libyan oil facilities in September 2016.<sup>18</sup> To secure Russian backing for his future military campaigns, Khalifa Haftar met Sergei Lavrov in November 2016 and discussed counterterrorism strategies with Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu aboard the Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier in January 2017.<sup>19</sup> These meetings were fruitful, as Russia began deploying Wagner Group PMCs on Haftar’s behalf in mid-2017. Initially, these PMCs were tasked with mine clearance and guarding port installations, but after the LNA began its offensive against Tripoli in April 2019, Russia began supplying advanced weaponry and direct training to Haftar’s forces.<sup>20</sup>

Even though the LNA’s position eroded dramatically in spring 2020, as Turkey’s military intervention on the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA)’s behalf gained momentum, Russia continues to synthesize military assistance to the LNA with support for a multilateral diplomatic resolution of the Libyan conflict. This approach has continued since the Government of National Unity (GNU), which is led by Abdulhamid Dbeibah, was inaugurated in March 2021. Russia has pledged to pursue military and economic cooperation with Dbeibah, who visited Moscow in April 2021, but has stealthily expanded the presence of its Wagner Group PMCs in Libya.<sup>21</sup>

## Russia’s current approach to power projection in Libya

Russia’s post-2011 resurgence in Libya is principally the product of tactical, rather than strategic, calculations. The opportunistic character of Russia’s current policy in Libya has received widespread attention within Western think tanks and foreign policy communities. In an October 2018 article for the Carnegie Middle East Center, Hamza Meddeb contended that Russia’s resurgence in Libya was the inevitable consequence of dissonant policies advanced by Western powers and not the product of a grand strategy.<sup>22</sup> Meddeb substantiates this hypothesis by stating that Russia wishes to accrue recognition from Europe as a great power, expand its access to Libya’s oil and gas reserves, and secure lucrative reconstruction contracts once the civil war ends. A May 2020 article in the *Financial Times* similarly concluded that “Western diplomats view Russia’s role in Libya as opportunistic”, as the Kremlin instrumentally uses its support for the LNA to expand its influence in the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> As Russia’s military intervention in Libya is deniable, as the Wagner Group is officially a private company overseen by Yevgeny Prigozhin, and financed by external powers, such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, Moscow can accrue influence in Libya at a much lower cost than it has in eastern Ukraine or Syria. This low cost, high reward calculus encourages Russia to stay involved in Libya, even as Haftar loses momentum and the Wagner Group’s conduct provokes criticism.

Although Russia’s material interests and status-seeking behaviour will be explored in detail below, the implications of Moscow’s opportunistic approach to the Libyan crisis should be briefly parsed. In contrast to Russia’s resolute support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Moscow’s leverage in Libya does not exclusively depend on

17 Al-Araby Al Jadeed, ‘Khubara Rus’.

18 Megirisi and Toaldo, ‘Russia in Libya’.

19 Lewis, ‘Russia Turns to Libya’.

20 Borschevskaya, ‘The Role’.

21 The Defense Post ‘Russia Calls’.

22 Meddeb, ‘Opportunism as a Strategy’.

23 England and Foy, ‘US Military Accuses Russia’.

the LNA's military strength. Russia officially recognized the Tripoli-based GNA and GNU as Libya's legitimate governments, while also engaging with Haftar-aligned House of Representatives (HoR) Speaker Aguila Saleh, GNA-aligned High Council of State head Khaled al-Meshri, and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi. Russia's focus on becoming indispensable, rather than exerting hegemonic control over a single partner, is a cardinal feature of Moscow's hybrid warfare strategy in Africa.<sup>24</sup> In Sudan, Wagner Group PMCs seamlessly transitioned from advising President Omar al-Bashir to supporting the Transitional Military Council that overthrew him in April 2019, and Moscow has also cultivated positive relations with Sudan's civilian authorities. Similarly, in the Central African Republic, Russia supports President Faustin-Archange Touadera, but has also reportedly supplied arms to Seleka rebels that seek to overthrow his regime.<sup>25</sup>

Russia's multi-vector balancing strategy ensures that it can seamlessly adapt to marked shifts in the internal balance of forces within Libya. It has also allowed Russia to diplomatically engage with the GNA's principal partners, Turkey, Italy and Qatar; and the LNA's main sponsors, the UAE, France and Egypt, and officially neutral countries, such as Algeria, on resolving the Libyan war. The imperviousness of Russia's diplomatic approach to changing geopolitical winds ensures that the US and EU will likely have to engage with Moscow on ending the war in Libya, in spite of their disdain for the Kremlin's approach to the conflict.

### **The economic domain of Russia's power projection in Libya**

Of the four domains of Russia's influence in Libya, the economic domain is arguably the weakest. Although economic data on Libya has been incomplete since the April 2019 offensive, 2017 and 2018 trade statistics revealed that Russia was lagging behind Libya's core European commercial partners (Italy, Spain, France, Britain and the

Netherlands), the United States, China, South Korea, Egypt and Turkey as an import and export partner. Wheat sales are the most consistent facet of Russia's commercial relations with Libya. Russia established itself as a crisis-proof supplier of wheat to Libya during the 2011 civil war, as it shipped 100,000 tons of wheat to Libya during Gaddafi's final weeks in power.<sup>26</sup> In December 2019, head of the Contact Group on Intra-Libyan Settlement Lev Dengov announced that Russia would export 1 million tons of wheat to Libya annually.<sup>27</sup> Beyond Russia's essential role in preserving Libya's food security, Moscow is also seeking to establish itself as a critical investor in Libya's energy, defence and infrastructure sectors. Russia faces stiff competition from rival external stakeholders in all three of these spheres, but hopes that it can gain a decisive advantage once the conflict progresses to the post-conflict reconstruction phase.

Since the inception of its alignment with Khalifa Haftar, Russia has eyed a stake in Libya's lucrative oil sector. In February 2017, Russian oil giant Rosneft signed a crude oil offtake agreement with Libya's National Oil Company (NOC). The NOC stated that this agreement would lead to the creation of a joint Rosneft-NOC working committee on oil exploration and production, and "lay the groundwork for investment by Rosneft in Libya's oil sector".<sup>28</sup> As Libya's oil production had doubled to 700,000 barrels per day in early 2017 and the NOC sought to increase its production to 2.1 million barrels per day by 2021, which would top its Gaddafi-era level of 1.6 million barrels per day, the offtake deal was expected to enhance Libya's production capacity.<sup>29</sup> This agreement provoked mixed reactions within Russia's business community. Ivan Andrievsky, the head of the board of directors of Engineering Company 2K, stated that Rosneft could accrue fast profits from Libya, as the NOC's oil field and transportation infrastructure was highly sophisticated. However, Andrievsky warned that Libya's political instability would convert the deal into a "purely political step", which would

24 Ramani, 'Russia's New Hybrid Warfare'.

25 Spivak, 'Russia Can't Compete'.

26 Saul, 'Libya Buys More'.

27 Alharathy, 'Imports of Wheat'.

28 Lewis, 'Russia's Rosneft'.

29 Ibid.



“inject funds into the maintenance of Libyan statehood and the legitimate government”.<sup>30</sup> Rustam Tankayev, the General Director of Info-Tech, saw Rosneft’s synchronous deals in Libya and Iraqi Kurdistan as a means of neutralizing long-term competition from Middle Eastern hydrocarbons.<sup>31</sup>

The ambivalence that accompanied the Rosneft-NOC deal swiftly gave way to outright pessimism, as foreign competition and Russia’s dissonant policies on oil production undermined the February 2017 offtake agreement. As the NOC required \$19 billion in external investments to meet its 2021 production target, Rosneft’s comparative advantage in the Libyan oil sector swiftly dissipated, as the NOC reached out to companies in Spain, Germany, Indonesia and Austria.<sup>32</sup> In spite of this competition, NOC chairman Mustafa Sanalla confirmed on 10 July, 2017 that Rosneft was extracting oil from Libya on a one-year contract with one to two cargoes being shipped on a monthly basis.<sup>33</sup> This breakthrough was swiftly undermined by the Russian Ministry of Energy’s stringent adherence to universal oil production cuts, which were mandated by Moscow’s OPEC+ pact with Saudi Arabia. Libya and Nigeria were initially exempted from these cuts. However, on July 23, Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak stated that both countries should adhere to OPEC+, as soon as they obtained a stable level of output.<sup>34</sup> This announcement was greeted positively by Russian capital markets, as it ensured that the OPEC+ would remain viable.<sup>35</sup> In January 2018, Novak confirmed Libya’s adherence to OPEC+ production cuts, which included a pledge to refrain from future production increases.<sup>36</sup>

Due to OPEC+ and the reverberations of Libya’s civil war, which included an LNA-instigated oil blockade, Russia’s presence in the Libyan oil sector stagnated until the summer of 2020. On

26 June 2020, Wagner Group PMCs coordinated with Haftar loyalists to assume guardianship over Libya’s largest oil field, El Sharara in western Libya’s Murzuq Desert.<sup>37</sup> Rosneft also signed an agreement to transfer Libyan oil to refineries in Germany via Trieste, Italy.<sup>38</sup> In late June, the NOC confirmed that the Wagner Group and other LNA-aligned militias were controlling three of the Sirte Basin’s five oil ports. These rapid-fire developments ensured that Russia was an ascendant power in Libya’s oil sector but provoked strong opposition from the United States. The US Embassy in Tripoli condemned Russia’s activities as an “unprecedented foreign-backed campaign to undermine Libya’s energy sector”, and imposed new sanctions on Yevgeny Prigozhin and his closest associates in mid-July 2020.<sup>39</sup> These sanctions, which are part of a broader US and EU crackdown on Prigozhin’s political interference efforts and malign activities in Africa, could render Russia’s oil field seizures pyrrhic successes. The stagnation of the Rosneft-NOC agreement since 2017 and the NOC’s condemnation of Wagner Group activities could ultimately prevent Russia from reactivating that agreement.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, it remains uncertain whether Russia will re-emerge as a critical stakeholder in Libya’s oil industry during the reconstruction phase, or be subsumed by competitors, such as Italy’s Eni or France’s Total, which also have deals in Libya’s oil markets.

Russia is also a major vendor of illicit arms to the LNA, in spite of an ongoing UN arms embargo against Libya. Khalifa Haftar has desired Russian weaponry since the inception of his military ambitions, and in a September 2016 interview with *Sputnik*, an LNA source denied an *Izvestia* leak that Haftar had asked Russia to suspend its participation in the arms embargo.<sup>41</sup> On 24 July 2020, the US Department of Defence alleged that Russian

30 Topalov, ‘Rosneft poshla’.

31 Ibid.

32 Future Center for Research and Advanced Studies, ‘Tathirat Mhdwdt’.

33 Reuters, ‘Russia’s Rosneft’.

34 RFE/RL, ‘Russia’s Oil Chief’.

35 Davydov, ‘Rynok nefli’.

36 *Izvestia*, ‘Novak zayavil’.

37 VOA News, ‘Libya Oil Company’.

38 Stephen, ‘Libyan Oil Production’.

39 Faucon and Malsin, ‘Russian Oil Grab’.

40 Belenkaya, ‘In Libya’s War’.

41 *Sputnik*, ‘Libyan Field Marshall’.

military cargo aircraft were supplying air defence equipment, trucks, armoured vehicles and fighter jets to Libya.<sup>42</sup> A September 2020 UN report blamed Russia for violating the UN arms embargo through the supply of two armoured personnel carriers to the LNA, a major battle tank upgrade for Wagner Group forces fighting alongside the LNA, and MiG-29 and Su-24 jets.<sup>43</sup> Russia has strenuously denied these accusations, and Russia's chargé d'affaires in Libya, Jamshad Boltaev, stated that it would be "absolutely pointless" for Moscow to violate the arms embargo.<sup>44</sup> Russia has also consistently supported the arms embargo's continuation in the United Nations, since Dmitry Medvedev decreed Moscow's compliance with UNSC Resolution 1970 that banned arms sales to Libya in March 2011.<sup>45</sup>

If the UN arms embargo comes to an end and a peace agreement is reached, Russia will seek to revive its Gaddafi-era arms contracts with Libya. According to Sergei Chemezov, the chairman of technology giant Rostec, this arms embargo cancelled \$4 billion in contracts between Russia and Libya, which included a deal to modernize 200 T-72 tanks, the prospective supply of T-905 tanks, a \$1 billion deal to sell 20 fighter jets, and a January 2010 weapons shipment contract worth 1.3 billion euros.<sup>46</sup> Although Sergei Lavrov stated in September 2013 that Russia would sell arms to help Libya's UN-recognized government address border security challenges,<sup>47</sup> Moscow's post-war contracts will most likely be given to the Tobruk-based authorities. In an April 2017 interview with *Sputnik*, Khalifa Haftar admitted that he had discussed with Russian officials the possibility of becoming the recipient of suspended Gaddafi-era contracts.<sup>48</sup> When asked about prospective Russian arms sales, Kheiri al-Tamimi, the head of Haftar's office, told reporters in April 2019 that "after the

embargo is lifted, we are going to boost our cooperation".<sup>49</sup> If international sanctions remain in place against Haftar-aligned entities, the Tobruk-based government will likely become more beholden to Russian-made dinars to fulfil its contractual obligations. Russia transferred 4 shipments of 4.5 billion Libyan dinars to the parallel central bank in eastern Libya from February to June 2019,<sup>50</sup> and these shipments could intensify further if the Tobruk-based authorities express serious interest in purchasing weapons.

In addition to its prospective commercial relationships with Libya's oil and defence industries, Russia could also invest in the reconstruction of Libya's infrastructure. As China is widely expected to be the dominant player in the rebuilding of Libya's infrastructure, as it aspires to include Libya in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Turkey and Egypt are already negotiating with the NOC on oil pipeline construction, the scope for Russia's entry into Libya's infrastructure reconstruction remains narrow. However, terrestrial infrastructure remains a theatre where Russian investors could accrue potentially lucrative contracts. In October 2018, Libya's Minister of Economy and Industry Nasser Shaglan sent a delegation to Moscow to encourage Russian Railways to invest in a railroad linking Benghazi to Sirte.<sup>51</sup> In order to entice Russian Railways to invest in Libya, Shaglan emphasized the importance of security guarantees for Russian companies and contended that Libya's vast Mediterranean coast would allow Russia to develop its infrastructure as a commercial bridge between Europe and Africa.<sup>52</sup>

The construction of a railway from Benghazi to Sirte would net Russian Railways \$2.5 billion in revenues.<sup>53</sup> Russian Railways has experience working on Libya's terrain, as it started constructing a national railway line from Sirte in February 2008.

42 RFE/RL, 'U.S. Says Russian Military'.

43 Ledner, 'Experts'.

44 Sputnik, 'Diplomat Stresses'.

45 Al Jazeera, 'Russia Bans Arms Sales'.

46 BFM.ru, 'Iz-za sobytiy'.

47 Kommersant, 'Rossiya postavit Livii'.

48 Sputnik, 'Russian Weapons Supply'.

49 Reuters, 'Aide to Libyan Commander'.

50 Sagdiev and Lewis, 'Exclusive'.

51 Kommersant, 'Tam, gde bolshe riska'.

52 Ibid.

53 Meyer et al., 'Russia Has a Plan'.

Due to the ongoing civil war, progress on these negotiations has stalled. In November 2020, however, Egypt's Transport Minister Kamel al-Wazir announced that Cairo was planning to construct a railway line that would link Benghazi to Wadi Halfa, Sudan, which would run through Egyptian territory.<sup>54</sup> This project would effectively complement Russia's Benghazi to Sirte railway project, should the Kremlin authorities wish to revive this construction.

### **The military domain of Russia's power projection in Libya**

This section provides a more thorough examination of Russia's deployment of private military contractors and conventional military equipment deployments in Libya. Even though the RSB Group deployed personnel to remove explosive mines from Libya in 2017 and Russia transferred Moran Security Group and Schit PMCs from Syria to Libya in January 2020,<sup>55</sup> the Wagner Group is the principal provider of Russian PMCs to Libya. The Wagner Group's presence has significantly expanded since the start of the LNA's offensive on Tripoli. In March 2019, a British intelligence assessment revealed that 300 Wagner Group contractors were supporting Haftar's forces in Benghazi.<sup>56</sup> A UN report in May 2020 revealed that the number of Wagner Group contractors had increased to 1,200, which included a mixture of "combat units" and "specialist snipers".<sup>57</sup> Wagner Group contractors hail predominantly from Russia and other eastern European countries, such as Belarus, Moldova, Serbia and Ukraine.<sup>58</sup>

Since February 2020, Russia has deployed Syrian mercenaries to Libya, in order to support the Wagner Group's operations, and complement the UAE's parallel recruitment of Sudanese and Chad-ian forces to fight on the LNA's behalf. Russia's decision to integrate Syrian forces with combat

experience into the Libyan civil war was likely inspired by Turkey's successful use of Free Syrian Army personnel during its military intervention, which began a month earlier. While Russia's Syrian troop deployments were initially confined to 50 personnel, Bashar al-Assad's March 2 expression of solidarity with Khalifa Haftar against "Turkish aggression", and the LNA chieftain's covert March 10 visit to Damascus resulted in an influx of pro-Russian Syrian forces entering Libya.<sup>59</sup> After the GNA captured the strategic al-Wattiyah air base in May 2020, Russia recruited 900 Syrians to fight for the LNA in May and provided them with military training in Homs.<sup>60</sup> As these Syrian forces receive a salary of \$1,000 to \$2,000 per month and consist of formerly anti-Assad Free Syrian Army militia members, socioeconomic deprivation appears to be the primary motivator for their decision to enlist in the LNA's campaigns.

Turning to the Wagner Group's links to the Russian state, Vladimir Putin insisted following a January 2020 meeting with Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel that Russians fighting in Libya do not represent the state, and nor are they paid by the state.<sup>61</sup> However, the Wagner Group is purported to have close institutional ties to the Russian Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU). This relationship dates back to the early stages of Russia's military operations in Ukraine, as Dmitry Utkin, a retired veteran from the GRU's special operations troops, founded the Wagner Group in 2014.<sup>62</sup> In March 2017, Egyptian security sources revealed that Russia had deployed a 22-member special forces unit to Libya via Egypt's Masra Mat-touh base. US officials simultaneously observed Russian special operations forces armed with drones at Sisi Barrani, which is approximately 60 miles from the Egypt-Libya border.<sup>63</sup> These GRU personnel shepherded the Wagner Group contractors into Libya in the months that followed. In October 2018, a British intelligence source alleged

54 CGTN, 'Egypt Plans Railway Lines'.

55 Assad, 'Two Russian Firms'.

56 Luhn and Nicholls, 'Russian Mercenaries'.

57 Al Jazeera, 'Russian Group's 1,200 Mercenaries'.

58 Ibid.

59 Belenkaya, 'Siriyskiy Front'.

60 Al Jazeera, 'Russia Hiring'.

61 Reuters, 'Russia's Putin'.

62 Reynolds, 'Putin's Not-So-Secret Mercenaries'.

63 Luhn, 'Russian Special Forces'.

that Russia had embedded dozens of GRU agents alongside Spetsnaz forces in eastern Libya and the Wagner Group was being used as cover for their activities.<sup>64</sup> The GRU is also reportedly involved in training Libya's Wagner Group forces.<sup>65</sup> The GRU's training role is unsurprising, as a GRU-operated centre in southwestern Russia's city of Molmino trained PMCs for war in Ukraine. The Russian Defence Ministry could also play a role in overseeing the Wagner Group's activities. Citing a video published by the information bureau of the Libyan Armed Forces High Command, *Novaya Gazeta* reported that Yevgeny Prigozhin had attended a November 2018 meeting between Sergei Shoigu and Khalifa Haftar.<sup>66</sup> The Wagner Group's use of Kalibr missiles and S-300 missile defence systems, which are typically reserved for the Russian Armed Forces, provides further evidence of this linkage.

Although his denials of institutional support for the Wagner Group are dubious, Vladimir Putin's contention that Russian PMCs are externally financed could have greater validity. On 6 January 2020, *Al Araby Al Jadeed* reported that the United Arab Emirates had paid Haftar to hire Russian security companies on the condition that the LNA chieftain would assume responsibility for these payments once his sphere of influence in Libya was ensconced.<sup>67</sup> Emirati financing resulted in the entry of PMCs from the Moran Security Group or Schit, which would fight more closely alongside LNA forces than the Wagner Group and guard oil facilities after the Libyan civil war ends.<sup>68</sup> On 28 January, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan heightened these accusations by publicly accusing the UAE of financing Russian mercenaries that fight on Haftar's behalf.<sup>69</sup> In a January 24 investigative report, French newspaper *Le Monde* challenged these accounts that Saudi Arabia was the Wagner Group's principal financier.<sup>70</sup> When asked about the ambiguous nature of the Wagner

Group's financing, Mohammed Ali Abdallah, the senior advisor to the GNA on US Affairs, informed the author that a consortium of Libyan nationals, Emirati and Saudi sources most likely financed Russian PMC deployments.<sup>71</sup>

The sustainability of the Wagner Group's reliance on external financial support for its military operations is unclear. On 30 November 2020, the US Department of Defense stated that the UAE had funded Wagner Group military activities in Libya.<sup>72</sup> This revelation caused Congressional Democrats to step up their criticisms of the Trump administration's proposed \$23 billion arms deal with Abu Dhabi. Moreover, if the Wagner Group divests from Khalifa Haftar and supports other politicians that have favourable relations with Russia, such as Aguila Saleh or Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, the UAE and Saudi Arabia could stop compensating Yevgeny Prigozhin. The Wagner Group's ability to balance its loyalty to the Russian state and the potentially conflicting demands of its external financiers is a crucial variable that shrouds Russia's military intervention in Libya.

It is also worthwhile analyzing Russian PMCs' military responsibilities and Russia's deployment of conventional military assets to Libya. Until early 2019, Wagner Group contractors operated as stationary forces via bases in Benghazi and Tobruk,<sup>73</sup> and focused on consolidating the LNA's hegemony over eastern Libya. Russian PMCs participated only in a limited support role in the LNA's initial offensives, which included the seizure of the Sabha oil field. After April 2019, the Wagner Group began to carry out offensive and defensive operations in a highly versatile fashion. In the offensive domain, Russian PMCs have attempted to be the "tipping point" deployments, which provide the LNA with a decisive battlefield advantage. Russian experts were acutely aware of the shortcomings of the LNA and GNA. Prominent Russian experts

64 Kartsev, 'Russia is Suspected'.

65 Turovsky, 'What is the GRU?'.

66 Murtazin, 'Chto-to gotovitsya'.

67 *Al Araby Al Jadeed*, 'Baed Wusul Fajnir Rwsy'.

68 Ibid.

69 *The New Arab*, 'Turkey's Erdogan'.

70 Vitkine et al. 'En Libye'.

71 Interview with Mohammed Ali Abdallah, 24 November, 2020.

72 Mackinnon and Detsch, 'Pentagon Says'.

73 *Al Bawaba*, 'Putin Plants Troops'.

on Middle East affairs, such as Leonid Issaev<sup>74</sup> and Grigory Lukyanov,<sup>75</sup> who are both professors at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, acknowledge that the LNA is a highly disparate force that lacks a clear strategic vision and Haftar's strongholds in eastern Libya consist of just 25% of the Libyan population. The GNA was seen as being equally weak due to its perceived reliance on untrained Syrian militias.<sup>76</sup>

Due to the perceived structural weaknesses of Libya's two principal factions and Russia's adherence to a low-cost military intervention model in Africa, the Wagner Group has focused its efforts on offering military advantages that the LNA's other partners cannot provide. Kirill Semenov, a Moscow-based defence expert specializing in the Middle East, contends that Russian PMCs have ceded responsibility over the majority of the LNA's offensive ground operations to Egypt, the UAE and Jordan. Instead, Semenov argues that Russian PMCs focused their attention on bolstering the efficacy of LNA snipers, mortar and artillery crews.<sup>77</sup> The Wagner Group has also leveraged its deniable relationship with the Kremlin to carry out illicit actions in support of the LNA's military campaign. On 23 April 2020, Libya's then Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha stated that GNA fighters had been exposed to nerve gas from Haftar's forces in the Salah al-Dan axis, and claimed that such action "can only be carried out by Wagner".<sup>78</sup> As LNA forces withdrew from neighbourhoods surrounding Tripoli in the summer of 2020, the US Department of Defence AFRICOM branch and local observers accused the Wagner Group of placing landmines in strategically important areas. Tarek Megirisi, a Libya expert at the European Council of Foreign Relations, believes that Russia is deploying these landmines in plain sight to "prepare for an enlarged conflict".<sup>79</sup>

Even though the Wagner Group's transition from a largely stationary to a forward deployed

offensive force dominated the spring and summer of 2019, Russian PMCs began assuming greater defensive responsibilities in autumn 2019. The Wagner Group's transformation into a dual-purpose offensive and defensive military force resulted in it operating Russian surface-to-air missiles, Pantsir S1 missile defence systems and anti-tank guided missiles with greater frequency. In December 2019, Libya's then Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha noted the efficacy of Russia's "drone-jamming" efforts,<sup>80</sup> as Russian PMCs had downed Turkish equipment, an Italian drone (20 November), and a US surveillance drone (21 November) in rapid succession. Despite these initial successes, the track record of Russian PMCs in defensive operations has dwindled significantly since the expansion of Turkey's military intervention in Libya. In May 2020, reports surfaced that at least 3 Pantsir S-1 missile defence systems had been destroyed by Turkey's Bayraktar TB-2 class drones.<sup>81</sup> The vulnerability of the Pantsir S-1 could be attributed to technological limitations, as Israel's Harop kamikaze drones had destroyed this system in Syria in January 2019.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, the inability of Russian PMCs to stem the GNA's advance in western Tripoli underscored their struggles in carrying out requisite defensive responsibilities.

As the LNA's position on the ground rapidly deteriorated in late spring 2020, Russia expanded its military intervention through the deployment of fighter jets to Libya. The US Department of Defense AFRICOM branch alleged that Russia had flown "at least 14 MiG-29s and several Su-24s" from Syria to Libya in late May 2020. AFRICOM also stated that it had photographic evidence of Russian aircraft taking off from Jufra, and of a MiG-29 operating in the vicinity of Sirte.<sup>83</sup> The Chairman of Russia's Federation Council Defence and Security Committee Viktor Bondarev immediately denied these reports by stating that

74 Podrugina, 'Livyskiy Feldmarshal Haftar'.

75 Osipov, 'Kak "Syn" Kaddafi'.

76 Ibid.

77 Semenov, 'Liviskiy Teatr'.

78 The New Arab, 'Libya Government Accuses'.

79 Solomon, 'Russian Mercenaries in Libya'.

80 South China Morning Post, 'Libya Conflict'.

81 Bryen, 'Russian Pantsir Systems'.

82 Ozler, 'Libya'.

83 Al Jazeera, 'US Says Jets Deployed'.

"If there are any airplanes in Libya, they are Soviet not Russian", and that almost all Warsaw Pact countries exported MiG-29s to Africa and Asia.<sup>84</sup> While the exact purpose of Russia's fighter jet deployments in Libya was unclear, AFRICOM's Director of Intelligence Rear Admiral Heidi Berg asserted on 11 September 2020 that MiG-29s were operated by Wagner Group pilots and carried out combat responsibilities, such as ground strikes in Libya.<sup>85</sup> The efficacy of these jets is questionable, as MiG-29 jets crashed in June and in September, but it would appear that Russia had used these aircraft to slow the GNA's advance while it was engaging in diplomatic negotiations.

To conclude, Moscow's much-discussed aspirations to construct a naval base on eastern Libya's Mediterranean coast will be examined. According to AFRICOM's July 2020 assessment, Russia has used Wagner Group PMCs as a "proxy in Libya to establish a long-term presence on the Mediterranean Sea".<sup>86</sup> This prospect poses a significant threat to US and European security. Kimberly Marten, a Professor at Columbia University specializing in Russian security policy, warned the US House of Representatives in July 2020 that Russia could establish a naval or air base in Libya, which would be able to harass and impede US, NATO and the European Union's freedom of movement in the Mediterranean.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, as Libya is a crucial nexus for illegal immigration into Europe, Russia could use a naval presence on its Mediterranean coast as a form of blackmail against Europe on the migration issue. This prospective "weaponization" of Libyan migration to Europe resembles Gaddafi's 2010 statement that Europe would "turn black" unless Italy paid Libya \$6.3 billion per annum.<sup>88</sup>

Even though Russian officials deny speculation that they will supplement their Mediterranean base in Tartus, Syria with a facility in Egypt or Libya, the Kremlin's actions suggest that it is at least mulling the possibility of constructing a base

in North Africa. Tobruk is a potential location for a Russian naval base, as Russian delegates visited the city several times in 2017 to inspect the conditions of the port.<sup>89</sup> A January 2017 analysis in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* argued that Tobruk has a "convenient, protected and deep water bay", and a port which was modernized by Soviet specialists during the early 1980s.<sup>90</sup> Benghazi is the most probable alternative location for a Russian naval base. Khalifa Haftar offered Moscow basing rights in Benghazi in 2017<sup>91</sup> and Muammar Gaddafi had asked the Russian Navy to deploy forces there in November 2008. Libya's then Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha was concerned enough about this prospect that he asked the United States on 22 February 2020 to construct a base in Libya that would deter foreign interference.<sup>92</sup> However, President Donald Trump's disengagement from Libya, which has broadly continued under his successor Joe Biden, raises serious doubts about Washington's ability to credibly deter Russia's base-construction ambitions.

### **The political influence and disinformation domain of Russia's power projection in Libya**

To augment its efforts to reshape the balance of forces in Libya through military means, Russia has also engaged in political influence operations in the North African country. Russia's political influence efforts combine on-the-ground active measures with the extensive use of disinformation. The Prigozhin-aligned Foundation of National Values Protection has used active measures to bolster the public image of Khalifa Haftar and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi. It notably carried out manipulated opinion surveys, which listed Saif al-Islam Gaddafi as Libya's most popular politician, and in May 2019, the GNA authorities arrested two Fabrika Trollei operatives.<sup>93</sup> These two operatives, Maxim Shugaley and his interpreter Samir Hasan Ali Seifan,

84 Interfax, 'No Russian Fighter Jets'.

85 Correll, 'AFRICOM'.

86 U.S. Department of Defense, 'Russia'.

87 Marten, 'The GRU'.

88 Yachyshen, 'Russia Now'.

89 Assad, 'Russia's Plans'.

90 Mustafin, 'Nuzhny li Rossi'.

91 Ibid.

92 RIA Novosti, 'V Tripoli'.

93 Semenov, 'New Challenges'.



were released in December 2020. The ultimate aim of these operatives was to secure Saif al-Islam Gaddafi's participation in future Libyan national elections, expand Russia's influence in Libya's oil and gas industry, and construct a base in Libya to deny the United States access to its coast.<sup>94</sup> This case revealed a potential conflict between the personal interests of Prigozhin, who viewed Saif al-Islam Gaddafi as a useful asset, and the Russian state, which recognized him as a fringe player in Libya. Since Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov stated in December 2018 that Saif al-Islam Gaddafi could play an integral role in Libya's future, as he was supported by "certain tribes in certain regions of the country,"<sup>95</sup> the Wagner Group can actively influence the direction of Russian state policy, as well as implement orders from the Kremlin.

While Russia's use of active measures in Libya failed and jeopardized its efforts to preserve a diplomatic backchannel with the GNA, Moscow's penetration of Libya's information space has been much more successful. Russia's information warfare strategy synthesizes soft and sharp power, as it actively promotes disinformation and attempts to highlight the constructive security contributions of its military intervention. RT Arabic is the 44<sup>th</sup> most viewed website in Libya, substantially ahead of regional outlets such as Al-Arabiya or Al-Hurra,<sup>96</sup> and its impact is especially pronounced amongst young Libyans who have regular access to social media. RT Arabic's messaging is complemented by its counterpart Sputnik Arabic. RT and Sputnik's English language websites regularly present interview content from LNA-aligned figures and Gaddafi loyalists in an uncritical fashion, which amplifies Russia's narratives at the regional and international level. Although Saudi Arabia is the largest origin point for disinformation targeting Libyans on Facebook and Twitter, as it circulated one-third of the misleading content on the Libyan war from April to October 2019,<sup>97</sup> Russia is also

using social media to promote disinformation. Shelby Grossman, a research scholar at Stanford Internet Observatory, noted that Prigozhin's employees had created Facebook pages on Libya, which praised Khalifa Haftar as a stabilizing force, praised the alleged prosperity of the Gaddafi era and, less frequently, praised Saif al-Islam Gaddafi's future presidential ambitions.<sup>98</sup> Facebook removed these accounts in October 2019, as they were part of an Africa-wide disinformation campaign, which vigorously targeted countries with Russian PMCs, such as the Central African Republic and Mozambique.

Through these media platforms, Russia denies the Wagner Group's malign activities in Libya in an often conspiratorial fashion. A consistent narrative in Russian state media outlets is that the United States and Ukraine are launching a smear campaign against Russia's ambitions in Libya. These accusations build on past statements by Russian officials. A 5 August 2020 article in *RT Arabic* claimed that US allegations about Wagner Group PMCs aimed "to tarnish the image of Russia and its efforts aimed at settling the crises in the Middle East without external interference."<sup>99</sup> Viktor Ozerov, the head of the Federation Council Committee on Defence and Security, alleged in March 2017 that reports about GRU deployments on the Egypt-Libya border had sought to discredit the Russian military's reputation.<sup>100</sup> These assertions persisted in the Russian official discourse as Moscow's military intervention in Libya expanded. Similarly, based on Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov's interview with Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram*, Sputnik Arabic stated on 9 June 2020 that lists of Russian participants in the Libyan conflict were propaganda lifted from a Ukrainian database.<sup>101</sup>

To further bolster these narratives and deflect from the Wagner Group's conduct, Russian media outlets routinely publish conspiracies about the US and Ukraine's policies in Libya. Sputnik Arabic

94 Assad, 'GNA Unveils Links'.

95 RIA Novosti, 'MID schitayet'.

96 Borschevskaya and Cleveland, *Russia's Arabic Propaganda*.

97 Herbert, 'Libya's War'.

98 Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 'Russian Disinformation Campaigns'.

99 RT Arabic, 'Washintun Tatahim Musku'.

100 Radio Sputnik, 'Voyennyy ekspert'.

101 Sputnik Arabic, 'Bujdanuf Yakshif Haqiqatan Qayimat'.

has promoted the conspiracy that the US has tried to subjugate Libya's sovereignty since the age of Gamal Abdel Nasser, and that AFRICOM is co-opting "ignorant" Libyans and local "agents" to step up their challenge to Russia and China.<sup>102</sup> This narrative revived criticisms of the 2011 NATO military intervention in Libya, which was often described by Russian media outlets as an extractive or neo-imperial project of the United States and France. Russian military experts, such as Colonel Vladimir Popov, have also circulated baseless allegations about Ukraine's provision of military support for Libya's GNA and alleged deployment of Odessa Aviation Factory experts to Libya since December 2014.<sup>103</sup>

In addition to deflecting from the pernicious aspects of its Libya strategy through disinformation, Russia has used disinformation to frame itself as a constructive actor that wishes to combat terrorism in Libya. Much like its exaggeration of ISIS-Khorasan's presence in Afghanistan and collective labelling of Syrian opposition forces as extremists, Russian media outlets have depicted GNA strongholds in western Libya as bases for terrorism. This narrative reached a crescendo in April 2019, as Russia sought to justify the LNA offensive against Tripoli. Citing LNA sources, an *RT Arabic* article claimed that al-Qaeda leaders from Syria had arrived in western Libya with the express purpose of "liberating the region".<sup>104</sup> Another *RT Arabic* article, which emphasized the concentration of pro-Turkish Muslim Brotherhood affiliates in Misrata and uncritically noted Haftar's allegations of terrorism sponsorship from Turkey and Qatar,<sup>105</sup> was the second most shared Facebook post at the start of the Tripoli offensive.<sup>106</sup>

Russia has used its self-ascribed counterterrorism role to justify its support for the LNA to a domestic, Libyan and international audience. Russian commentators, such as Orientalist Andrei Ort-nikov, have described Libya as a potential "exporter

of instability" to Russia, and highlighted Haftar's potential to "knock out Islamists" from Tripoli.<sup>107</sup> This pre-emption argument mirrors Russia's justification for its September 2015 decision to militarily intervene on Bashar al-Assad's behalf in Syria. Prior to the LNA's offensive against Tripoli, some GNA officials, such as Prime Minister Ahmad Mait-eeq, praised Moscow's stabilizing role.<sup>108</sup> Libya's then Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha's June 2020 pledge to prevent Russia from establishing a base anywhere in Libya underscored the deleterious impact of the Wagner Group's conduct on Russia's reputation within Libya.<sup>109</sup>

As Russia did not counter these negative statements by GNA officials with humanitarian aid shipments, such as transfers of food aid to Yemen, or the construction of cultural centres, which had helped assuage anti-Russian sentiments in Afghanistan, Moscow's narratives about counterterrorism had little traction amongst the Libyan public. Pivoting to international engagement, Vladimir Putin warned Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte in July 2019 that militants and terrorists were moving from Syria to Libya, which he deemed "very threatening".<sup>110</sup> Putin's attribution of blame for this crisis to Western powers, and claims that Russia was not involved in Libya out of a sense of obligation, were aimed at drawing a positive contrast between Moscow's and NATO's approaches to Libya. This ploy to influence international opinion in a pro-Russian direction reaped few dividends but remained a cornerstone of Moscow's public diplomacy on the Libyan civil war.

## The diplomatic domain of Russia's power projection in Libya

In spite of its status as a critical protagonist in the LNA's offensive against Tripoli, Russia has aspired to be an indispensable diplomatic arbiter in Libya. This synthesis of military intervention and

102 Sputnik Arabic, 'Aleudw Al Aelaa'.

103 Sukhanin, 'Ukrainian "Footprint"'.

104 RT Arabic, 'Masdar Eskry'.

105 RT Arabic, 'Rwytrz'. The headline and first paragraph derived from Reuters, but subsequent commentary was added by RT Arabic's team of writers.

106 CESI, *Information War in Libya*, 7. The RT Arabic article received 14,100 Facebook shares.

107 Tsargrad, 'Budet li tam'.

108 Sputnik, 'Tripoli Sees Russia'.

109 Golden, 'Bashagha'.

110 The Daily Sabah, 'Putin Blames NATO'.

diplomatic ambition mirrors Russia's approach to the Syrian civil war but with a critical distinction. Except for its failed efforts to broker a ceasefire with Turkey in January 2020, Russia has carried out shuttle diplomacy with a broad array of international stakeholders and has embraced established diplomatic formats, such as the June 2021 Berlin Conference. This contrasts with Russia's focus on engagement with Iran and Turkey in Syria, and efforts to supplant the UN-backed Geneva Process with the Astana and Sochi negotiations.

Aside from this tactical departure, Russia's legal discourse on Libya and periodic obstructionism in the United Nations closely mirrors its actions in Syria. In tandem with Russia's equation of support for Bashar al-Assad with the protection of Syria's sovereignty, Moscow has called upon international actors to rescue Libyan sovereignty through multilateral diplomacy. In a meeting with German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas on 11 August 2020, Sergei Lavrov emphasized the need to "restore the state's sovereignty and maintain Libya's territorial integrity", which was allegedly undermined by the 2011 NATO military intervention in Libya.<sup>111</sup> Lavrov's rhetoric originated during Russia's failed intra-Libyan mediation efforts between the Gaddafi regime and National Transitional Council during the 2011 Libyan civil war. Russia claimed that these efforts sought to fulfil UNSC Resolution 1973's civilian protection mandate while maintaining Libya's sovereignty as a state.<sup>112</sup> Russia has also emphasized the need for "inclusive dialogue" in Libya,<sup>113</sup> which mirrors its efforts to selectively engage with the Syrian opposition and Kurdish representatives. Much like its frequent vetoes of UN resolutions condemning Assad's conduct, Russia blocked a UN statement on April 8, 2019 that urged Khalifa Haftar to abandon his offensive against Tripoli.<sup>114</sup> Russia justified this controversial position by stating that a UN resolution should have called upon all warring factions in Libya to lay down their arms.

To exert influence over the resolution of the Libyan civil war, Russia publicly supported intra-Libyan dialogue, sought to restrain the most bellicose ambitions of its pro-LNA partners, and intermittently engaged with Turkey and European countries. Russia has an active contact group on the Intra-Libyan settlement, which played a critical role in preserving Moscow's relationship with the GNA. Lev Dengov, the head of this contact group, is aligned with Chechnya's leader Ramzan Kadyrov and has experience in negotiating the release of Russian nationals detained in Libya.<sup>115</sup> To counter the GNA's frustrations over Russia's refusal to reopen its embassy in Libya and suspicions of Moscow's alignment with the LNA, Dengov repeatedly emphasized that the Russia-Haftar alliance was the product of Western and LNA propaganda.<sup>116</sup> The credibility of these contentions diminished as evidence of Wagner Group support for the LNA mounted, but Dengov's initiative ensured that GNA Prime Minister Fayez el-Serraj remained in regular contact with Russian officials. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov held discussions with GNA Prime Minister Ahmad Maiteeq on April 7, 2019, which suggested that Russia could be trying to act as a messenger between the LNA and GNA through indirect dialogue.<sup>117</sup> In addition to its efforts to facilitate GNA-LNA dialogue, Russia strengthened its relationship with Aguila Saleh, as it believed that he was a more reliable and moderate partner within the Tobruk-based government than Khalifa Haftar. Sergei Lavrov's praise for Saleh's peace plan on 28 April, 2020 exemplified this relationship's growing strength. It occurred just hours after Russian officials publicly condemned Haftar's decision to walk away from the Skhirat Agreement, which created the UN-backed GNA.<sup>118</sup> Since the GNA's dissolution and the diminution of Saleh's political influence, Russia has strengthened ties with GNU Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah, supported all-inclusive

111 Al-Marsad, 'Lavrov'.

112 Alekseev, 'Rossiya-Liviya'.

113 Reuters, 'Russia Calls'.

114 France 24, 'Russia Blocks'.

115 Mustafin, 'S kem Rossiya'.

116 Valdai Discussion Club, 'Working with All Parties'.

117 Alharathy, 'PC Member Maiteeq'.

118 Belenkaya, 'Spiker Liviyskoy Palaty Predstaviteley'.

future elections in Libya, and periodically engaged with Khalifa Haftar.

In addition to their coordinated support for LNA military operations, Russia actively engages with Egypt and the UAE on a diplomatic settlement in Libya. Consultations between Russia and Egypt occur through the 2+2 format and bilateral exchanges, while Russia-UAE dialogue is almost exclusively bilateral in nature. Although Egypt and the UAE's aversion to the GNA's purported alignment with Islamist movements in Libya rendered them natural partners of Haftar, Russia has always been more circumspect about the LNA chieftain's long-term leadership potential. As Haftar's position weakens, Russia has positioned itself as a restraining force in its interactions with Egypt and the UAE. In June 2020, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov endorsed the Cairo Declaration, which was signed by Khalifa Haftar, and proposed an immediate ceasefire in Libya.<sup>119</sup> However, Russian media outlets were sharply critical of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's subsequent plans to militarily intervene in eastern Libya, even though the House of Representatives (HoR) had expressed legal support for this initiative. An article in *Gazeta.ru* on 14 July 2020 warned of the risk of a global conflict if Sisi followed through on his proposed offensive.<sup>120</sup> With respect to Russia-UAE relations in Libya, defence expert Kirill Semenov has noted the contrast between Moscow's support for flexible diplomacy and Abu Dhabi's emphasis on its ideological opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>121</sup> These disagreements have periodically impeded cooperation, and the UAE Embassy in Moscow allegedly encouraged Haftar to walk out of the ceasefire negotiations brokered by Russia and Turkey on 12 January 2020.<sup>122</sup>

As the Libyan war drags on, Russia has sought opportunities to establish lines of communication with Turkey and European countries. Even though Russia-Turkey disagreements in Syria have often been resolved through direct dialogue between presidents Putin and Erdogan, Russia and Turkey

regularly participate in bilateral and 2+2 meetings on Libya. These meetings have helped breed institutional trust, which assists Russia-Turkey diplomacy on Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh. However, they have not resulted in a credible ceasefire proposal since January 2020. Even though Russian International Affairs Council Director General Andrei Kortunov contends that Russia supported the LNA's Tripoli offensive to bolster Haftar's diplomatic leverage,<sup>123</sup> Moscow's outreaches to European countries on Libya have produced few results. These interactions could benefit Russia's broader foreign policy goals, however, as France-Russia dialogue on Libya eased Moscow's tensions with the EU over the poisoning of Alexei Navalny, and Russia-Italy meetings allow Moscow to highlight its status as a Mediterranean power.

## Conclusion

Through the use of Wagner Group PMC deployments, shuttle diplomacy, oil sector investment negotiations and information warfare, Russia has ensconced itself as an indispensable stakeholder in the Libyan civil war. Russia's approach to power projection in Libya can be described as a synthesis of the tactics that undergird its military intervention in Syria and Yevgeny Prigozhin's numerous forays throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. Even though Russia's influence in Libya has increased from near isolation in late 2011 to renewed great-power status, considerable systemic risks loom on the horizon. Turkey's military intervention could continue to make advances, as Khalifa Haftar's ongoing mobilizations of LNA forces in eastern Libya look unlikely to change the conflict's strategic balance. The election of Joe Biden as US President was expected to result in a more assertive US diplomatic position in Libya, a detachment of US policy from the influence of Egypt and the UAE, and an intensification of sanctions on Russia. This scenario has not yet come to fruition and Russia has been able to ensconce its position in Libya with impunity. Despite these risks, Russia's nexus

119 Cura, 'Russia Lends Support'.

120 *Gazeta.ru*, 'Bratskaya vojna'.

121 Ramani, 'Putin'.

122 Rezeg, 'UAE Embassy'.

123 Meyer, 'Russia Makes Move'.

of local and international partnerships in Libya could prove difficult for US officials to displace, and NATO should remain wary about Moscow's potential establishment of a permanent naval or air base in eastern Libya. Whatever the long-term outcome, Russia's involvement in Libya has

increased its influence on the eastern Mediterranean to a degree not seen since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and will allow Moscow to further burnish its great-power status in Africa in the years to come.

## Author

**Dr Samuel Ramani** is an Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institution (RUSI).

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# The Syrian civil war: Russia as a hybrid threat actor

Josef Schroefl, Jarno Välimäki

## Introduction

Since 2011, Syria has been in the middle of a protracted civil war that has turned into a conflict with international dimensions. The conflict started in the wake of the Arab Spring after peaceful pro-democracy protesters took to the streets in Daraa, in the southwest of the country. President Bashar al-Assad's regime brutally suppressed the movement, which initially led to massive nationwide anti-government demonstrations and then to an armed uprising.

Russia has been one of the main foreign actors in this conflict, and had also primed the Syrian environment to make it suitable for influence and interference even before the conflict. Throughout the conflict, Russia has been using Syria as an opportunity to actively work towards obtaining its goals of gaining, preserving and proving its global superpower status and continued presence in the Mediterranean region. This chapter will examine these Russian actions in Syria in the context of its own as well as the West's involvement in the conflict.

This case study argues that, due to its coordinated actions in multiple domains supporting the non-democratic Assad regime and discrediting the West, Russia is a hybrid threat actor in the Syrian conflict. This chapter begins by explaining the background to the Syrian situation, how the conflict emerged, and how Russia had primed the environment for its hybrid threat actions. It will then discuss the first years of the conflict and how they shaped the Syrian landscape, as well as explain Russia's goals in Syria and how Moscow's initial political, diplomatic and information operations sought to achieve these goals. Turning to the transformation of the conflict into an international war, the chapter continues with an analysis of Russia escalating its actions towards more direct inter-

ference, followed by a military intervention and finally a re-engagement with the West, highlighting its actions in different domains. The chapter concludes by arguing that Russia has been relatively successful in its hybrid threat efforts, cementing its key role in Syria and making it impossible for Western or regional states to ignore it.

## Background

Syria gained independence from the French after the Second World War in 1946 and was involved in all of the Arab-Israeli conflicts as well as the Lebanese civil war. The Arab-Israeli dispute has shaped the development of Syria since independence. After the defeat in 1949 against Israel, Syria witnessed a series of coups d'état until 1967. In the meantime, Syria and Egypt founded the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958, from which Syria seceded in 1961. In 1963, the USSR-backed Baath party gained power in a coup. After Syria also lost the Six-Day War against Israel, in 1970 Hafiz al-Assad, the father of the current President Bashar al-Assad, came to power. During the so-called Yom Kippur War in 1973, the Syrian army recaptured a small part of the Golan Heights occupied by Israel, which consolidated Assad's position.

Historically, the coexistence between several religious groups in Syria was largely peaceful, because the state kept its structures secular. However, this started to change when the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood group began to play a major role in resisting the ruling Ba'ath Party in the 1960s. Assad was vehemently opposed to any kind of opposition movements and in 1980 he imposed the death penalty on members of the Muslim Brotherhood. However, the group remained active and started to present an increasing challenge to the regime. This resulted in the so-called Massacre of

Hama in 1982, when the state crushed a revolt by the Muslim Brotherhood in the city of Hama and killed up to 30,000 people. The Muslim Brotherhood duly ceased its activities within Syria.

President Hafiz al-Assad died in 2000 and his son Bashar became president. Bashar's initially more moderate and liberal policies coincided with the so-called Damascus Spring from June 2000 until autumn 2001, heralding a short spell of intensive political and social debate in Syria. However, the following year the government again started to suppress dissent. In fact, Syria can be characterized as a dictatorship and a one-party system, as the Ba'ath Party continues to dominate the country's entire political system.

This history of authoritarian rule and suppression of dissent has played its part in bringing the people onto the streets but also in forming Assad's brutal response. When the conflict also began to see increasing numbers of foreign fighters and mercenaries enter Syria, and especially when foreign states directly intervened, particularly from 2014 on, the war expanded into an international conflict involving several states with various objectives. The original motivation for the 2011 uprising, democratization, had largely given way to sectarian dynamics and power politics.

Both external state and non-state actors support different parties involved in the conflict directly and covertly. Among many others, Saudi Arabia and the US have supported the rebels, and the US is also leading a coalition to fight the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Iran, Russia and Hezbollah are the most prominent supporters of the Assad regime. Russian intervention on behalf of Assad in 2015 was a gamechanger in the conflict. The regime was able to turn the battle around and retook control of most of the country. However, Russian support for Assad was not altruistic. Russia has its own goals that it is aiming to further in Syria through what could be described as hybrid threat actions.

## Uprisings and civil war

### Protests against the regime erupt

Until the protests started in March 2011, the

Syrian political system was characterized by relatively strong stability. This was based on effective control and monitoring instruments by the executive branch or the secret services, and a strict approach towards any unwelcome challenges to the rule of the minority Alawi political elite.

Yet in March 2011, peaceful protests erupted against Bashar al-Assad and the ruling Ba'ath party in the city of Daraa. The immediate catalyst was the arrest of over a dozen children for painting anti-government graffiti. However, in the preceding months, people had already taken to the streets in Tunisia and Egypt, and it looked like a democratic wave was sweeping through the Arab world and old autocrats would be toppled in short order. Many in Syria believed it was their turn, and mass protests erupted in bigger cities such as Hama as well.

The protesters initially demanded more civil rights, freedoms and reforms. Economic hardship and the lack of opportunities for the majority of the population due to the oppressive political system and corruption had resulted in increasing grievances against the regime. The price of basic foodstuffs continued to increase while severe drought forced farmers to cities without any real prospects of decent work. Advanced high-quality education was available, but as a university degree did not guarantee a good job, the young population with rising expectations became increasingly dissatisfied. Only those with influential connections could be sure of securing good jobs.

The social contract on which the political system rests was broken, and the protesters laid the blame at the president's door. Among many chants, they kept shouting, "Hey Bashar, you were lying about reforms!". The regime opted for violence, and Assad ordered the military to crush the protests and to make mass arrests.

### Uprising turns into a civil war

By mid-April 2011, parallel violence and protests also broke out against the ruling minority sect of the Alawites, marking the onset of sectarian violence.<sup>1</sup> Some of the initially peaceful protesters also took up arms to protect themselves from the military and to drive out the security forces, and

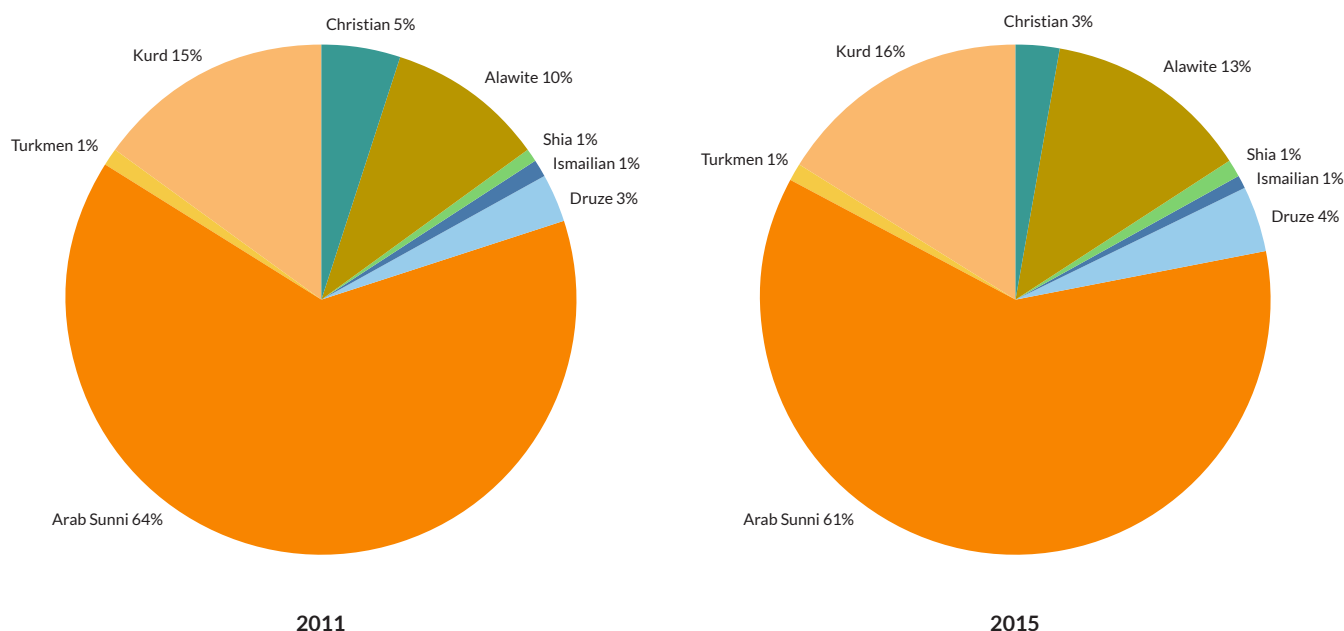
<sup>1</sup> Wimmen, 'Syria's Path'.

these protests quickly morphed into a full-fledged civil war, in which around half a million people have been killed.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 6 million people are still on the run within Syria, and about 5 million others fled abroad.

The protest movement in itself had been political and social rather than ethnic or religious, and most protesters only took up arms after the situation on the ground rapidly deteriorated. There are various different ethnic and religious groups in Syria (see Figure 1), with the largest being Arab Sunnis, Kurds and Alawites. Syrians had reported overall respect towards different religious views before the uprising, even though underlying divisions existed in society. The violence inflamed the sectarian differences and stirred a sectarian conflict. Much of this was intentional, as particularly

the Assad regime but also the opposition have sought the support of religious minorities to portray their opponents as sectarian actors.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the Assad regime has consistently painted the opposition as representatives or at least tools of Sunni radicalism to inflame sectarian tensions. As a result, moderate and secular forces have largely disappeared from the conflict. The war turned into a sectarian civil war, and Syrians have seen a stronger sectarian divide, which has now manifested as a political identity.<sup>4</sup> As seen in Figure 1, this has also led to a slight increase in the percentage of Alawites, Assad's sect, and a decline in the percentage of Arab Sunnis and Christians, although the change is more prevalent in the ethnic separation occurring within territories controlled by different factions.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1: Syrian population by sect in 2011 and 2015.<sup>6</sup>**



<sup>2</sup> There are various estimates of the death toll. In April 2016, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, estimated the number of those killed at more than 400,000, according to Al Jazeera: Al Jazeera, 'Syria death toll'. In December 2020, the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, estimated that the toll was over 593,000: Syria HR, 'Nearly 585,000 people'.

<sup>3</sup> Norwegian Church Aid, 'The Protection Needs'.

<sup>4</sup> Alloush, 'Understanding How'.

<sup>5</sup> Balanche, 'Ethnic Cleansing'.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

In July 2011, seven military officers defected and created the Free Syrian Army (FSA) armed rebel group, which was anticipated to represent a moderate, secular and unified Syrian opposition. However, the FSA failed to bring the rebels under centralized command. The various militias of the FSA frequently failed to coordinate among themselves and often had competing interests. The civil war soon saw the proliferation of dozens of armed groups trying to further their own interests, and many of the FSA fighters joined various Islamist armed groups.<sup>7</sup> The FSA was much weakened from its original idea of representing a nationwide resistance movement that would protect peaceful protesters and fight the Assad regime, but it nonetheless remained the cornerstone of the moderate opposition.<sup>8</sup>

Islamist extremists also took advantage of the chaotic situation. At the beginning of 2012, a group called Jabhat al-Nusra emerged as a self-declared al-Qaeda Syrian branch. The Nusra Front attracted plenty of domestic and foreign fighters to its ranks and proved more successful than many other armed opposition groups. Approximately twelve months later, in April 2013, a group formed from the remnants of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq, soon to be known as ISIS, and established control over considerable territory in Syria and Iraq.<sup>9</sup> The sectarian character and the complex nature of the conflict had by now been cemented.

### **Foreign interventions transform the war into an international conflict**

The fragmentation of the opposition, the emergence of sectarianism and Islamist extremist groups, and the overall escalation of the conflict also drew various external states and non-state actors. Both pro- and anti-regime forces became dependent on external actors, and the Syrian war became an international conflict.

By mid-2012, the Assad regime and its security forces were in a difficult situation. The government had steadily lost territorial control, and an increasing number of soldiers had deserted the army. By July 2012, the rebels were already closing in on the centre of Damascus, almost reaching the presidential palace. On one occasion, a bomber killed Assad's brother-in-law, as well as the defence minister, and a top general.<sup>10</sup>

As fighting intensified and the loss of personnel increased, the Assad regime pushed ahead with the establishment of pro-government paramilitary organizations, which were subsequently named the National Defence Forces (NDF). The NDF was organized from local militias that had originally protected regime-held areas in major cities, but under the NDF umbrella they were also deployed to the front lines.<sup>11</sup>

Instrumental in turning the tide, however, was the support of foreign forces. The Assad regime began to increasingly rely on Iran and Russia. Iran has invested billions in supporting the regime and the Revolutionary Guard Corps have trained Assad's military. Iranian paramilitary forces and foreign Shia militias such as the Lebanese Hezbollah – trained and supported by Iran – also increasingly joined the fighting on Assad's side.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the NDF was reported to receive Iranian funding and training.<sup>13</sup>

Opposition forces have also had their own foreign supporters. Initially, the United States covertly trained and armed rebels, while France and the United Kingdom have also provided logistical and military support. Some Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, have likewise provided significant support for rebel groups.<sup>14</sup>

The rise of Islamist extremist groups such as ISIS has also given foreign actors reasons and pretexts to intervene directly. The United States has led the Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS since September 2014 to fight against the extremist group, support

7 Laub, 'Syria's Civil War'.

8 Lister, 'The Free Syrian Army'.

9 Laub, 'Syria's Civil War'.

10 Karouny and Holmes, 'No sign of Assad'.

11 Kajjo, 'Who Are Syria's'.

12 Lund, 'Who Are the Pro-Assad'.

13 Reuters, 'Insight'.

14 For example: Gardner, 'Gulf Arabs'.

partners in Syria, and address humanitarian crises.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the US, a total of 38 partners across the globe participate in the coalition.<sup>16</sup>

This provided a pretext for Russia to directly enter the conflict as well. Russia had already supported Assad tacitly and diplomatically for years. However, it was not until September 2015 that Russia deployed its air force and claimed that air strikes would target ISIS and al-Qaeda. Yet Moscow frequently targeted other rebel groups, allowing Assad to strengthen control, particularly in the west of Syria.<sup>17</sup>

Russian influence and interventions have been decisive in shaping the war. By December 2016, the Assad regime had gained enough ground to restart offensive campaigns and to put so much

pressure on the rebels that they became increasingly fragmented. At the end of April 2019, government troops and the Russian Air Force were able to launch an offensive against the last rebel-dominated area around Idlib. In October that same year, after the surprising withdrawal of the United States from the Kurdish region near the Turkish border, Turkey launched an offensive in northern Syria. The Assad regime halted the Turkish advance, and the Russian and Turkish presidents agreed on a Turkish buffer zone and distribution of power in northern Syria. Russia has, thus, become a central player in the conflict. It has its own interests that it is aiming to advance in Syria, and its involvement in the conflict can be described as hybrid threat activity.

## Troop strengths of some of the parties involved in the Syrian conflict

### *Syrian armed forces*

An assessment by the International Institute for Strategic Studies in 2011 estimated that the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) had approximately 220,000 regular troops and 280,000 reservists.<sup>18</sup> Large numbers of defections and combat deaths have reportedly resulted in the SAA having lost half of its troops. Despite new conscription campaigns, some analysts concluded that the SAA had no more than 25,000 troops capable of offensive campaigns by late 2017.<sup>19</sup> By 2018, the regime only fully controlled an estimated 20,000–25,000 troops. The pro-government paramilitary organizations were estimated to have up to 150,000–200,000 fighters.<sup>20</sup>

### *Opposition groups*

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) armed rebel group included approximately 15,000 soldiers in late 2011,<sup>21</sup> but by 2013 the group had amassed up to 80,000 fighters.<sup>22</sup> The FSA, renamed the Syrian National Army (SNA) in 2019, has since decentralized and lost fighters to several other groups.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, in 2015, Kurdish and Arab militias founded an alliance called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). In October 2019, the SDF had approximately 40,000 troops before a Turkish offensive,<sup>24</sup> but since then it has been difficult to arrive at reliable estimates of its current strength.

### *Russian military*

Russian interference started with air strikes for the most part, and an unknown number of special forces, but according to some estimates, the number of Russian troops has reached 13,000 at the maximum. According to estimates, Russia has also used at least 1,500–2,000 private military contractors.<sup>25</sup>

15 US Department of State, 'About Us'.

16 See full list at <https://www.state.gov/the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis-partners/>. Unless otherwise indicated, all links were last accessed on 20 January 2022.

17 Laub, 'Syria's Civil War'.

18 IISS, 'The Military Balance'.

19 Waters, 'The Lion'.

20 Al-Ghadawi, 'Russia's failed efforts'.

21 Sherlock, "'15,000 strong' army'.

22 Lund, 'The Non-State Militant Landscape'.

23 Kasapoglu, 'The Syrian National Army'; Gall, 'Syrian Rebels See Chance'.

24 Francis and Perry, 'Syrian Kurds outgunned'.

25 Al-Ghadawi, 'Russia's failed efforts'.

### **Iran and Hezbollah**

Iran's involvement also began with low-profile operations such as financial aid and arms shipments. However, since mid-2014 Tehran has sent in thousands of fighters. According to the Israeli Defence Forces, the Iranian troop contribution has reached 2,500 fighters at most. Iranian proxy groups have contributed even more fighters, with an estimated 8,000 Hezbollah fighters alone.<sup>26</sup>

### **ISIS**

In late 2014, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimated that there were over 50,000 ISIS fighters in Syria.<sup>27</sup> ISIS has since lost its entire territory, but UN experts believe that some 10,000 fighters remain in Syria.<sup>28</sup> ISIS reportedly continues recruitment and aspires to regain territory.<sup>29</sup>

## **Russia as a hybrid threat actor in the Syrian conflict**

### **Russia's goals in Syria**

In order to understand Russia's goals in Syria, its involvement must be examined in a wider context. There are undoubtedly Syria-specific goals that Russia wishes to achieve. By supporting Bashar al-Assad's government, Russia can ensure it continues to be able to sell weapons to Syria and may gain other financial benefits such as winning reconstruction contracts.<sup>30</sup> Russia is also genuinely worried about the rise and expansion of Islamist terrorist groups in Syria and believes that the Assad regime is the best counterforce to them.<sup>31</sup> However, these reasons alone would not have been sufficient for Russia to intervene. For example, the size of Russian financial deals with Syria does not justify the cost of Russian involvement.<sup>32</sup> Russia also seems to have overstated the importance of fighting terrorists in Syria, or rather it has used this as a beneficial narrative, as its air strikes have more often targeted moderate rebels.<sup>33</sup> Thus, these goals should be seen as serving Russia's wider goals, or as additional less important goals.

Russia is first and foremost aiming to gain, preserve and prove its global superpower status, and

this is supported by multiple more specific aims. First, the overthrow of Assad would have eliminated another regional ally of Russia right after the NATO-supported toppling of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi. By intervening on behalf of Assad, Russia could ensure that similar scenarios would not play out in Syria, and simultaneously challenge the US role in the Middle East.<sup>34</sup> In particular, Russia saw a pattern of Western-backed regime changes that would, according to Russian thinking, destabilize the Middle East but also potentially aim to undermine or overthrow Russian allies, or eventually even the Russian government itself. Backing Assad would also defend Russia against Western policies and strengthen the sovereignty-based international order that Russia uses to preserve its own international influence.<sup>35</sup>

After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent Western sanctions against Russia, Syria also became a front where Moscow could pressure the West into negotiations with it as a key player.<sup>36</sup> Russia's role in Syria would increase its leverage with the West as it could, for example, use it as a bargaining chip in negotiations on other issues.<sup>37</sup>

At the same time, Russian involvement in Syria aims to reinvigorate its presence in the Mediter-

26 IDF, 'Iranian Forces'.

27 Al Jazeera, 'Islamic State'.

28 Thomson, 'IS brutality'.

29 Sen, 'IS Determined'; Seldin, 'Rebuilt Islamic State Growing'.

30 Trenin, 'Russia's Line in the Sand'; Vohra, 'Russia's Payback'.

31 Spalding et al., 'Russia's Deployment to Syria'.

32 Petkova, 'What has Russia gained'.

33 Bishara, 'Russian Intervention in Syria'.

34 Salter, 'Why Russia'.

35 Lund, 'From Cold War'.

36 Petkova, 'What has Russia gained'.

37 Charap, Treyger and Geist, 'Understanding Russia's Intervention'.



anean and preserve its naval base in Tartus.<sup>38</sup> The port of Tartus is Russia's only remaining base in the Middle East, and while at the beginning of the Syrian civil war it was small and had the primary purpose of repairing and resupplying Russian navy ships transiting the Mediterranean, its preservation has increased importance for Moscow's ability to portray itself as a military power abroad. In Russia's strategy, the Mediterranean is used to protect Russia's southern flank and to challenge US and NATO naval supremacy. Military force in the Mediterranean allows Russia to counter Western activities in the region, gain improved access to the world's oceans, and project power in the states of the region.<sup>39</sup>

Some of these more particular goals were reactions to the developments in Syria or elsewhere or to new possibilities, but in the end they have also served the main goal of improving Russia's position as a global superpower at the expense of the Western powers. The following sections will explain how Russia has used hybrid threat activities to advance this goal in Syria in the different phases of its involvement.

### **Russia priming Syria to aid global status-seeking**

Prior to the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, Syria was already one of the Middle Eastern states that Russia saw as important in achieving global status. During the Cold War years, Syria and the Soviet Union had developed an extensive military partnership, as evidenced by the establishment of the Tartus naval base, as well as a military base in Latakia province. Syria was also among the Soviet Union's most significant arms importers.<sup>40</sup> After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's influence in Syria and in the Middle East in general diminished greatly, with trade plummeting and weapon deliveries discontinued.<sup>41</sup>

However, Russia has continued to maintain positive relations with Syria. Particularly since Vladimir

Putin became president of Russia in 2000, Moscow has sought to rebuild its relations with its Middle Eastern allies, especially with Syria, Libya and Iraq. Russia has looked in particular for opportunities in the Middle East to weaken or counterbalance the US dominance in the region.<sup>42</sup> This can be described as the priming phase of Russian hybrid threat activities.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, cultural and economic exchanges as well as military and intelligence cooperation between Syria and Russia continued. Thousands of Syrian military personnel had reportedly trained in Russia or the Soviet Union before the civil war, and senior officials of Assad's Ba'ath party continued to travel to Russia regularly. Although only a small group of Syrians had personal ties to Russia, this group consisted largely of well-connected military, academic, and political elites. This undoubtedly offered Russia valuable information and points of contact when the civil war started.<sup>43</sup>

On the military side, as early as 1994, the two countries signed a new defence agreement that would create a framework for renewed arms exports.<sup>44</sup> Russia is also reported to have had at least two signals intelligence facilities in Syria prior to 2011, giving Russia much better knowledge when it came to preparing a potential intervention.<sup>45</sup> Retaining the Tartus naval base is perhaps the best example of how this can act as priming. In 2008, amid Russia's invasion of Georgia and NATO's plans to deploy missile defence systems in Poland, Russia talked about expanding the Tartus base as part of its tough stance against the West.<sup>46</sup>

Russia also revived political contacts and diplomatic efforts with regard to Syria in the 1990s. In 1999, Syrian President Hafez al-Assad visited Moscow for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia also attempted to establish a role for itself in the peace talks on the conflict in the Golan Heights. Russia's efforts were again

38 Celso, 'Superpower Hybrid Warfare'.

39 Gorenburg, 'Russia's Naval Strategy'.

40 Charap, Treyger and Geist, 'Understanding Russia's Intervention'.

41 Menkiszak, 'Responsibility to protect'.

42 Gorenburg, 'Why Russia Supports'.

43 Lund, 'From Cold War'.

44 Ibid.

45 Charap, Treyger and Geist, 'Understanding Russia's Intervention'.

46 Cordesman, 'Russia in Syria'.

at least partially aimed at achieving wider effects in the global arena. In the early 2000s, Russia renewed a more proactive foreign policy aimed against the West after the US invasion of Iraq, NATO's expansion eastwards, and several uprisings against Russia-friendly authoritarian leaders in states such as Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine. In this context, Bashar al-Assad met Putin in Moscow for the first time and Moscow agreed to write off USD 13.4 billion of Syria's debt. The following year, the two states rebuilt their military relationship as well, and Russia started to export air defence systems to Syria to serve as a deterrent against the US and Israel.<sup>47</sup>

Syria was clearly not a priority for Russia, but it remained a tool that could be used when the occasion arose. Particularly in the 2000s, Russia positioned itself in Syria so that it could better utilize it against the West in the wider competition. In that sense, Syria was one of the numerous parts of the wider Russian goals. However, the uprisings in the Middle East in 2011 in general, and in Syria in particular, and the NATO-led toppling of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya changed the situation.

### Initial political and diplomatic efforts

When NATO intervened in Libya in 2011, Russia had not vetoed the UN Security Council Resolution that had authorized the protection of civilians with all necessary measures. Moscow had not foreseen that NATO's bombings would lead to Gaddafi's overthrow and eventual death. In Russia's eyes, this signalled a Western cover-up to force a regime change. With this in mind, when the Syrian uprisings escalated, Russia wanted to prevent a similar scenario for another Russian ally. In the first instance, Putin verbally attacked the US on several occasions, blaming it for using military force unilaterally as a foreign policy instrument to force regime change.<sup>48</sup>

At the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Russia was primarily a political supporter of the Assad regime who ensured that the UN Security Council

could not condemn it, while Iran and Hezbollah were the main military supporters. Russia, together with China, vetoed three UN Security Council resolutions authorizing action against the Assad regime.<sup>49</sup> In May 2011, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Russia was opposed to the UN resolutions because interventions would destabilize Syria, having repercussions beyond its borders.<sup>50</sup> With these actions and statements, Russia tried to ensure that it would continue to have an ally in Syria, and that the West would not gain further supremacy in the region by being able to overthrow a regime and install a more favourable one, or support a democratic process that could result in a government less favourable to Russia.

However, the diplomatic efforts in the UN did not suffice, and Russia also started to employ political narratives as the situation in Syria worsened. In particular, Russia tried to portray both sides – the government and the rebels – as responsible for the situation and the West as hypocritical in supporting just one side. In November, Lavrov said that Russia would oppose plans to establish no-fly zones over Syria as those would be aimed at supporting one side only.<sup>51</sup> In December, Russia proposed that a UN Security Council resolution would explicitly condemn violence “by all parties”.<sup>52</sup>

These efforts were also aimed at establishing Russia as a key player in the plans and negotiations on the future of Syria, and at pressuring the West to partner with Russia rather than impose unilateral decisions. For example, Russia publicly supported UN special envoy Kofi Annan's peace plan launched in March 2012 and said that Assad's forces should take the first steps towards ensuring that a ceasefire would take place. As Russian Middle East Expert Georgy Mirsky said in an interview, “the Russian authorities [were] keen to be seen as allies of world public opinion, as partners of Kofi Annan.”<sup>53</sup>

When the possibility of a Western-led intervention increased, Russia toughened its stance in support of Assad, highlighting how Russia wanted

47 Lund, 'From Cold War'.

48 Menkiszak, 'Responsibility to protect'.

49 Charap, Treyger and Geist, 'Understanding Russia's Intervention'.

50 Meyer, Cook and Arkhipov, 'Russia Warns U.S.'.

51 AFP, 'Russia will not allow'.

52 AFP, 'Russia submits UN resolution'.

53 Charbonneau, 'Analysis: Success of Annan'.

to have an equal role as a global power in Syria, but also to ensure that its influence in the country would not diminish as a result of peace. While Russia clearly supported Assad's government, it appeared as if Moscow would be willing to see him go as long as his successor was amicable towards Russia as well. In May 2012, Russia admitted that Assad's government bore responsibility for the deaths of its citizens.<sup>54</sup> Yet when the talks on an intervention intensified, Russia again reverted to explicitly blaming the rebels. Alexei Pushkov, chair of the international affairs committee of the Russian parliament, said about the Houla massacre of May 2012: "The shelling was probably the responsibility of the troops of Mr Assad, but the stabbing and point-blank firing was definitely from the other side."<sup>55</sup> Putin also explicitly called for the US to avoid a unilateral intervention, and to work with international cooperation instead.<sup>56</sup>

At the same time, Russia continued to sell arms to Assad's forces, including ammunition, military training aircraft, air defence systems and anti-tank weapons.<sup>57</sup> For Russia, this was not only aimed at supporting Assad but also at showing that Russia was equal to the Western powers, a state that had the same right to sell weapons as the US or the UK, and others. Defence analyst Ruslan Pukhov, head of the arms trade think tank CAST said: "Russia doesn't see any problems selling weapons to Syria if the CIA and French and British secret services are shipping military hardware via Turkey to the rebels."<sup>58</sup> The delivery of air defence systems in particular was also aimed at deterring Western intervention. The head of Russia's arms control export company, Anatoly P. Isaykin, said that "whoever is planning an attack should think about this", signalling a warning to the West.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, Russia increased its weapon deliveries just as the US was beginning to increase its support for the rebels in mid-2013.<sup>60</sup>

Russia also seized diplomatic opportunities to improve its global standing when the military developments presented such opportunities. One of the most important such developments took place when Assad used chemical weapons in 2013. US President Barack Obama had earlier warned that the use of chemical weapons would be a "red line" and would have "enormous consequences". Yet US and Russian officials held several secret meetings, and Obama accepted Russia's proposal of a joint disarmament mission instead of a US attack in Syria. In September, Sergey Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry duly agreed to eliminate the regime's chemical arsenal. This can be seen as a major victory for Russia as it ensured that Western airstrikes and deepened involvement were avoided, the US did not act unilaterally, and Moscow played an equal role with Washington in these international negotiations.<sup>61</sup>

### **Military escalation and supporting (dis)information operations**

As discussed above, in 2015 Assad's forces were rapidly losing control of territory as various armed groups, including ISIS, were advancing. The government had already lost the provincial capital of Raqqa in 2014, and in March 2015 it lost another, Idlib. Large territories in several provinces such as Idlib, Aleppo, Raqqa, Deir Az Zor, Hassakeh, Deraa and Quneitra had also been lost.<sup>62</sup> At this point, Russia was undoubtedly becoming increasingly concerned about losing an ally in Syria. However, two other major factors played a part in Russia's decision to escalate into a full intervention. The rise of ISIS had resulted in the US and other Western states entering the stage, while the annexation of Crimea in 2014 had isolated Russia in the international arena and resulted in sanctions against Moscow. Intra-Syrian talks on political transition held in Geneva in 2014, with a significant role for Russia,

54 Associated Press, 'Russian FM: Syrian government'.

55 BBC, 'Houla'.

56 Putin, 'A Plea for Caution'.

57 Galpin, 'Russian arms shipments'.

58 Rosenberg, 'Why Russia sells'.

59 Kenner, 'What Russia Gave Syria'.

60 Lund, 'From Cold War'.

61 Ibid.

62 Petkova, 'What has Russia gained'.

had also just failed.<sup>63</sup> Western-Russian relations were at a new low. Hence, Syria ostensibly represented the best way to force the West to accept Russia as an equal at the same negotiating table.

The rise of ISIS was genuinely worrying for Russia but also provided a convenient pretext for an intervention. Moscow saw a link between the terrorist threat in Syria and in the wider Middle East, and the threat of domestic terrorism in Russia. In particular, Moscow feared the return of terrorists from Syria to Russia and the Islamist takeover of parts of Central Asia, which could lead to increased migration and terrorist attacks.<sup>64</sup> Yet, when in September 2015 Russia deployed its air force and claimed air strikes would target ISIS and al-Qaeda, they in fact frequently targeted other rebel groups, allowing Assad to reinforce his control, particularly in the western parts of the country.<sup>65</sup>

However, Moscow continued to use the counter-terrorism narrative as public justification for the intervention. Russian analysts argued that moderate opposition did not exist, and that the Western-backed rebels also had links to extremists. Moreover, they claimed that restoring Syrian statehood by supporting Assad was the only sustainable way to fight the terrorist threat, and for that reason it was logical to attack the non-ISIS opposition, those rebels that posed the greatest threat to Assad.<sup>66</sup>

At the same time, Russia began to target the White Helmets, a volunteer rescue group of non-partisan local humanitarian workers supported by Western funding, who also recorded the Assad regime's and Russia's atrocities. In order to discredit them, Russian disinformation sought to paint them as an al-Qaeda-linked terrorist organization funded from abroad.<sup>67</sup> This can be seen as a tool aimed at Syrian audiences to prevent the work of an organization that ran counter to Assad and Russia's goals, and to prevent negative views on Assad and Russia from gaining ground, but it also

had a broader context. The Russian disinformation campaigns also functioned as a part of the counter-terrorism narrative to portray all figures and groups opposing the Assad regime as terrorists, and thus to legitimize attacks against them.

Moreover, these campaigns seemingly attempted to discredit international humanitarian actors and certain norms of the international humanitarian law to boost the case for national sovereignty, and to exclude any legitimacy for humanitarian interventions. Undermining the independence of humanitarian actors allows international humanitarian aid to be increasingly channelled through the Syrian government, and consequently to enhance Assad's ability to force the population to submit.

### **Re-engaging the West and the regional states**

The military intervention, the accompanying counter-terrorism narrative and disinformation campaigns played an important part in re-engaging the West with Russia. As Aron Lund put it, the "intervention was a military operation, but it had a strong political component".<sup>68</sup> In the post-Crimea environment, Moscow hoped to prevent the US from isolating it by confronting it in a more favourable arena, such as Syria. Two weeks before the first series of air strikes, on 15 September, Putin had already called for a joint international effort to fight ISIS.<sup>69</sup> Thus, information operations were used to increase the legitimacy of the military intervention, while also decreasing international pressure against Russia in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea.<sup>70</sup>

Once the Russian airstrikes had begun, Russia increased pressure against the US. Russian narratives highlighted Moscow's alleged success in fighting ISIS and the comparable inefficiency of the US.<sup>71</sup> In October, Putin ridiculed the US intervention, saying that the Pentagon would have been better off funding Russian intervention as it would

63 Lund, 'From Cold War'.

64 Gorenburg, 'Why Russia Supports'.

65 Laub, 'Syria's Civil War'.

66 Charap, Treyger and Geist, 'Understanding Russia's Intervention'.

67 Solon, 'How Syria's White Helmets'.

68 Lund, 'From Cold War'.

69 Felgenhauer, 'Putin Tests His Future'.

70 Yenidünya and Atalayb, 'Comparative Analysis'.

71 Van Volkenburg, 'Russian Hybrid Warfare'.

have been more effective in fighting terrorism.<sup>72</sup> Russia also employed frequent legal arguments, saying that several Western interventions had been illegal as they had lacked UN Security Council approvals or host-state invitations. In contrast, the Russian intervention came after a formal invitation by the Syrian government, which the US intervention did not receive.<sup>73</sup>

Soon after, from November to December 2015 on, Russia also started to deploy ground troops in Syria.<sup>74</sup> Although Moscow publicly celebrated its troops and special forces during victorious events such as the recapture of Palmyra in March 2017, it has been widely established that Russia relied heavily on private military companies such as the infamous Wagner Group. This conveniently allowed Russia to only highlight victories and to avoid discussion of casualties by denying knowledge of Wagner casualties.<sup>75</sup>

The intervention, together with the political, diplomatic and information efforts, indeed forced some level of re-engagement by the West. Russia and the US negotiated agreements regarding military operations that aimed at avoiding accidental clashes, and the UN Security Council issued a resolution that aimed to restart peace talks and impose a ceasefire under joint US-Russian supervision. Nonetheless, US-Russian negotiations did not lead to any lasting solutions.<sup>76</sup> This can at least be partly blamed on Russia's disingenuous behaviour. Lavrov had indeed dedicated a significant amount of time to promoting peace initiatives, signing ceasefire agreements and promoting humanitarian missions in Syria, but Russia did not generally honour these commitments.<sup>77</sup> Hence, these political and diplomatic efforts were also designed to cover the continued support for Assad.

In fact, Russia proceeded to organize its own peace initiatives without the US and the UN in Astana in January 2017, aiming to secure a more

favourable outcome. The Astana talks brought together the Syrian opposition, the Assad regime, Russia, Iran and Turkey.<sup>78</sup> The participants had excellent room for manoeuvre, particularly as the new US administration was dysfunctional and the new US president, Donald Trump, wanted to reduce the US presence in Syria.<sup>79</sup> Thus, under this format, Russia established four de-escalation zones, which allowed the Assad regime to focus its efforts and seize control of the opposition-held areas one after another.<sup>80</sup>

Perhaps the greatest victory of the Russian military intervention was the regional turn towards Russia, highlighted by the inclusion of Turkey in the Astana process and thus in Russia's sphere of influence. As Russia demonstrated its capability to intervene abroad, many states in the Middle East started to believe that Russia would be a key player in the region and reached out to Moscow to advocate their concerns. Turkey, for example, had previously been an avid supporter of the opposition, and in November 2015 had shot down a Russian fighter jet. With Russia improving its position in Syria and pressuring Ankara with sanctions and hints about supporting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), even Turkey shifted towards Russia.<sup>81</sup> While Russia certainly hoped its regional influence would be enhanced, it is unlikely that even Moscow could have anticipated such remarkable results. On the contrary, some in Russia had even anticipated a regional backlash.<sup>82</sup>

Russia will likely retain its key influence in Syria for the foreseeable future. Besides the diplomatic, political and military influence that Russia will continue to exercise, economic and cultural ties appear to be growing stronger. Russia has provided Syria with commodities such as wheat and other agricultural products, as well as goods otherwise unavailable due to Western sanctions, most significantly military equipment, and printed currency for the

72 Adamczyk and Ware, 'Putin'.

73 Charap, Treyger and Geist, 'Understanding Russia's Intervention'.

74 Quinn, 'Russia's military action'.

75 Volkenburg, 'Russian Hybrid Warfare'.

76 Lund, 'From Cold War'.

77 Celso, 'Superpower Hybrid Warfare'.

78 Hamilton, Miller and Stein, 'Russia's Intervention in Syria'; Petkova, 'What has Russia gained'.

79 Lund, 'From Cold War'.

80 Petkova, 'What has Russia gained'.

81 Lund, 'From Cold War'.

82 Charap, Treyger and Geist, 'Understanding Russia's Intervention'.

Central Bank of Syria. Similarly, Moscow has promoted Russian culture in the country, for example with cultural events and celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the establishment of Syrian-Soviet diplomatic relations in March 2019.<sup>83</sup>

## Conclusion

The Syrian civil war, which erupted more than a decade ago after the Assad regime responded with brutal violence to peaceful protests, has evolved into a complex international conflict. Perhaps no other state has been able to benefit from the war as much as Russia. While Russia did not enter the conflict directly until 2015, it had used hybrid threat actions, including a combination of political and diplomatic support for Assad, using its leverage to block UN Security Council resolutions, increasing arms sales to support Assad, and employing verbal attacks and political narratives to discredit the West, ever since the beginning of the conflict to help achieve its regional and global goals.

Moscow has achieved its main goals to a great extent. Russia has become an indispensable player in Syria, and no political actor can ignore Moscow when negotiating solutions to the ongoing conflict or planning Syria's future. As Chris Miller put it, "If the war in Syria ever ends, it will only happen with Russian assent."<sup>84</sup> Assad's government has become totally dependent on Russian military protection, arms, training, economic assistance and diplomatic support.<sup>85</sup> By extension of its involvement in Syria, Russia has also become a major player in the region in general. Many Middle Eastern leaders consider that Russia has proved itself to be a reliable defender of its allies. With its intervention in Syria,

Russia has improved its relations with Turkey and Iran in particular.<sup>86</sup>

Russia's relations with the West remain difficult, but Russia has nonetheless managed to force the US to include it in negotiations regarding Syria. Importantly, Syria has not witnessed a Western-supported regime change, maintaining Russia's influence in the country and simultaneously highlighting to Moscow that it has been able to prevent further allies from falling due to the West. Overall, Russia can therefore be satisfied with its standing vis-à-vis the West when it comes to Syria, regardless of the continued sour relations.

Finally, Russia has been able to reinvigorate its presence in the Mediterranean and to preserve its naval base in Tartus. The base has been significantly expanded and there are plans for further expansions, which will give Russia increased capacity for sustained naval operations in the Mediterranean.<sup>87</sup> Together with Moscow's attempts to establish a permanent presence in Libya and agreements on the usage of Egyptian bases for Russian combat aircraft, Russia is gaining a permanent strengthened foothold in the Mediterranean that could counter US and NATO influence in the region. These developments also complement Russia's military buildup in Crimea and increase its capability to strike targets in the Black Sea.<sup>88</sup>

All in all, through the use of hybrid threat efforts, Russia has been able to cement its key role in Syria, and it will be impossible for Western or regional states to ignore it. Russia will likely try to extend these gains further in both the Mediterranean and the Black Sea regions. It is also feasible that Syria could be seen as a 'model' for further hybrid threat activity.

83 Lund, 'From Cold War'.

84 Miller, 'After Five Years'.

85 Lund, 'From Cold War'.

86 Ibid.

87 Miller, 'After Five Years'; DW, 'Russia to extend Tartus'; McDermott, 'Moscow Plans Enhanced Military'; Courtney, 'Russia Is Eyeing'.

88 Courtney, 'Russia Is Eyeing'.

## Authors

**Josef Schroefli** is the Deputy Director of COI Strategy and Defence at the Hybrid CoE.

**Jarno Välimäki** works at Hybrid CoE as an Analyst for the Research and Analysis function.

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# Sino-Algerian relations: The consolidation of a long-standing relationship

Yahia H. Zoubir

## Introduction

Algeria and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have enjoyed long-lasting political, diplomatic, economic, military, and trade relations. Both have had manifold interests in consolidating this relationship, which continues to evolve. Unlike many countries in the Middle East and Africa (MEA), Sino-Algerian relations were born a mere six months after the launch of Algeria's war of independence against colonial France on 1 November, 1954.

Since its independence in July 1962, Algeria has maintained an independent, nonaligned foreign policy. But because of the strong support it had obtained from Socialist countries, like China and Russia, throughout its war of independence in the 1950s, it has upheld those close links. However, the affinities it has with those states do not signify alignment, let alone an alliance, a concept that both Algeria<sup>1</sup> and China<sup>2</sup> have always dismissed.

This chapter argues that these Sino-Algerian relations have been consolidating continuously, and that this will continue for the foreseeable future. The relationship is most pronounced in the economic domain, where China and Algeria share, for example, significant trade relations. However, the two countries have also engaged in some political and diplomatic cooperation, and have increased military, scientific and cultural relations.

The chapter first describes the history of Sino-Algerian relations, as their warm historical relations have laid the foundations for the current ties between the two countries. It will then explain the reasons for cooperation from the perspective of both sides, and what they aim to achieve, before turning to detailing the forms that this cooperation

takes. The chapter pays particular attention to their economic cooperation, including China's role in building infrastructure in Algeria and the two states' trade relations, with particular emphasis on the role of the automobile industry. Finally, the chapter highlights the growing military cooperation between Algeria and China, especially when it comes to arms trade, as well as the increasing cultural and scientific cooperation, including language teaching and space science cooperation.

## The building of Sino-Algerian relations: The road to pragmatism

Two historical events laid the foundations for Sino-Algerian ties: The Afro-Asian Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia in April 1955, and China's recognition of the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA), three days after its proclamation in September 1958. China and the GPRA established diplomatic relations in December 1958. China was the first non-Arab state to recognize the GPRA. This recognition was significant insofar as the references in Algeria's contemporary foreign policy draw heavily on the country's brutal war of independence (1954–1962). This explains why Algeria's most solid foreign relations are with those states that supported its struggle. And since China is one of those states, relations are seldom hostile; quite the contrary.

The 1950s were an important landmark in China's foreign policy towards the Global South, and towards Algeria in particular. This was the decade during which China outlined its Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which it has reiterated ever since: mutual respect for sovereignty and

1 Zoubir, 'The Resurgence', 169–183.

2 On China's rejection of alliances, see Ruonan and Feng, 'Contending Ideas', 151–171; Sun and Zhang, *Diplomacy of Quasi-Alliances*.

territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.<sup>3</sup> Military, political and financial support for the Algerian nationalists served as an ideological lever for China to demonstrate its revolutionary credentials, especially during the mounting rivalry with the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup>

The political and military support that China had extended to the Algerian nationalist movement continued after the country's independence.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Algeria adopted, deliberately or not, foreign policy principles that coincided with China's. The principles are apparent in Algeria's foreign policy even today. The two countries shared a similar socialist, anticolonialist ideology which Algerian diplomats made plain at the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and the League of Arab States. Algerian and Chinese officials liaised and exchanged views on international issues, particularly on liberation movements. The multifaceted rapport that the two countries maintained resulted in the signing of twenty agreements in the period from 1963 to 1975. Cooperation extended to many sectors, such as economics, health, culture, communication, and scientific and military assistance, among other fields.<sup>6</sup>

Both countries underwent changes in the early 1980s. China launched its 'opening up' policy, whereby it put aside its revolutionary, uncompromising policies, pursuing a pragmatic foreign policy. Cognizant of its underdevelopment, China duly concentrated on modernizing the country, which necessitated trade relations, the acquisition of modern technologies (from the West) and quasi-capitalist internal development. Of course, this transformation impacted its relations with developing countries, including Algeria. In order to modernize, it was vital to find new suppliers of energy and raw materials. China required massive amounts of hydrocarbons, which it needed from

suppliers regardless of their ideological and political leanings. After the death of President Houari Boumedienne in December 1978, Algeria, for its part, took a 'liberal' economic turn away from the socialist policies of the past. It was precisely during this period that Sino-Algerian relations started to take off in economic terms, albeit very slowly. In 1982, the two governments established a joint commission to facilitate economic, commercial and technological cooperation. Unsurprisingly, it was in that same year that the China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC) established its CSCEC-Algeria branch,<sup>7</sup> which later in the 2000s took part in major works in the country. Although it did engage in several projects in the 1980s–90s, its operations were limited because of the civil strife that ravaged Algeria in the 1990s. In addition to the internal turmoil, Algeria faced a dire economic situation, made worse by the stringent International Monetary Fund structural adjustment programme. This resulted in the stagnation of Sino-Algerian relations.

In light of their long-standing relations and friendship, when the Algerian government faced an armed Islamist insurgency in the 1990s, the two governments signed an accord to convene frequent political consultations, whereas Western countries pursued an implicit diplomatic embargo on Algeria. Thus, faced with perceived Western interference (human rights issues, political pressure, tacit arms embargo),<sup>8</sup> the Algerian government relied on China's unwavering support during a decade of domestic crisis which almost destroyed the state. China's discreet political backing provided real relief, and Algeria went on to purchase weapons worth \$100 million from China during the 1990s.<sup>9</sup>

It was during the early 2000s that Sino-Algerian relations really took off, however, particularly at the economic level. Looking at the trade relations between the two countries today, it is hard to imagine that the trade volume totalled only US\$170 million in 1982, rising to US\$198 million in

3 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'The Five Principles'.

4 Friedman, *Shadow Cold War*.

5 Shinn and Eisenman, *China and Africa*.

6 Behbehani, *China's Foreign Policy*, 351–352.

7 CSCEC Algeria, 'About Us'.

8 Darbouche and Zoubir, 'The Algerian Crisis', 33–55.

9 Grimmett, *Conventional Arms Transfers*, 38, cited in Calabrese, 'Sino-Algerian relations'.

2000, and to US\$292 million in 2001.<sup>10</sup> Since then, the trade volume has grown exponentially, amounting to \$9 billion in some years. For their part, Chinese firms obtained lucrative contracts to realize infrastructure and construction works. Since then, the two countries have developed sustained cooperation and partnership at all levels. I

### Drivers of Algerian relations with China

The drivers of Algeria's relations with China derive from Algeria's desire to maintain a nonaligned foreign policy,<sup>11</sup> which rests on the diversification of its relations with the outside world and has continued hitherto. Policymakers in Algeria, as in many countries in the Global South, have come to the realization that China is the second economic powerhouse in the world. From their perspective, China, a developing country, has achieved that rank in a very short space of time and has made its name in the area of infrastructure and construction, which it can achieve at reasonable cost. Politically, Beijing has abided by its policy commitment of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries. Not only does China claim to adhere to that principle, but it also dissuades Western powers from interfering. For instance, when the European Parliament passed a resolution on 28 November 2019 on the situation concerning liberties in Algeria,<sup>12</sup> Beijing issued a statement through its ambassador in Algiers, saying, 'We will oppose the interference of any foreign power in the internal affairs of Algeria. China will always remain on Algeria's side', contending that it would also oppose 'any intervention by foreign forces in Algeria's internal affairs'.<sup>13</sup> This opposition to foreign interference derives from Beijing's concern over the stability of Algeria, where it has considerable interests, but also aims to avoid a scenario similar to that which occurred in neighbouring Libya, where a civil war and a NATO-led intervention resulted in societal

fragmentation and a prolonged conflict of international dimensions, which also resulted in the loss of billions of dollars for China and the repatriation of 38,000 of its citizens working in Libya.

More importantly, developing countries like Algeria are attracted by China's developer role. As Duggan put it, 'China has presented itself as an equal partner to Africa and as a defender of the interests of developing countries, which aligns with the principle of South-South Cooperation'.<sup>14</sup> What distinguishes China and Chinese companies from Western governments and corporations is the sentiment that the cooperation between China and Africa is based on mutual respect. The prevailing perception is that China, unlike Western countries, 'does not have a history of colonial aspirations in Africa...' and is 'a partner which could provide much-needed funding without any strings attached. They also believe Beijing understands and respects Africa's priorities'.<sup>15</sup> This is particularly true for Algerians, who fought a brutal anticolonial war. From a business and development perspective, Africans and Algerians in particular appreciate China's unconditional soft loans, which help them avoid IMF and World Bank conditionality associated with political and economic reforms, and access to capital that China provides as well as the speedy delivery of services and affordable goods. Although they are still attracted by the Western model, Africans/Algerians consider the Chinese type of development as an alternative development model.<sup>16</sup> In sum, China does not make human rights and corruption-free procedures a condition for investment. Furthermore, as a McKinsey study has shown, 'China's entrepreneurial class, fresh from a three-decade run of building China in a similarly fast-paced and uncertain market environment with evolving institutions, has the risk tolerance, practical experience, and skill set to undertake such investments'.<sup>17</sup>

10 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'China-Algeria Relations'.

11 Assassi, *Non-Alignment*.

12 EU Neighbors South, 'European Parliament plenary debate'.

13 Nadir, 'L'ambassadeur de Chine'.

14 Duggan, 'China's changing role', in Harnisch, Bersick and Gottenwald (eds.), *China's International Roles*, 207–225.

15 Maru, 'Why Africa loves China'.

16 Soule and Selormey, 'What Africans really think'.

17 Sun, Jayaram and Kassiri, 'Dance of the lions'.

## China's geostrategic interests in Algeria

As a global power, the drivers of China's relations with Algeria are evidently more varied as they obey different imperatives. Due to the opacity of Beijing's decision-making process, the actual objectives of its foreign policy are not always easy to decipher. However, some drivers can be identified with a degree of accuracy.

For China, Algeria represents a partner, strategically located, with which it has had historical ties (anticolonial experience), one it can trust politically, and with which it shares a broadly similar mindset (e.g., discretion, opacity). The two countries believe in and practice some reciprocity. Both pursue independent foreign policies; their views on key international issues (such as opposition to hegemonism, peaceful resolution of conflicts, or the fight against extremism) overlap. In other words, there exists a great deal of trust between them. Although these considerations should not be underestimated, geopolitical and commercial factors underpin the long-standing relationship. For Beijing, Algeria, the largest country in Africa, a critical continent for China, is a dependable partner which sits in a geostrategic location in the Mediterranean. From Beijing's perspective, the presence of many Chinese companies in Algeria will facilitate the export of goods to Europe at a lower transportation cost and in a very short time. This is why the construction of the mega-port in Cherchell will be significant for China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR), while the implementation of various Sino-Algerian projects within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership will represent tangible results and serve as a model for South-South cooperation. This will also enable Chinese companies to benefit from solid support from Beijing in their projects in the Maghreb region in general.

Algeria is not only close to Europe – a vital region for Beijing – but is also astride the Sahel, where China has growing security and development interests,<sup>18</sup> and Sub-Saharan Africa, where it has strong, multifaceted interests.

Undoubtedly, this geostrategic position constitutes a major centre for the BRI and the MSR. Algeria's geostrategic position is doubly significant for China precisely because of the strong historical and political ties. Furthermore, Beijing values Algeria's political weight in the Mediterranean and in the African Union – the successor to the OAU. Chinese policymakers are cognizant of Algeria's role in swaying African states to support China after the Tiananmen Square events of April 1989. Indeed, as it did in 1970–71 to support China in obtaining its seat on the United Nations Security Council, this time Algeria mobilized African countries within the OAU to discard the use of sanctions, which were obstructing economic relations between China and Africa. In fact, it was this orientation which eventually resulted in the creation of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000, from which China-Africa relations took on a strategic dimension for both sides.

Obviously, commercial interests are an important driver of China's ties with Algeria. Algeria's billions of dollars in government contracts granted to Chinese public and private companies in the infrastructure and construction sectors represented a golden opportunity for Chinese companies' visibility in the Mediterranean and African regions. These commercial contracts will inevitably extend to other sectors (mining, solar energy, IT infrastructure, etc.) but their purpose extends beyond economic objectives. Indeed, China's objective behind deepening economic relations with Middle Eastern and African states underpins some diplomatic drives, like expanding its supporters on the issue of Taiwan and Tibet;<sup>19</sup> its investments in the region also aim to elicit their support in international organizations. Last, but not least, China is aware of the security role that Algeria plays in the Sahel,<sup>20</sup> where China has important economic (mining, ports, presence of Chinese companies) and security interests (security of assets, protection of Chinese citizens against terrorists).

In sum, having Algeria as a reliable strategic partner on the continent and in the Mediterranean is a significant asset for Beijing, which sees Africa

<sup>18</sup> Rousselot, 'How popular is China'.

<sup>19</sup> Sun, 'Africa in China's Foreign Policy', 5.

<sup>20</sup> See Zoubir, 'Algeria and the Sahelian Quandary', 70–95.



as an indispensable hub for its own modernization. Therefore, unsurprisingly, in 2006 China and Algeria signed the Declaration on Strategic Partnership and Cooperation, which was elevated eight years later, in 2014, to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP),<sup>21</sup> Beijing's first ever with a Middle Eastern and North African state, and the uppermost partnership category that it enters into with select states to express their importance as partners in its international relations.<sup>22</sup> This CSP coincided with the 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of Sino-Algerian diplomatic relations and the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conclusion of Strategic Cooperation relations between the two nations.<sup>23</sup>

Soon afterwards, in April 2015, China and Algeria signed fifteen draft agreements, two agreements and a memorandum of understanding on industry, mining, agriculture and tourism.<sup>24</sup> These cooperation agreements coincided with the intensification of political relations, including frequent high-level official visits, the establishment of air links between Beijing and Algiers, the granting of visas to tens of thousands Chinese workers in the construction sector, and the movement of Algerian business people to Yiwu (Zhejiang Province) in search of low-priced Chinese consumer goods.<sup>25</sup> In many ways, the new cooperation since the early 2000s has built upon and expanded the agreements contained in the 1982 Joint Committee for Economic, Commercial and Technical Cooperation, which included numerous fields.<sup>26</sup>

### China's role in revamping Algeria's infrastructure

China's conspicuous economic presence in Algeria took on extraordinary dimensions in the early 2000s, and has expanded exponentially since then. Having benefitted from the rise in oil prices, the Algerian government called on China to overhaul the country's downgraded infrastructure. Choos-

ing China did not stem from political reasons only, but also from important economic considerations. The Algerian government believed that Chinese knowhow was considerable and, more importantly, offered at a competitive price. For the Chinese, Algeria represented a substantial market for their companies. Soon, those companies secured billions of dollars' worth of contracts, mostly in the building of roads, highways, railways, and hydrocarbon facilities, but also in housing construction. Housing construction was particularly important for President Abdelaziz Bouteflika (1999–2019), who had promised in his 1999 presidential campaign that he would provide affordable housing for the population. The housing crisis in Algeria has been a permanent problem, complicated by the fast population growth (Algeria's population tripled from less than 12 million in 1962 to more than 31 million in 2000, and reached nearly 44 million in 2020).<sup>27</sup> The housing crisis had reached dire proportions, resulting in social unrest. Thus, the government called on Chinese (and some Turkish) construction companies to do the job. China was able to deliver housing rapidly and at low cost, even if the quality was often questionable. By 2016, 2.8 million housing units had been supplied, including nearly one million between 2014 and 2016.<sup>28</sup> A recent study, citing China's Bureau of Statistics, revealed that in 2015, excluding merchants, 90,000 Chinese were employed in the 300 Chinese subsidiaries operating in the construction sector in Algeria.<sup>29</sup> With oil rent at an all-time high, Algeria could well afford such investment in civilian infrastructure; besides, this was an opportunity for the president to gain legitimacy since his appointment had been called into question – six candidates had withdrawn on the eve of what they considered to be a rigged election.<sup>30</sup>

Housing is not the only sector in which China has been involved. The Algerian government signed other contracts worth several billion dollars. The

21 National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, 'Spotlight'.

22 Sun, 'China's Partnership Diplomacy'.

23 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Wang Yi'.

24 Ministry of Industry, National Agency of Investment Development of Algeria, 'Algeria, China'.

25 Belguidoum, 'Transnational Trade', in Zoubir (ed.), *The Politics of Algeria*, 226–236.

26 Xinhuanet, 'Al-Jazaair wa al-Siin'.

27 Populationof.net, 'Algeria population'.

28 Beratto, 'En Algérie'.

29 Rouibah, 'Comment appréhender la problématique'.

30 Zoubir, 'Les Relations', 97–98.

most noticeable was the \$7 billion deal for the construction of nearly half of the 1,200-kilometre-long highway which connects Algeria to its western border with Morocco and the eastern border with Tunisia – hence its name, the Trans-Maghreb Highway. The deal went to a joint venture between China's state-owned CITIC Group and China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC), previously part of Chinese state railways.<sup>31</sup> The work was completed in 2016, at a total cost of \$12 billion, \$5 billion over its original estimate.<sup>32</sup> While the construction of the highway was a major accomplishment, it has experienced various problems. The sub-standard quality of some segments are not to blame on China but on the local, corrupt contractors linked to the Bouteflika regime. Many officials and businesses involved in the construction of the highway and other works have been tried and imprisoned.

In terms of highway construction, China has also been involved in the 3,000-kilometre North-South Trans-Saharan Highway linking Algeria to Nigeria, the most difficult section of which was built by the CSCEC.<sup>33</sup> This was an African dream from the early 1960s onwards. Work started on sections of the highway in the early 1970s, mainly in Algeria. The undertaking is a continental-scale infrastructure which crosses six countries, namely Algeria, Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Tunisia. In recent years, China has taken the lead in the completion of the endeavour through the CSCEC and the Export-Import Bank of China. The project is a major contribution to an intercontinental interconnection road network between West Africa, Central Africa, and North Africa. It has a total stretch of 4,800 km on the route linking Algiers to Lagos in Nigeria.<sup>34</sup> By the end of 2019, the largest parts of the highway project built jointly by the six African states had been asphalted, constituting 80% of the whole project.<sup>35</sup> At the time of writing, the project is prac-

tically completed.<sup>36</sup> Given the instability prevailing in the Sahara-Sahel region, Sino-Algerian security cooperation will undoubtedly be strengthened, especially since the project serves the BRI.

Chinese companies have also been involved in extending the railway network and telecommunications in Algeria. The Chinese obtained a \$3.5 billion contract for the development of a railway, won by CCECC.<sup>37</sup> In 2012, the China Railway Construction Corporation Limited, associated with the National Agency for the Study and Monitoring of Railway Investments (ANESRIF), had begun work in western Algeria on one of the longest tunnels (more than seven kilometres) in North Africa, and the longest of its type in Africa.<sup>38</sup> The tunnel-drilling work was completed in October 2017, with the project creating 4,100 jobs for the local population.<sup>39</sup>

Another major project is the Port of El Hamdania near Cherchell, 80 kilometres west of Algiers. The agreement to build this megaport was signed on 17 January, 2016. The construction was to be carried out by a company under Algerian law composed of the Algerian Public Port Services Group and two Chinese companies, CSCEC and the China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC). The initial cost was estimated to be between US\$ 3.3–3.6 billion; long-term Chinese credit, guaranteed by the Algerian state, would provide the necessary financing for the port infrastructure. Once completed, this megaport will presumably be among the 30 biggest harbours in the world. The cost is now estimated at \$6 billion due to its additional functions. Originally, the mammoth project was expected to be realized by 2024,<sup>40</sup> with the involvement of Shanghai Ports, which will ensure its management.<sup>41</sup> The project consists of 23 docks with the capacity to handle 6.5 million containers and 25.7 million tons of freight per year. The Algerian authorities anticipate that

31 Byrne, 'Algeria turns to Chinese knowhow'.

32 Algerian academics have conducted a major critical study on this highway: Bouhedja and Kecheb, 'Case study', 4830–4835.

33 Xinhuanet, 'Algerian PM lauds efficiency'.

34 Xinhuanet, 'Chinese firm supports construction'.

35 Makichuk, 'China builds'.

36 Construction Review Online, 'Trans-Saharan road construction to be completed'.

37 Souiha, 'La société algérienne', 15–52.

38 Khettab, 'L'Algérie construit'.

39 People's Daily, 'La Chine construit'.

40 PortSEurope, 'Algerian new port'.

41 EcoFin Agency, 'China lends \$3.3bn'; Kiganda, 'Algeria approves US \$3.3 billion'.

the annual cargo traffic will reach 35 million tons by 2050.<sup>42</sup> Coupled with this project is the establishment of industrial activities, with the authorities aiming to make the port a development hub connecting Algeria with Southeast Asia, the United States, and the rest of Africa. For its part, China's state-owned shipping line, COSCO Shipping, declared its intention of making El Hamdania its hub in the western Mediterranean Sea.<sup>43</sup> Undoubtedly, the new hub could rival northern Mediterranean ports, such as those in Spain (e.g., Valencia and Barcelona).<sup>44</sup> Despite this optimism, Algerian experts have voiced some apprehension about the geographical setting because El Hamdania has a limited capacity to house the megaport. The Chinese partners seem to agree with their Algerian counterparts on this point.<sup>45</sup> Notwithstanding these reservations, the construction, which was due to begin in mid-2021, will likely start in 2022 and will last for at least seven years. For Algerians, the mega-project is a strategic structure that aims to penetrate the African market (goods arriving at the port will then be shipped through the Trans-Saharan network). It will be financed with a loan from Algeria's National Investment Fund (NIF) and a long-term loan from the Exim Bank of China. According to the minister of transportation, the megaport is 'intended for international trade, while being an axis of exchange at the regional level.'<sup>46</sup> Algerian officials are convinced that the port will also benefit Africa as it will allow for the transportation of goods and merchandise to African countries (Sahel-Saharan countries, central Africa, etc.) through the trans-Saharan road in 15 instead of 45 days. In view of Algeria's long coast and geopolitical location, China has grasped this opportunity to undertake such a major enterprise in Algeria, especially since this geopolitical dimension coincides with its port construction policy to support the Maritime Silk Road.<sup>47</sup>

Chinese companies, such as Huawei and ZTE (Zhongxing Telecom Equipment), invested directly in Algeria, while ZTE signed an agreement with Algérie Télécom to modernize the telecommunications sector in the country.<sup>48</sup> Partnering with Algeria's National School for Post and Telecommunications (ENPT), in January 2007 ZTE opened a training centre in Oran in western Algeria. Huawei has also opened training departments and provided grants for training at Huawei hubs in China.<sup>49</sup> Huawei employs more than 400 people in Algeria, 83% of whom are locals. The company is involved with the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and with the Ministry of Post, Telecommunications, and Digital Technologies. The arrangement aims at the creation of Academies of Excellence in the country.<sup>50</sup> In January 2019, Huawei started operating an assembly plant in Algeria, the first in Africa and a joint venture with Algerian firm AFGO-TECH. The initial production capacity was set for 15,000 devices monthly, but more could be produced depending on market demand. As Algeria had banned the import of mobile phones, among 900 other products to reduce the country's trade imbalance, this came as a godsend for Huawei. Huawei had entered the Algerian market in 2005, and the opening of the plant in 2019 provided it with a hub for its conquest of the North African mobile market. The factory employs 100 workers, 18 of whom are engineers who had been trained in the industrial city of Shenzhen in south-eastern China.<sup>51</sup>

Another area of cooperation is in the pharmaceutical industry. On 29 September 2021, a plant for the production of the Chinese Covid-19 Sinovac vaccine (CoronaVac) was inaugurated in Constantine in eastern Algeria. The factory will produce vaccines for the local market, and will eventually ship them to sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>52</sup>

42 PortSEurope, 'Algerian new port'.

43 Ibid.

44 Aguinaldo, 'Exclusive'.

45 Idir, 'Grand port du centre'.

46 Cited in Amrouni, 'Le mégaport d'El Hamdania'.

47 Sun and Zoubir, 'Development First', 35–47.

48 Lamara, 'Algérie Telecom'.

49 Ahres, '10 étudiants algériens'.

50 Mechti, 'Alexandre Tian'.

51 Agence Eco-Fin, 'L'Algérie abrite'.

52 TSA, 'Le vaccin Sinovac'.

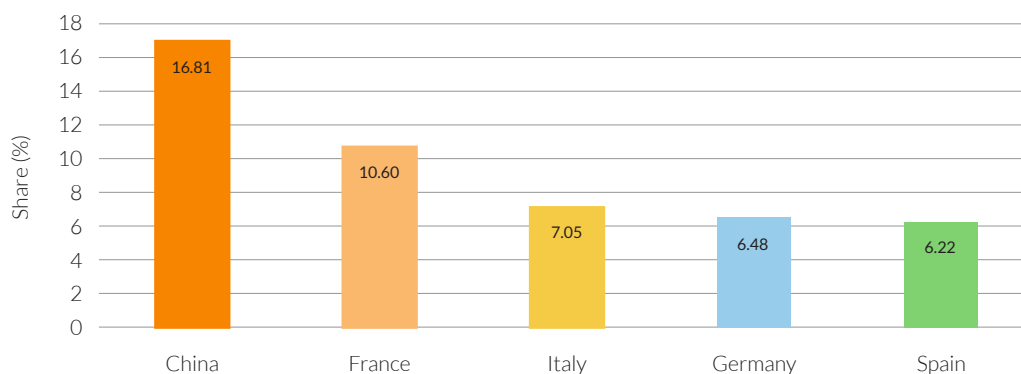
## Trade relations between China and Algeria

Another area which has witnessed exponential growth is trade. By 2013, China had become Algeria's largest trading partner (as supplier) outside of hydrocarbons, supplanting France, the traditional partner hitherto.<sup>53</sup> China has remained Algeria's chief supplier ever since. Although Algeria's imports diminished by more than \$1.5 billion compared to 2018, China was still the main supplier in 2019, contributing a total of 18.25% of Algeria's imports (\$7.7 billion), followed by France, Italy, Spain, and Germany. In 2020, imports from China fell by 24.46% because of the import deferment procedures that the Algerian government had imposed (to limit dependence on imports); however, those importations still amounted to 16.81% of Algeria's total imports.<sup>54</sup>

In 2020, Italy was Algeria's main customer, with a share of 14.47% (\$3.44 billion), followed by France, Spain, Turkey, and China with respective shares of 13.69%, 9.84%, and 4.89%.<sup>56</sup> The Chinese renminbi is an accepted mode of payment in exchanges between Algeria and China,<sup>57</sup> to which Algeria contributes 4.89% of its exports.

Algeria's import of cheap products from China is minimal; it is the informal sector that imports inexpensive products to sell in popular markets. A review of the list of goods that Algeria imports from China reveals that most of China's exports to Algeria are made up of machinery, a segment that used to be dominated by European countries, such as France, Italy, and Germany, among others.

**Figure 1. Percentage share of Algeria's top five suppliers (2020)<sup>55</sup>**



<sup>53</sup> Sun and Zoubir, 'China's Economic Diplomacy', 903–921.

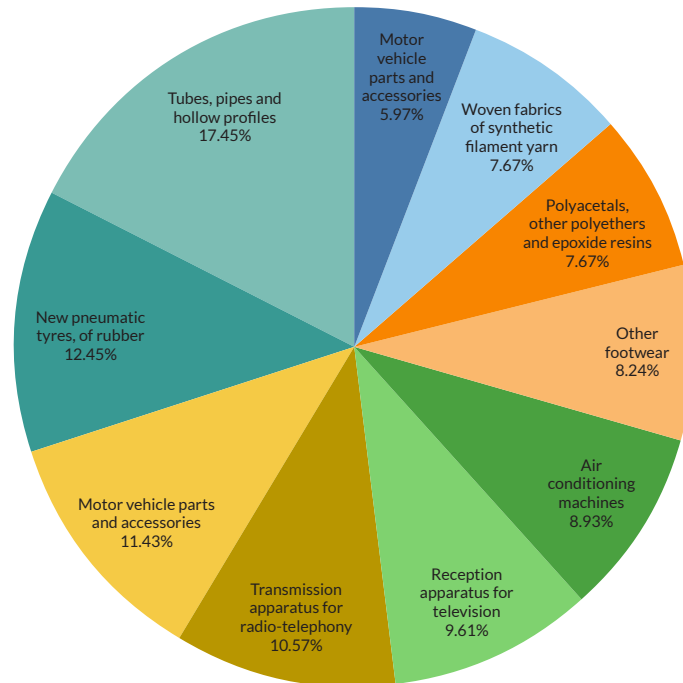
<sup>54</sup> Ministère des Finances, 'Statistiques du Commerce Extérieur de l'Algérie'.

<sup>55</sup> Ministère des Finances, 'Statistiques du Commerce Extérieur'.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Chikhi, 'Hit by oil'.

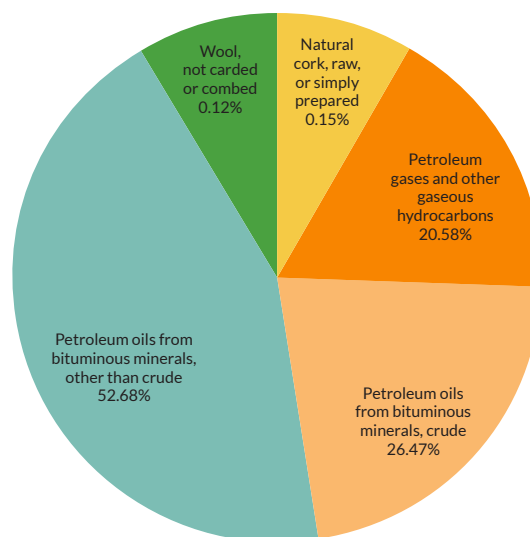
Figure 2. Top exports from China to Algeria in 2019<sup>58</sup>



Algeria has significant oil and gas reserves, ranking 16<sup>th</sup> in proven oil reserves and positioned among the top three oil producers in Africa. Its oil reserves amounted to 12.2 billion barrels in 2019. Furthermore, the country holds the third largest amount

of technically recoverable shale gas resources in the world.<sup>59</sup> Yet Algeria is not an important supplier of hydrocarbons to China. As Figure 3 shows, Algeria's exports to China are mostly hydrocarbon derivatives.

Figure 3. Top imports to China from Algeria in 2019<sup>60</sup>



58 TrendEconomy, 'What did China export to Algeria in 2019?'

59 United States Department of Commerce, 'Algeria – Oil and Gas'.

60 TrendEconomy, 'What did China import from Algeria in 2019?'

Given these reserves, China might eventually regard Algeria as another alternative source of hydrocarbons. Chinese oil companies, such as China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), China Petroleum, Chemical Corporation and China Petroleum Engineering and Construction Corporation, have all invested in oil and gas exploration in Algeria.<sup>61</sup> Chinese companies have secured numerous contracts in the hydrocarbon sector, building wellheads, for instance. In 2019, China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC) signed a US\$445 million deal with the Algerian national oil company for the building of a liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal in Skikda, 473 kilometres east of the capital Algiers.<sup>62</sup> In March 2020, the Chinese group, Zhongman Petroleum and Natural Gas Group Co (ZPEC), obtained a drilling contract at Hassi Mes-saoud, 600 km south of Algiers.<sup>63</sup>

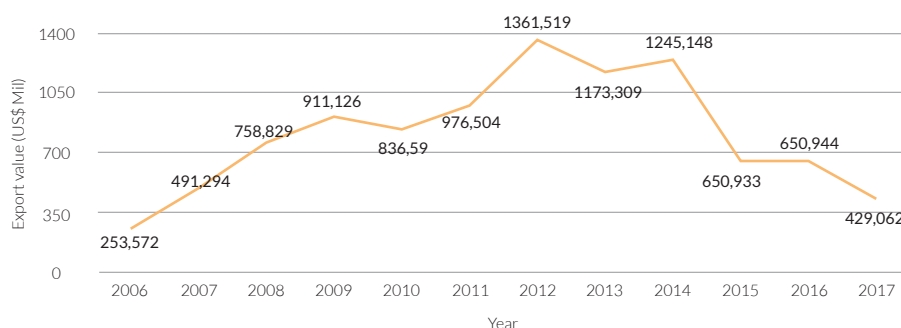
Algeria also boasts other important raw materials, such as uranium, iron, gold, and phosphates, essential for China's continued modernization. In May 2020, Algeria's president stressed the need to focus on untapped resources and to cease to rely on hydrocarbon revenues. China will certainly be among the countries involved in tapping into those mining industries. The two countries had already signed a memorandum of understanding in 2018 for the exploitation of phosphates, with an investment of \$6 billion. In January 2020, Sonatrach, the

state-owned Algerian oil company, and the Chinese CITIC signed an amendment for the phosphate complex to start operating in 2022. The project is expected to generate 3,000 direct jobs while its construction sites across four *wilayas* [provinces] are expected to provide 14,000 indirect jobs.<sup>64</sup>

### The automobile industry's role in Sino-Algerian trade

In the industrial sector, the automotive industry (cars and trucks) has seen numerous assembly plants being set up. In 2012 and 2013, Algeria was the main destination for China's vehicle exports.<sup>65</sup> By 2013, joint ventures for the assembly of Chinese vehicles in Algeria mushroomed.<sup>66</sup> In 2018, heavy-duty truck manufacturer Shaanxi Automobile Group opened a production line in Algeria, the country's first Chinese vehicle assembly plant in production;<sup>67</sup> about 3,000 trucks are assembled yearly under the Shacman brand. The company serves the local market but also exports to other countries, such as Tunisia and Mali. The first Shacman 'Made in Algeria' truck emerged in Sétif (eastern Algeria) on 10 May, 2018.<sup>68</sup> A joint venture between the KIV Group, an Algerian car dealer, and Chinese car manufacturer Foton materialized in 2017, branded Foton Motors Algeria.<sup>69</sup>

Figure 4. China's automobile exports to Algeria<sup>70</sup>



61 Pecoraro, 'China's Strategy'.

62 Marray, 'CHEC to build LNG terminal'.

63 Larbi, 'Algérie'.

64 Algérie-Eco, 'Projet de phosphate'.

65 Al-Tamimi, 'China-Algeria relations'.

66 Challenges, 'Le Chinois FAW'.

67 People's Daily Online, 'Algeria's first Chinese automobile'.

68 Semmar, 'Sortie du premier camion'.

69 APS, 'Algerian-Chinese partnership'.

70 CEIC, 'China Automobile Exports'.

BAIC Algeria, which specializes in automotive assembly, constructs vehicles in its plant in Batna (eastern Algeria); BAIC is a newcomer to the automotive market in Algeria. The main investor and shareholder in the venture is the Algerian Eurl Saria Auto Handler; the Chinese group Beijing Automobile holds a minority stake of 10%.<sup>71</sup>

Shortly after the government's publication in September 2020 of the new specifications pertaining to the terms and conditions of the vehicle manufacturing business, and the terms and conditions of the motor vehicle dealership business, numerous Chinese companies submitted their applications to undertake vehicle construction and car dealership activities. The Chinese automaker JAC, present in the country since 2000, with its Algerian partner, Emin Auto, applied for the industrial production, import and distribution of new vehicles under its JAC brand.<sup>72</sup>

Since the removal of Bouteflika and the anti-corruption campaign that ensued,<sup>73</sup> the Algerian government has sought to end the anarchy in the automotive industry sector which had been used as a smokescreen for fraudulent practices.<sup>74</sup> The government wants to create a genuinely productive automotive sector with a high degree of integration. The Chinese companies that have a major stake in this industry in the Algerian, African, and eventually European, markets have shown, thus far, an inclination to abide by the new laws.

These are only examples of China's infrastructure and industrial activities in Algeria, which range from the third largest mosque in the world, the opera house that China gifted to Algeria, dams, tunnels, shopping malls, and parks, the \$3 billion construction of a 750-km water pipeline from Salah to Tamanrasset in the deep south,<sup>75</sup> the constitutional court, stadiums, foreign ministry, and

railway network, all of which were built by the Chinese. While statistics on employment creation are scarce, Chinese investments resulted in the creation of 50,000 jobs<sup>76</sup> by 2014, the year before the price of oil began to decline. The import of workers from China by Chinese firms has drawn criticism from Algerians, but the total number of officially registered Chinese workers in Algeria has never exceeded 0.2% of the workforce.<sup>77</sup>

Regardless of the various obstacles, Sino-Algerian relations continue to evolve. Thus, during the two-day visit in October 2020 by a delegation from the Chinese Agency for International Cooperation and Development, China and Algeria agreed to negotiate a new 'Five-Year Plan for China-Algeria Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation' to "steadily advance major projects such as the central port of Algiers and the integrated development of phosphates, fully tap the potential, and comprehensively expand the two parties' digital economy, communications, and cooperation in transportation, agriculture and other fields".<sup>78</sup>

## Sino-Algerian military cooperation

Traditionally, the Soviet Union, and later Russia, has been Algeria's chief supplier of arms, accounting for 90% of those supplied to the National Popular Army (ANP).<sup>79</sup> Algeria imported little military weaponry from China, apart from Chinese-made Soviet AK-47s. This situation has changed in recent years, however, as Algerian authorities have sought to diversify the ANP's sources of arms and military training, turning to Germany, Turkey, Italy, South Africa, the United States, and China. With the rise in oil revenues until 2014, Algeria increased its military budget to buy new hardware to replace its outdated military equipment. The

71 Benalia, 'Le Chinois BAIC'.

72 Bouchaala, 'Industrie automobile'.

73 Many businesspeople (the so-called oligarchs), officials, including two former prime ministers and many ministers, and military officers were tried and imprisoned for corruption and the squandering of state financial resources. The last decade of Bouteflika's rule was marked by an unimaginable degree of corruption at all levels. See Charef, 'Les incroyables mœurs de la République Bouteflika'.

74 The Algerian government had sought to create an automobile industry locally through partnerships with foreign companies in the hope of achieving a good degree of integration. However, the 'semi-knocked down' (SKD) system, which consists of importing a vehicle in pre-assembled kits, simply riveted, or bolted on site, led to abuses such as 'disguised' imports, illicit transfers of money abroad or overpricing to inflate the cost price of 'assembled' vehicles. Autoactu, 'Algérie: comment l'industrie automobile a tourné au fiasco'.

75 This project was started in 2008 and experienced some difficulties; however, it has contributed to the distribution of water in a desert area. APS, 'L'eau à Tamanrasset'.

76 S.T., "L'investissement chinois".

77 Del Panta, 'China's Growing Economic Role'.

78 Xinhua Agency, 'An Interview'. The author thanks Dr ChuChu Zhang for the translation of this interview.

79 Zoubir, 'Russia and Algeria', 99–126.



ANP duly began to import modern, sophisticated Chinese weapons; today, Algeria is one of China's most important clients in Africa for weapons.<sup>80</sup> A large increase in Chinese arms exports to Algeria was already apparent in the period from 2013 to 2017.<sup>81</sup> Algeria acquired various types of weapons from China, ranging from LZ45 155 mm self-propelled howitzers, frigates and Chinese Hainan patrol boats to advanced unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), such as CH-3 and CH-4 combat drones.<sup>82</sup> In 2018, for example, Algeria purchased the highly sophisticated Chinese CX-1 cruise missile,<sup>83</sup> and in June 2020 it ordered another Corvette from China's Hudong-Zhonghua Shipbuilding Group (HZ).<sup>84</sup> The choice of the CX-1 rather than the Russian P-800 was part of the deliberate decision to diversify suppliers, although Russia remains, and will be for quite some time to come, Algeria's main provider. Russia's arms sales to Algeria account for 66% of Algerian arms imports, while imports from China and Germany represent 15% and 12%, respectively.<sup>85</sup> Sino-Algerian military cooperation also includes training; about 500 Algerian officers visit China annually to train in two or three Chinese academies.<sup>86</sup>

Despite this growing military cooperation, including in the area of satellites,<sup>87</sup> China is currently unable to offer Algeria the equivalent sophisticated equipment that it can obtain from Russia and from developed countries. The CX-1 cruise missile is the most sophisticated weapon that the Algerian military has acquired from China, and there is no indication that China would supplant Russia as Algeria's main supplier. In fact, Algeria endeavours to acquire advanced weapons systems wherever it can purchase them, with price being no object. Recently, Algeria has called on Washington to ease restrictions on its military imports from the United States.<sup>88</sup>

## Cultural and scientific cooperation

Since Algeria's independence, Algeria and China have signed many exchange and cooperation agreements on culture, education, sport and media. Nonetheless, China's cultural presence in Algeria remains quite limited. The Chinese language is taught in universities in different cities, but despite the growing number of students learning Chinese, the dominant foreign language is still French, for historical reasons. Both the Chinese and the Algerian governments offer scholarships annually for Algerians wishing to study in China.<sup>89</sup>

Sino-Algerian cooperation in the scientific domains has increased in the last decade, covering space science and technology. This cooperation is conducted with the Algerian Space Agency; China assisted Algeria in the completion of the Alcomsat-1 Algerian space telecommunications satellite, a remarkable achievement. The cooperation in satellites has been rather successful and is part of the comprehensive strategic partnership the two countries signed in 2014.<sup>90</sup> With the success of the satellite programme, Algeria and China have continued developing satellite programmes for earth observation, focused on the environment, regional planning, mining and agricultural resources, urban planning, transport, prevention and management of major risks, as well as the field of communication.

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Sino-Algerian relations have developed on an ongoing basis and will continue for many years to come. This has enabled Algeria to reduce its economic and trade dependence on France, which used to account for more than 50% of Algeria's trade. This has changed noticeably, giving rise to fears in Western countries. In 2017,

80 Center for Strategic & International Studies, 'How dominant is China'.

81 MD Staff, 'Asia and the Middle East'.

82 DefenceWeb, 'Algeria operating new UAV'; Reimann, 'China is Flooding'.

83 Military Watch Magazine, 'Algeria Acquires Lethal'.

84 DefenceWeb, 'Algerian Navy'.

85 Fleurant, Wezeman, Wezeman and Tian, 'Tendances des transferts', 34.

86 Zoubir, Anonymous interview with high-level Algerian official.

87 Ibeh, 'Alcomsat-1 Communications Satellite'.

88 Ybarra, 'The Politics'.

89 In December 2019, the Chinese government offered scholarships of up to 400 euros monthly, in addition to housing, medical insurance, and registration fees. See Ismain, 'Etudiants Algériens à l'étranger'.

90 Badis, 'Chine-Algérie'.

the then president of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani, stated that China's influence on the continent [Africa], including Algeria, represented a threat to European interests: "Africa is now risking becoming a Chinese colony, but the Chinese want only raw materials. Stability does not interest them."<sup>91</sup> France, too, perceives Sino-Algerian relations as a threat to its own interests in Algeria;<sup>92</sup> it is also concerned about Algeria's membership of the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>93</sup> While it is true

that Sino-Algerian relations have strengthened, their development does not signify Algeria's alignment with China or that China seeks to supplant the Western presence in Algeria. Algeria is quite jealous of its independence and will continue diversifying its foreign relations. China, for its part, is interested in extending its commercial influence wherever it can, while pursuing its goal of implementing the Belt and Road Initiative through the multiplication of strategic partnerships.

91 Jeune Afrique, 'L'Afrique risque de devenir'.

92 Allizard and Jourda, 'Sénat français'.

93 Ouramdane, 'Algérie-Chine'.

## Author

**Yahia H. Zoubir** is Professor and Director of Research in Geopolitics at the KEDGE Business School, France.

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# Iran's strategy in the Middle East and Mediterranean region: the Hezbollah model

Susan Khazaeli

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Understanding Iran's involvement in Lebanon requires an appreciation of Iran's military capabilities and strategic intent in the Levant and the Mediterranean. Given Iran's transfers of military technology and other sophisticated weaponry to regional partners and 'proxies',<sup>2</sup> the scholarship typically focuses on Iran's missile and rocket – and sometimes nuclear – capabilities. This chapter focuses on Iran's ever-growing capacity to fight with and through third parties and partners, particularly Hezbollah.

Hezbollah (Arabic: Party of God) in Lebanon remains Iran's most powerful partner in the Middle East. Created with Iranian assistance in the early 1980s, Hezbollah has yielded many lessons for its benefactor on third-party operations. By employing the 'Hezbollah model' in new theatres in the region,<sup>3</sup> Iran has dramatically increased its network of Shia militias and extended its regional reach.<sup>4</sup> Iran now has a robust asymmetrical warfare capability. It uses third parties and partners to advance its interests throughout the Middle East and beyond.<sup>5</sup> For instance, to buttress its sole state ally, Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, Iran deploys fighters from Afghanistan (e.g., Fatemiyoun Division),

Pakistan (e.g., Zeynabiyoun Brigade), numerous Iraqi Shia groups, and the Lebanese Hezbollah.

Iran has gained considerable advantages in the wars in Iraq and Syria, consolidating power in both theatres, which has allowed it to extend into new areas (e.g., Yemen, the Red Sea). By replicating the Hezbollah model, Iran has greatly expanded its influence with relatively minimal Iranian casualties. Iran's sphere of influence is frequently referred to as the Shia Crescent – a term that often gives the impression that Iran has revived its project to export the Islamic Revolution. The term refers to Shia populated areas – Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and western Afghanistan – under Iran's control, and is the creation of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).<sup>6</sup> It has allowed Iran to accelerate its transfer of funds and weapons through Iraq, then Syria, into southern Lebanon, and is essential to Iran's asymmetrical regional strategy and ambitions.

This chapter starts by providing a historical account of Iran's strategic doctrine. Next, it frames the importance of Lebanon in Iran's strategic thinking, including how it came to establish the partnership with Hezbollah. It then examines Iran's efforts to build, operate, retain, and increase its influence

1 The opinions and assessments presented in this paper are the author's and do not represent or reflect the opinions of the Government of Canada. © Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada (Department of National Defence), 2022. Hybrid CoE is authorized to produce and grant third party permissions. The author thanks Dr. Anton Minkov, Defence Research Development Canada for his review of the paper and suggestions for improvement.

2 A note on nomenclature: This chapter avoids using the word proxy, preferring 'partner.' A proxy relationship implies automatism in the patron-client relation and little to no independent agency. It is not obvious that Hezbollah executes on all direct orders from Tehran (although it has indicated it would support Iran if it were attacked) given its own domestic political agenda.

3 The Hezbollah model refers to the goal of establishing a state within a state by capturing key institutions, personnel-rich portfolios, and through patronage of Shiites and/or other marginalized groups.

4 Iranian influence in Afghanistan should be noted. The current Commander of the Quds Force, or the expeditionary branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), is Esmail Ghani. While his predecessor, Qassem Soleimani, was a fluent Arabic speaker and established a robust network of partners and agents in the Levant, Ghani had prior experience in Afghanistan, where he established significant connections. He does not have a strong command of Arabic, so it remains to be seen whether he can continue to maintain ties in the Levant as well as Soleimani did. However, attention should be paid to his capacity to recruit and deploy growing numbers of Shia militias and agents from Afghanistan and Central Asia.

5 Iran does not necessarily share Western terminology. While it sometimes refers to actions and activities that can be understood as, or translated into 'asymmetrical warfare', Iran seems to alternate between ideological language (i.e., 'Axis of Resistance') and the term, first advanced in IRGC histories of the Iran-Iraq War, *Jang-e Ghayr-e Kelasik* ('asymmetrical warfare').

6 Milburn, 'Iran's Land Bridge', 35–48.

in Lebanon, primarily using Shia actors while also considering the place of the Mediterranean in its grand strategy. It discusses the role of Hezbollah as a partner, as well as its role in domestic Lebanese affairs, and as an advanced military. While the chapter does not prescribe any defence or security policies, it does aim to guide decision-making in the event of a future conflict involving Iran. Given the potent and extensive nature of Iran's third parties and networks, attention should be paid to the prospect of future asymmetrical warfare.

### Iran's strategic doctrine

Iran's strategic doctrine has its roots in the eight-year-long war with Iraq (known as the 'Imposed War' or *Jang-e Tahmili*). Iran was in the throes of a revolution that had toppled the monarchy when Iraq invaded in 1980. The Islamists were in the process of consolidating power, which included killing off their former leftist allies and purging the brass in the once powerful *Artesh* (Persian: military). At the same time, Iran's new Supreme Leader, Ruhollah Khomeini, was making enemies in the region by calling for an Islamic revolution. His proclamations worried many, particularly Saddam Hussein in Iraq, where the Shia were an unrepresented majority. As a secular leader, Saddam had double the reason to fear an Iranian-style revolt toppling his rule. This, coupled with his desire to regain control of the Shatt al-Arab River (*Arvand Rud* in Persian) – a key waterway and Iraq's sole access point to the Persian Gulf and therefore crucial for transportation and exports – prompted him to pre-emptively strike against what he assumed was a chaotic and weakened Iran.<sup>7</sup> Iraqi forces invaded the oil-rich province of Khuzestan in the south, where they faced little resistance: the *Artesh* was in the north along Iran's Soviet border, and the IRGC (known as *Pasdaran* in Persian), a new paramilitary established to hasten the revolution, was dealing with Kurdish rebellions in the northwest.<sup>8</sup> Iran was not at all prepared.<sup>9</sup>

Iran found itself alone and under attack. Khomeini's provocations meant that Iran had no regional support. During the course of the war, Iraq received significant international support, including from Brazil, China, Denmark, France, the Soviet Union, the United States, most Arab states, as well as several Warsaw Pact and NATO countries.<sup>10</sup> When it looked like Iran might launch an offensive that would turn the tide of the war, the US intervened to provide Iraq with intelligence on the locations of Iranian forces, even while acknowledging that Iraq would likely use chemical weapons.<sup>11</sup> Iran's only ally was Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, who hoped that Iran would crush his Baathist rival.<sup>12</sup> Assad aided Iran by closing a key pipeline to Iraq. Iran, in turn, saw Syria not only as a strategic partner in the war, but also as a conduit to the Shia community in south Lebanon, where a small band of clerics and followers pledged allegiance to Khomeini.<sup>13</sup> That group became Hezbollah.

The Iran-Iraq War taught Iran several valuable lessons that have fundamentally shaped Iran's strategic doctrine into one that combines asymmetrical warfare and martyrdom culture. This doctrine relies on unconventional tactics and foreign militias to offset its conventional military weakness, compensate for its lack of strategic depth, and deter a direct attack on Iranian territory.

First, Iran had to be self-sufficient. Unlike other countries in the region, it did not enjoy protection from a powerful ally nor state-of-the-art military transfers. The international community's silence on Saddam's use of chemical weapons against Iran also eroded the country's confidence in international law. Iran would have to resort to self-help and be prepared to defend itself in the event of another attack.

Second, it had to compensate for conventional weakness. Under the Shah, Iran had had one of the world's most powerful air forces. However, after the revolution, states were no longer willing to sell equipment and technology to Iran, nor help the country maintain it. This meant that Iran could no

<sup>7</sup> Shatt al-Arab is a vital riverway that discharges into the Persian Gulf and over which Iran and Iraq have long had competing territorial claims and navigation rights disputes.

<sup>8</sup> Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 64.

<sup>9</sup> Thaler et al. (eds.), *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads*, 21–35.

<sup>10</sup> Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, 97.

<sup>11</sup> Harris and Aid, 'Exclusive'.

<sup>12</sup> Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 1–376.

<sup>13</sup> Milani, 'Why Tehran'.

longer sustain its conventional capabilities. While Iran has shown resourcefulness with respect to outdated weapons, cannibalizing equipment to maintain and extend the life of its inherited weaponry and fleets,<sup>14</sup> its focus has primarily been on indigenous and asymmetrical capabilities that eliminate the need for foreign parts or assistance.

Third, Shi'ism was an effective propaganda tool that could whip popular discontent into mobilization. Iranian leaders likened the war with Iraq to the Battle of Karbala in which Husayn ibn Ali, a highly revered figure in Shi'ism, was defeated and killed by the powerful and corrupted Sunni Umayyads.<sup>15</sup> For the Shia, Husayn ibn Ali represents martyrdom – the idea of sacrifice in the face of injustice. In invoking Karbala, Iran was able to leverage its vastly larger population to overwhelm Iraqi forces on the battlefield. Men joined the frontlines in droves, and the devout sent their young. In lieu of weapons and training, boys were given keys that promised to unlock the gates of heaven to wear around their necks and were used as human fodder against the Iraqi onslaught. Iran mastered the exploitation of Shia symbols of martyrdom as a force multiplier. These propaganda lessons have been passed along to Iran's partners.

Finally, Iran needed alternatives to conventional deterrence. IRGC commanders determined early on that Iran was mistaken in fighting a *jang-e kelasik* (Persian: classical war or conventional war) against Iraq.<sup>16</sup> The only way to win and to deter attacks in the future would be through *jang-e ghayr-e kelasik* (Persian: asymmetrical warfare; literally, other than classical war). Accordingly, Iran massively invested in the IRGC, particularly in the expeditionary Quds Force (IRGC-QF). Through the IRGC-QF, Iran continues until today to emphasize *jang-e ghayr-e*

*kelasik*. Indeed, in 2014, then Major-General Mohammad Ali Jafari explained: "The IRGC's warfare is not classic warfare; we fight asymmetrically."<sup>17</sup> In short, the Iran-Iraq War was Iran's 'never again' moment. Never again would Iran be vulnerable, defenceless, and unprepared; the outcome of this concept is a military strategy that is entirely novel in the Middle East.<sup>18</sup>

The IRGC-QF is entrusted with protecting the Islamic Republic from all external threats. It also has the objective of spreading revolutionary ideology beyond Iran's borders. Prior to the Iran-Iraq War, the QF was deployed to respond to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan where QF fighters forged many enduring relationships with the Shia Mujahadeen,<sup>19</sup> the Persian-speaking Hazaras, and others.<sup>20</sup> However, it was its performance in the Iran-Iraq War that made the IRGC a powerful entity in Iran, one that had not only saved Iran from ruin but had also proved its loyalty to the new regime. As a reward, the IRGC members enjoy considerable economic favours and political influence in Iran. The IRGC has an independent revenue stream, owing to various business holdings, particularly in construction, energy, and infrastructure, smuggling enterprises, and sanction evasion schemes.<sup>21</sup> This makes it difficult to establish an accurate figure for defence expenditure.<sup>22</sup> The IRGC also receives the largest share of Iran's defence budget. According to various estimates, Iran spends anywhere between 12 billion to 21 billion USD a year on defence.<sup>23</sup>

Qassem Soleimani, the notorious IRGC-QF Commander who was assassinated in January 2020, was a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War and the principal architect of the Shia Crescent. Security expert Ali Soufan notes: "Soleimani [was] the leading exponent of a uniquely Iranian style of insur-

14 During the war, Iran also released skilled military officers, including pilots of the Imperial Air Forces who had been imprisoned after the revolution, in an effort to tip the scale of war.

15 Gieling, *Religion and War*, 40–106.

16 The IRGC-QF apparently recognized that the war would be a significant one, and very early on began to document the conflict in a series of IRGC histories. For an excellent account of this history, see Pinkley, 'Guarding History'.

17 Jafari, 'Training the Oppressed'. For similar references by Jafari to asymmetrical warfare, see Sepehri, 'Iran'.

18 Wehrey et al. (eds.), 'Dangerous But Not Omnipotent', 142.

19 This group should not be confused with the Sunni Mujahadeen, which enjoyed the support of other Muslim states, such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, as well as Western countries, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and West Germany.

20 Although Iran was for a rare moment on the same side as the US and the 'West' in opposing the Soviet Union, its intervention was in practical terms quite limited. Iran's new leadership was compelled to condemn the aggression of 'godless' communists, but it was careful not to invite retaliation from its powerful neighbour. See Tarock, 'The Politics of the Pipeline', 805.

21 Watling, 'Iran's Objectives and Capabilities', 13.

22 Chandler, 'Decoding Iran's defence spending'.

23 The 2019 estimates are as follows: The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute estimated \$12.6 billion, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) \$17.4 billion, and the US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) \$20.7 billion. See Rome, 'Iran's Defense Spending'.

gency. Typically, militias define themselves against governments, fight them, and seek to sweep away all vestiges of their power. Those under Soleimani's control, by contrast, have tended more often to work with the grain of government power, and thus to co-opt governments from within, fusing militant and state power into a formidable whole. Lebanon's Hezbollah is the most prominent example...but, far from the only one."<sup>24</sup> In the process of building the Shia Crescent, the IRGC has learned a thing or two about maintaining relationships. Even while effectively subjugating the sovereignty of countries along the Crescent, Iran does not speak like a conqueror. Iran calls its sphere of influence the Axis of Resistance (Persian: *Mehvar-e Moghavemat*) – a term that suggests concert rather than conquest. In part because of this *savoir-faire*, the IRGC-QF presides over a large network of partners that allow Iran to project power far beyond the Persian Gulf.

### Hezbollah's place in Iran's strategic doctrine

Iran's influence in the region did not materialize overnight. The country has slowly cultivated relationships with various Shia civilian and military groups as well as several non-Shia groups (e.g., the Kurds in Iraq, Hamas) with whom it has shared a common enemy since 1979. Among all of Iran's non-state partners, Hezbollah remains its oldest and most powerful. The partnership allows Iran to project asymmetrical power far beyond its borders, prevent its global isolation from ever again becoming an existential issue, and hold hostage a vital US interest in the region – the security of Israel – all while providing Iran with a level of deniability.

The relationship with Hezbollah is valued because it enables Iran to have a foot in Lebanon, a strategically important country not only due to its location along the Mediterranean but also because of the states it borders. After all, Lebanon borders both Iran's main state ally, Syria, and its professed regional enemy, Israel. Since civil war broke out in Syria, Iran has endeavoured to keep Assad in power. Without Assad in Syria, many of Iran's regional aspirations, which include establishing a supply

corridor for Iranian weapons and fighters, would unravel. For instance, Assad permits Iran to land supply planes in Damascus, where supplies are then transported by land into Lebanon and into other theatres. In other words, Iran's interests in Syria are practical.

However, how Hezbollah and Israel fit into Iran's strategic doctrine is less obvious. In 1979, Iran's new clerical government adopted an anti-Zionist stance as part of its broader anti-colonialist and Islamic identity. Anti-Zionism was meant to advance two broad aims. First, it enables non-Arab Iran to foster solidarity with Muslims, which might then lead to Iranian-inspired revolutions elsewhere. The fact that Iran's condemnations of Israel are often more vicious than any of those uttered by the Arab states is intended to showcase the latter as feeble American vassals that – in contrast to Iran – do not genuinely care about the plight of their Muslim brethren. Second, Israel is integral to Iran's layered deterrence strategy. Iran's anti-American establishment targets Israel in part because it deems that Israel's security is a vital US interest. Iran has developed its deterrence strategy around three pillars: energy and oil security (e.g., threatening to close the Straits of Hormuz to shipment), the presence of Americans and US personnel in the Middle East, and the US relationship with Israel.<sup>25</sup> Hezbollah advances the latter two.

Israel and Iran had been close strategic allies prior to the revolution – a relationship that Israel hoped would continue despite the change in government.<sup>26</sup> Israel was even prepared to accept post-revolutionary Iran's anti-Israeli rhetoric as mere theatrics and provided the new regime with some assistance in the war against Iraq. It was Iran's grooming of, and material support for Hezbollah that marked the end of the alliance. Tehran remains committed to its anti-Israel stance not only to project itself as a champion for the oppressed Muslims but also to undercut US interests in the region. Exploiting American vulnerabilities in the Middle East has been the mainstay of Iran's regional security policy, and the primary way in which Iran aims to deter direct attacks.

<sup>24</sup> Soufan, 'Qassem Soleimani'.

<sup>25</sup> Pinkley, 'Guarding History'.

<sup>26</sup> Iran supported Israel during the Yom Kippur War (1973), and Israel, in turn, provided Iran with valuable intelligence.

Support for Hezbollah also enables Iran to augment its soft power. Given that Lebanon has a sizeable Shia population, Iran thought that the country would be more receptive than other Arab states to an Iranian-style government based on the *velayat-e faqih* (Persian: guardianship of the Islamic jurists).<sup>27</sup> The idea of a clerical government is anathema to Sunni views on authority. Iran was also motivated by the fact that most Shiites were concentrated in the southern part of Lebanon, where they were caught in the crossfire of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) used southern Lebanon as a base for attacks into Israel, forcing the Israelis to counterattack. The Shiites suffered disproportionately. Although Lebanese Shia preferred Israel to the PLO, they soon backed Hezbollah and its patron, Iran. When Israel occupied southern Lebanon in 1982, Iran responded by committing its own forces to oust the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) even while engaged in a brutal war with Iraq. With Syrian assistance, Iran deployed a contingent of some 1,500 IRGC troops to the Beqaa Valley to train and arm the radical Shia militants and to share their battle lessons on propaganda and guerilla warfare.<sup>28</sup> It also committed some \$200 million to provide the Shia militants with salaries.<sup>29</sup> This assistance consequently led to the creation of Hezbollah, paving the way for a profound strategic partnership that continues until today.

### Transforming Hezbollah, co-opting Lebanon

Hezbollah is an effective instrument in Iran's regional strategy. It shared Iran's commitment to confronting American and Israeli imperialism, starting with fighting against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. It also attacked American forces deployed to Lebanon during the Civil War in 1982. In April 1983, Lebanese militants, acting on

behalf of Iran, bombed the US embassy in Beirut.<sup>30</sup> This was followed by a series of suicide attacks a few months later in October 1983 that killed US and French personnel in Beirut. Although implicated, Iran denied involvement and escaped significant consequences.<sup>31</sup> Through Hezbollah, Iran was able to advance its twin goals of challenging the security of Israel and raising the costs of an American presence in the Middle East, all while maintaining plausible deniability.

Throughout the 1980s, Hezbollah became known for asymmetrical warfare and crude tactics such as suicide bombings, kidnappings, hostage-taking, assassinations, and hijackings. Hezbollah soon proved itself as a small but effective guerrilla force. In 2000, Hezbollah was also able, with the support of Iran, to increase the human costs of intervention to such an unacceptable level as to force Israel to withdraw from Lebanese territory – the first time that Israel had withdrawn from Arab territory in the absence of a ceasefire. Hezbollah claimed success, and cemented its status, particularly among Shia Lebanese, as the only group capable of resisting Israel. The real celebration took place in Iran, demonstrating the correctness of their investment and their choice of Lebanon as a starting point for their regional strategy.

Since the death of Khomeini in 1989, Hezbollah has slowly transformed from a guerrilla group into a socio-political entity with a military wing.<sup>32</sup> Starting in the early 1990s, Hezbollah made efforts to broaden its appeal to win popular domestic support. Recognizing that the Iranian model of governance did not appeal to most Lebanese, Hezbollah finally dropped this from its founding manifesto in 2009. Around this time, it also formed a political alliance with the Christian Maronite Free Patriotic Movement (FPM).<sup>33</sup> While this move served to publicly dissociate Hezbollah from the *velayat-e faqih*, Hezbollah remains ever faithful to Iran. There

27 In 1979, Iran established a theocratic form of government loosely based on Khomeini's interpretation of the Shia Islamic concept of *velayat-e faqih*. There was disagreement among the Shia ummah, or community, over how much power the faqih has. Khomeini argued that ultimate political authority should be vested in the hands of a learned religious scholar, whom he referred to as the Supreme Leader (Persian: *rahbar-e mo'azzam*, or simply, *rahbar*). Khomeini's interpretation prevailed following the revolution in 1979 and he assumed this title. The Supreme Leader holds a life tenure, and is supported by and accountable only to an elected body of 88 clerics, known as the Assembly of Experts (Persian: *majles-e khobregan-e rahbari*).

28 Hokayem, 'Iran and Lebanon', 178–181.

29 Feltman, 'Hezbollah'.

30 Levitt, 'The Origin of Hezbollah'.

31 Associated Press, 'Iran Denies Any Involvement'.

32 Love, *Hezbollah*, 10–122.

33 Majidyar, 'Iran Steps up Efforts'.



are several reasons for how and why such a transformation took place.

First, although Hezbollah no longer wants to bring about an Iranian-style government, it did not abandon its *raison d'être*; it remains anti-Israel. It has become pragmatic and attuned to the pulse of the Lebanese population, which is mostly resentful of growing Iranian influence. While the majority of Shia Lebanese generally hold favourable views on Iran, at least 61% of its Sunni and Christian population do not.<sup>34</sup> Hezbollah, in its capacity as a political party and social welfare institution, is mindful of sectarian fault lines, and strives to manage negative perceptions of its relationship with Iran.<sup>35</sup> Hezbollah also ceased or otherwise scaled back some of its earlier practices of suicide bombings that had repulsed its coalition partners. This decision, in part, reflects the necessity of maintaining support among Lebanon's Christian Maronites, who have a distaste for extremism, but Sunni extremism in particular. Furthermore, Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has worked hard to promote Hezbollah as a party concerned with advancing the Lebanese interests – and not those of Tehran.

Second, Hezbollah's transformation has been part of a broader Iranian strategy to fuse insurgent and state power. Indeed, while militias are typically defined by their opposition to their own governments, Hezbollah has worked within the parameters of Lebanon's electoral system to gain political control and influence. Rather than challenging existing systems of power in Lebanon, Hezbollah has infiltrated and then co-opted them. This model has been reproduced in Iraq, where the Badr Organization – one of the IRGC-sponsored proxies – has become an extension of the state, controlling key ministries of the interior and transport.

Before Hezbollah's transformation into a political party, Beirut kept Iran at arm's length. With Hezbollah as a dominant political force, Iran has made strides in Lebanon, even holding meetings

with government officials to discuss issues like military cooperation. It has also asked Hezbollah to lobby on its behalf to persuade the government to accept Iran's offer of military aid to the Lebanese army.<sup>36</sup>

Iran's efforts to dominate, influence, and subvert Lebanese politics are not confined to its support for Hezbollah, although Hezbollah remains instrumental in these efforts. Rather, Iran complements hard power (such as militant groups) with soft power. In Lebanon, Iran aims to raise its public profile with Arab audiences and elites to shape public opinion. To do this, it invests in cultural, educational, humanitarian and reconstruction programmes as well as religious and information campaigns to broaden domestic support, particularly amongst Shiite Lebanese. These initiatives and programmes are run by the IRGC or otherwise administered by Hezbollah on its behalf. As these often have a humanitarian component or are cultural exchanges, IRGC personnel can openly operate in Lebanon with relatively little dissent. The IRGC runs entities, such as the Iranian Committee for the Reconstruction of Lebanon (ICRL) and the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC), which was modelled after the *Bonyads* (Persian: foundation) in Iran<sup>37</sup> – a pseudo-charity that launders funds and propagates Shia ideology.<sup>38</sup> Both have been designated as terrorist subsidiaries of Hezbollah by the US Department of the Treasury.

Iran's operational, materiel, and financial support have transformed Hezbollah into a formidable force in Lebanon and in the region, although it remains almost wholly reliant on Iran. Hezbollah's leader Nasrallah explains, "We are open about the fact that Hezbollah's budget, its income, its expenses, everything it eats and drinks, its weapons and rockets, are from the Islamic Republic of Iran."<sup>39</sup> In return, it stands to reason that Hezbollah consults Tehran before taking action in either the military or political realms.<sup>40</sup> Although this does not necessar-

34 Pew Research Center, 'A Global "No"'. See also Pollock, 'Lebanon Poll Shows Drop'.

35 In the last election in 2018, Hezbollah won only 13 seats out of 128. See Humud, 'Lebanon's 2018 Elections'.

36 Majidyar, 'Iran Steps up Efforts'.

37 The *Bonyads* are state-approved, charitable trusts, which since the 1979 revolution are answerable directly to the Supreme Leader. Although they are officially entrusted with redistributing wealth to the poor and other social welfare and reconstruction programmes, many bonyads are run by members of the IRGC and are used as cover for their illegitimate activities. See Khazaeli, 'An Assessment of Iran's Posture', 21–22.

38 ICRL was run by IRGC-QF Commander Hassan Shateri, who was killed in Syria in early 2013.

39 Al Monitor, 'Hezbollah brushes off'.

40 IDF, 'Hezbollah: An Iranian Proxy'.

ily mean it acts only in the interests of Tehran, one should note that Iran does not take chances when its interests are at stake. For instance, IRGC commanders, and not Hezbollah's, command Hezbollah fighting units deployed in Syria.<sup>41</sup>

Hezbollah uses Iranian money to support three broad ends. As mentioned, Hezbollah provides cultural and social welfare services to Lebanese Shia, which allows it to shape educational programmes and to spread propaganda. It also provides salaries for veterans, the unemployed, and post-conflict reconstruction.<sup>42</sup> This makes Hezbollah the second largest employer in Lebanon.<sup>43</sup> Second, Iranian money supports Hezbollah's political activities, allowing it to maintain political alliances. Third, Iranian funding allows Hezbollah to maintain its military readiness and to conduct operations. This includes training, equipment, and advanced weaponry such as unmanned aircraft with attack and reconnaissance capabilities, anti-ship missiles, long-range surface-to-surface missiles, and air defence systems.<sup>44</sup>

Hezbollah remains an essential component of Iran's regional strategy, particularly with respect to Israel. The 2006 July War (also known as the Lebanon War) between Hezbollah and Israel was widely seen as a 'proxy war' between Iran and Israel. After all, it allowed Iran to test the strength of its patron against a much more powerful adversary, and to do so without incurring costs in terms of heavy Iranian casualties or an attack on Iranian soil. Iran's support of Hezbollah thus supports its asymmetrical security strategy of challenging technologically superior opponents while avoiding reprisals.

During the 2006 war, it was clear that Iran's protégé had emerged as an advanced and skilled military. Throughout the war, the IRGC passed sophisticated weapons, including Zelzal missiles via Syria, to Hezbollah. What struck most observers of that conflict, including the Israelis, was not simply how well-armed Hezbollah was but also how well-organized it was. Hezbollah had seemingly

been ready for the conflict before it happened, withstanding the heavy-handed Israeli onslaught, and luring the Israeli ground forces back into southern Lebanon where Hezbollah had the advantage. Hezbollah also managed to manipulate international and domestic perceptions of the conflict, using social media to spread propaganda and images of the dead. Hezbollah's tactics, training, and strategy during the conflict also showed that it was no longer a meagre guerrilla but a military capable of taking on a much more conventionally powerful adversary. Although Israel did not lose – the war ended in stalemate – it was obvious to Israel that Hezbollah was a formidable foe.

For its part, Hezbollah declared it a 'divine victory' in which Israel had been defeated. Nasrallah curiously made no mention of Iran's assistance, but neither did he heed the terms of the ceasefire demanding that Hezbollah disarms and puts a stop to receiving weapons from Iran. Instead, Nasrallah boasted of a clandestine stockpile of some 20,000 rockets and missiles.<sup>45</sup> Ten years after the war, in 2016, Hossein Salami, the IRGC's Commander-in-Chief, issued Israel with a nasty reminder. Salami stated: "In Lebanon alone, over 100,000 missiles are ready to be launched. If there is a will, if it serves [our] interests, and if the Zionist regime repeats its past mistakes due to its miscalculations, these missiles will pierce through space, and will strike at the heart of the Zionist regime."<sup>46</sup>

To be sure, Iran provides Hezbollah with considerable arms and a hefty budget. Despite the Iranian public's demonstrations against their government's support for Hezbollah, Tehran remains as committed as ever. According to 2019 estimates, Iran's financial support amounts to about \$700 million.<sup>47</sup> The figure has mushroomed in recent years because of Hezbollah's contributions in helping Iran out in Syria. It should be noted that Hezbollah also needs a sympathetic government in Damascus if it is to receive arms from Iran. Iranian transfers to Hezbollah are typically moved from Syria by land

41 Kam, 'Iran's Shiite Foreign Legion'.

42 Love, *Hezbollah*, 1–139.

43 Bakeer, 'Hezbollah's Finances'.

44 Love, *Hezbollah*, 1–139.

45 Shadid, 'Hezbollah Chief'. Other reports estimate that Hezbollah has anywhere between 40,000 and 150,000 rockets and missiles (e.g., the mid-range Zelzal 1 and Zelzal 2), as well as Iranian-provided offensive cyber technology. See also Groll, 'The US-Iran Standoff'.

46 Haaretz, 'Revolutionary Guard Commander'.

47 Bakeer, 'Hezbollah's Finances'. See also Parker and Noack, 'Iran has invested'.

into the Beqaa Valley – a stronghold of Hezbollah in the south. Without this land route, shipments are vulnerable to interdiction and interception at sea or in the air. Thus, there is a convergence of interests in Syria between Iran and Hezbollah.

Iran's strategic goals in Lebanon are thus directly related to its asymmetrical military strategy. Through Hezbollah, Iran can project influence in the Levant and the Mediterranean. Given its strategic position between Iran's principal state ally, Syria, and its regional foe, Israel, maintaining Hezbollah is critical to the success of Iran's military strategy. By funding, training, and supplying Hezbollah, Iran can effectively threaten those interests which the US holds dear, that is the security of Israel and the lives of Americans in the region. This relationship enables Iran to project asymmetrical power in the Middle East at a relatively low cost, thereby deterring direct action against it since its involvement is indirect.<sup>48</sup>

### Iran's evolving strategic interests in Lebanon

Iran's strategic interests have evolved since 1979.<sup>49</sup> The country is no longer driven by an ideological imperative, but by pragmatism. In 1979, Iran was committed to exporting the revolution. This objective changed in 1989. Khomeini died that year, and with him, the revolutionary zeal. Tempered by the war, Iran came to appreciate that its form of government did not resonate with the Sunni populations in the region. Hezbollah, as mentioned, no longer has an Iranian-inspired government as a goal. Even Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Iraq, where the Shia form the majority, eschews the *velayat-e faqih*. Not wanting to disaffect Arab populations, Iran stopped agitating for an Iranian-style Islamic revolution and looked towards deepening ties with non-Muslim countries.

To many observers, Iran appears ever intent on exporting the revolution. Indeed, some of Iran's actions, particularly its co-option of Shia groups since the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, lend support to the notion that Iran has reverted to the

fundamentals of the revolution and has resuscitated the export project. While Iran's recent activities suggest an expansionist agenda, it is important to understand that Iran is not trying to reproduce Iranian-style governments throughout the Middle East, but rather is trying to ensure a network of friendly, loyal, and indebted countries around it.

Iran's ideas of expansionism should be clarified in that it is neither, to take a historic example, like the Third Reich seeking Lebensraum for the Germanic people, nor is it like the self-styled Islamic State, seeking to impose its values and government over its claimed territory. Further, Iran has very little desire to administer or govern, or to collect economic benefits. In fact, despite stifling sanctions, Iran continues to finance its partners without such expectations. For instance, Iran did not request payment in exchange for sending weapons and supplies to support the Iraqis to retake Tikrit from Daesh; the gratitude and indebtedness of Iraqi officials was enough.<sup>50</sup> Iran is not motivated by money, but by projecting power. In Iraq, Iran is determined to prevent the emergence of a Sunni government that is antithetical to its interests and allied to its rival, Saudi Arabia, or otherwise allied to the United States. To ensure this, Iran has strengthened Iraqi Shia, but has also embraced Iraqi Kurds who, albeit overwhelmingly Sunni, also suffered under the former government and, to an extent, at the hands of the West. However, what Iran is trying to achieve is arguably more disconcerting than the export of an Islamic Republic model: namely, a new Middle East with governments that are friendly, or otherwise indebted, to Iran. Iran has been encouraged by popular discontent, instability, and growing anti-American sentiment in the region. It has exploited such opportunities in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen to arm and train militias loyal to and dependent on Iran, and then groom them to subvert positions of power within their own governments. Iran has effectively applied the Hezbollah model throughout the Shia Crescent.<sup>51</sup> Part of Iran's objective is to improve its own security. It does not want any country to either become powerful enough to attack it directly, as

48 Wehrey et al. (eds.), *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, 39–80.

49 Uskowi, 'The Evolving Iranian Strategy'.

50 Reuters, 'Iraqi PM'.

51 Kam, 'Iran's Shiite Foreign Legion', 49–58.

Iraq did in 1980, nor does it want them to serve as a base from which the United States might attack it.

In late 2017, the Iranian IRGC-QF retook the Syrian town of Albukamal from Daesh and anti-government rebels. This was a success for Iran and Hezbollah for two reasons. First, Albukamal is a strategically located border city next to Iraq's Al Qaim along the Euphrates. With Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in the east and Hezbollah in the west, Iran now effectively controls a significant border-crossing to move weapons, money, and fighters. There are reports that Iran has already shipped weapons through the city.<sup>52</sup> Satellites have also confirmed that Iran is completing a military base, Imam Ali, and a possible underground weapons storage facility there.<sup>53</sup> Second, its capture represented a coup over the US and US-backed anti-Assad groups. It also allowed Iran to enjoy freedom of action to operate and advance its goals in the region. As such, preventing Iran from physical control over ports and borders should be a priority. At present, Iran has an uncontested air bridge – ever since Iraq opened airspace to Iranian flights to Syria – and relies on state-controlled commercial airlines to transport supplies to Hezbollah.<sup>54</sup> Iran does not have air superiority. For now, it depends on Russian protection of its air transports to Syria.<sup>55</sup>

Another Iranian objective is enhancing its deterrence position. By positioning Hezbollah so that it can strike at Israel, Iran hopes to deter any direct action against it by effectively holding hostage the security of a key US ally in the region. With Iranian support, Hezbollah showed that it could move and position forces close to and within Israeli territory. In early 2019, Israel discovered a network of underground tunnels from the south of Lebanon into its northern town of Metula.<sup>56</sup> The tunnels were shocking in that they were wide, big enough to allow an adult to stand upright, and outfitted with electricity. Israel has since destroyed the tunnels, denying Hezbollah the ability to use them to infil-

trate the country in a surprise attack. As both Iran and Hezbollah are preoccupied with Syria, Israel has highlighted the growing deterrence deficit by intensifying and even publicizing some of its attacks on Iran's position in Syria.<sup>57</sup> For now, neither Iran nor Hezbollah have directly responded to these attacks. Indeed, Iran – and Hezbollah – both seemingly ignore Israeli attacks on their assets and personnel in Syria. This suggests that neither want an escalation, at least at present.

As Iran's influence in the Middle East has grown, Tehran is probably now concerned with preserving its gains, particularly in the land transit and access routes to its partners, since it cannot depend on Russian air superiority indefinitely. The possibility of the US or Israel either intercepting or shooting down aircraft has further motivated Iran to secure transportation routes on the ground. Establishing and preserving ground routes are key to its ability to maintain its position in the region. According to an Israeli government think tank, Iran wants to create two corridors to the Mediterranean: one through Iraq's northern territories from Rabia, Iraq to al-Yarubiyah, Syria, and the other in the south through the Euphrates Valley.<sup>58</sup> With the US withdrawal from northeastern Syria in October 2019 (except for its presence at al-Tanf in the south), Iran may have even more unrestricted access to the northern route, as well as a potential opportunity to court Syrian Kurds – abandoned by the US – by offering them protection from Turkey in exchange for freedom of passage. The southern route has been secure since Iran took Albukamal.

Iran's regional strategy of cultivating military and political support has reversed its isolation in the region, at least amongst the Shia, non-state groups, and militias. Iran's support for Houthis in Yemen and for the Shia in Iraq, as well as its assistance to the Iraqi and Kurdish governments in defeating Daesh, have earned it gratitude – or at least made them debtors. Iran's ambitions now exceed mere support for Hezbollah. With several powerful

52 Rasmussen and Schwartz, 'Israel Broadens Fight'.

53 Ibid.

54 See Nadimi, 'Iran Is Still Using'; Ottolenghi, 'Treasury rightly clips wings'.

55 Rauschenbach, 'Iran's entrenchment'.

56 Bruton and Goldman, 'Discovery of Hezbollah'.

57 Associated Press, 'Israel confirms attacking'.

58 Kam, 'Iran's Shiite Foreign Legion', 49–58.

militias under its control, Iran no longer has all its eggs in Hezbollah's basket.

Given its 'never again' experience, Iran is particularly interested in controlling neighbouring Shia-majority Iraq through the Hezbollah model. The creation of the PMF, comprised primarily of Iranian-backed Shia militias-cum-political groups, is the most obvious manifestation of the Hezbollah model at work in a new theatre. While Iran is not necessarily trying to impose its form of government, it is working to use soft power – at times a pan-Islamist identity and at other times a sectarian one – to subvert the authority of government and state apparatuses, and to bend those to Tehran's interests. Iran and its partners establish and maintain influence through patronage, particularly through dominating personnel-rich portfolios and charities. For example, in post-Saddam Iraq, the Shia parties aimed to control the health ministry, and not the high profile foreign or defence ministries, since through the provision of essential services and employment, the health ministry enables them to appeal to ordinary people and to thereby earn followers. Likewise, Iran uses the pseudo-charity IKRC to advance its ideology (e.g., Quds Day parades). In Afghanistan, for example, the IKRC paid for the weddings of those who could recite Khomeini's Last Will and Testament. Such strategies not only serve to indoctrinate but also to win over loyal supporters who, without Iran's charitable contributions, might be unable to marry.<sup>59</sup>

It should likewise be pointed out that Iraq also allows Iran the opportunity to hedge against Hezbollah (which has been the target of public dissatisfaction since the port blast in Beirut in August 2020) and even Syria, should Assad fall, through new partnerships in the region. Iran's calculus is that if the Assad family is removed, or replaced by a Sunni-dominated government, it will lose its most significant gains in the region.<sup>60</sup>

Further, Iran's networks enable it to neutralize the conventional military superiority of the US and its allies. It does this by strengthening the asymmetrical warfare capabilities of its own allies, and

by using these groups to target the US and its coalition partners in order to increase the costs of intervention in the region, and to force them to vacate. This, in turn, leaves Iran free to pursue its other strategic objectives in the Middle East. The creation of the Shia Crescent was slow and deliberate – a quality that reflects the character of the IRGC as an institution.

Iran's patience has been rewarded; the Axis of Resistance is now one of the most significant assets in Iran's arsenal. And the supply corridors that Iran has carved through the Shia Crescent are integral to enabling Iran to operationalize the militias. For that reason, Iran is working to ensure that its supply corridor from Iran into the Mediterranean is so firmly entrenched and secure that Iran's access would remain uninterrupted, even if it loses a partner or an ally.<sup>61</sup>

## Conclusion

Iran's ambitions are no longer limited to deterrence by projecting asymmetrical power through regional militias. Iran is interested in regional control and dominance. The country's impressive network of third-party militias constitutes its most important defence and deterrent capability, but also allows it to exert considerable political power within a number of states, such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria.

Iranian-backed legions will continue to be a core element in Iran's strategic doctrine. Iran continually inserts itself in regional conflicts and exploits instability by supporting one side over another. In Syria, it largely supports Assad and pro-government groups, trying to preserve the status quo because this is in its interests. In Iraq, Iran supports a strong Shia-dominant government, blending soft and hard power in support of various Shia militia groups, and sometimes by calling in old friends in Iraqi Kurdistan, who owe it favour. In other theatres, like Yemen, Iran actively supports the Houthi minority, using the group to score against its principal adversary, Saudi Arabia.

59 Kamal, 'Iran's Aid Diplomacy in Afghanistan', 308–326.

60 Rauschenbach, 'Iran's entrenchment'.

61 Chulov, 'Amid Syrian chaos'.

Iran's regional strategy serves several purposes, including the following:

- It contributes to its strategic deterrence strategy by raising concerns that any direct attack on Iran might result in retaliation from one of its regional partners.
- It shifts the balance of power to favour Iran because of the distribution of Iran's partners and third-party militias in close proximity to its adversaries.
- It allows Iran to attack the US, its allies (including Israel) and interests through partners, thereby having the protection of plausible deniability.
- Iran's involvement in Syria, in particular, has allowed Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed partners and militias to acquire battlefield experience.
- Having a network of partners, in addition to Hezbollah, serves as a hedge.
- Access to the Mediterranean provides an additional forward base.
- Future economic benefits, should an overland pipeline or railway from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean ever be constructed – something akin to China's Belt and Road initiative.<sup>62</sup>

Given its considerable regional gains over the last two decades, Iran is capable of asymmetrically responding to any major threat to it, or to its interests across different theatres in the region, including by deterring unwanted behaviour in vital areas beyond the Persian Gulf. Its main deterrent capability is derived from fears about the possibility that one of its partners and third-party militias might conduct unauthorized attacks on the US and those allied with the US. However, while Iran has been effective in preventing a direct large-scale attack directly against its soil, its adversaries, such as Israel and the US, are ever prepared to fight Iran in the "grey zone". For example, Iran's current deterrence posture has not prevented adversaries from targeting IRGC personnel in conflict zones such as Syria. But conflict in the grey zone is an area that deserves attention because of the potential for rapid escalation.

<sup>62</sup> There have long been plans for such a pipeline from the South Pars-North Dome gas field into the Mediterranean, allowing Iran to reach export markets more effectively. See Soufan, 'Qassem Soleimani'.

## Author

**Susan Khazaeli**, PhD, works as a Defence Scientist at Defence Research and Development Canada.

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# ISIS as a hybrid threat actor: from Iraq and Syria to a new rise in Africa

Jarno Välimäki

## Introduction

This chapter examines how the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has aimed at building a caliphate, its own state based on its perception of divine legitimacy, in Syria and Iraq, while globally challenging democracy and the international state system. The study focuses on the rise of ISIS in the early 2010s, its rapid expansion and control over territory in the middle of the decade, and its eventual losses against the US-led anti-ISIS coalition. Lastly, the chapter evaluates the potential for ISIS's new rise, particularly in Africa.

The chapter demonstrates how ISIS has acted in different domains, with various tools, to further its strategic goals of building a caliphate, expanding it, and delegitimizing alternative governance systems. To this end, the domains under consideration are military, intelligence, cyber, information, culture, societal, legal, political, diplomatic, public administration, economic, and infrastructure. Where distinguishable and relevant, changes across phases in the use of various tools and activities in different domains are also highlighted.

The chapter shows that actions taken by ISIS have supported two interlinked aims: state-building, and delegitimization of its enemies such as modern Muslim states and the Western state system. As a result, the group's actions in different domains are often strongly interlinked. Overall, this chapter argues that these interlinked actions and their careful and flexible usage allowed ISIS to gain considerable support as well as control over territory, while portraying its caliphate as legitimate, and alternatives as inefficient and illegitimate. This flexibility and wide range of tools maintain the

group's capability of influencing supporters globally, and its ability to prepare for a new rise.

## ISIS's strategic goals

ISIS is a transnational terrorist organization with a Salafi-Jihadist worldview, which is an ideology that aims to violently Islamize society, replace modern states with divine rule, and to purge the Islamic faith of what its adherents consider modernism and heresy, including human rights, gender equality, Western ideas of liberal democracy, and so forth.<sup>1</sup> Salafism on its own refers to a conservative Sunni Islam movement that aims to revive the early tradition of practising Islam, which its proponents consider to be the pure way. It is important to note that Salafism in itself does not prescribe any attitude towards political forms of influence, and the movement includes a variety of views on how to achieve its goal. Jihadism, on the other hand, rejects the current political systems and international order and aims to overthrow them violently.<sup>2</sup> Thus, ISIS is a Salafi-Jihadist group due to its ideological views and its attitude towards political systems and political forms of influence.

It is sometimes argued that ISIS is a non-religious power-seeking group controlled by the members of the former regime of the late president of Iraq, Saddam Hussein. It is true that social, political and economic factors were all important in the rise of ISIS, and in many cases may have contributed more than religious beliefs to the decision to join the group. Certainly, the majority of Muslims do not share the beliefs of ISIS. Yet it would be misleading and reductionist to claim that ISIS has no religious aspects. Not only does ISIS build on

<sup>1</sup> Mahood and Rane, 'Islamist narratives'.

<sup>2</sup> Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*.

the teachings and writings of earlier proponents of Islamism, and particularly Salafi-Jihadism, but it also deliberately recruited these former Ba'athists to strengthen the Salafi-Jihadist project because of their military experience rather than the other way around.<sup>3</sup>

The ultimate strategic goal of ISIS's project is to bring about an apocalypse by establishing a permanent global caliphate. The desire to establish a caliphate is not unique to ISIS, but rather builds on the ideas of Hasan al-Banna (the founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood), Abul A'la Maududi (the founder of Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami), and Sayyid Qutb (a former leader of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq, predecessor of ISIS, formulated his view of an Islamic state in 2006 in a way that replicated the formulation by Abd-al Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism.<sup>5</sup>

ISIS's project aims to destroy Western and Western-inspired state systems, as they are based on human rule instead of righteous divine rule. In ISIS's worldview, only the caliph is a legitimate leader, and democracy is considered heresy. The group blames the Western "crusaders" of imperialism and colonialism in the Muslim world and wants to avenge their "crimes" such as the creation of modern borders in the Sykes-Picot agreement. Modern notions of nationalism are considered a pagan concept and practice, and as such nation-states should be destroyed.<sup>6</sup>

ISIS also considers modern Arab leaders apostates since they allegedly do not enforce the Islamic Sharia law, or they also use other sources of governance. Thus, the idea of building a caliphate does not leave any room for current states that claim to be Islamic. Faithful followers of ISIS must overthrow the leaders of modern Muslim states.<sup>7</sup> As Mahood and Rane put it, "The enmity directed towards not only Western forces but Muslims who adhere to what the group perceives as un-Islamic

'Western' cultural, social and political influences, such as gender equality, human rights and democracy, is intended to establish a clear divide between ISIS's 'Islam' and all other modes of existence and co-existence."<sup>8</sup>

Concerning this division of ISIS's own interpretation of Islam and other modes of existence, the concept of *jahiliyya* (state of ignorance), as coined by Sayyid Qutb, is extremely important. According to Qutb, it is a religious duty of the faithful to create an Islamic State in order for them to turn away from the immorality and corruption of *jahiliyya*. For ISIS, this concept emphasizes that the caliphate is also a way to evade the wrong social order, to fully reject Western norms.<sup>9</sup>

The way in which ISIS differentiates itself from the overall Salafi-Jihadist tradition is exemplified in the urgency with which it seeks to achieve the creation of a caliphate. The ISIS strategy, *baqiyyah wa tatamaddad* (remain/endure and expand), calls for the creation and expansion of this state to be as rapid as possible, while many other jihadist organizations, most prominently al-Qaeda, have called for a more gradual approach.<sup>10</sup> Hence, ISIS's immediate goal is to control territory and to achieve sovereignty, so that it can implement so-called divine rule and what it sees as the correct Islamic way of life. Whereas al-Qaeda and many other Salafi-Jihadist groups believe that the time is not yet ripe for this, and that the caliphate will emerge through gradual awakening and the subsequent mobilization of Sunni Muslims,<sup>11</sup> for ISIS, control over territory will remain an important goal at any given time, even if it needs to wait to build capabilities.

As ISIS needs territory with a Muslim population and a significant support base to establish a functioning state, it must first and foremost defeat, at least partially and in specific areas, those modern Muslim states and their security apparatus that would prevent it from controlling territory. Simultaneously, ISIS must win over a sufficient number of

3 Whiteside, 'A Pedigree of Terror'.

4 Mahood and Rane, 'Islamist narratives'.

5 Crooke, 'You Can't Understand ISIS'.

6 Macris, 'Investigating the ties'.

7 Ibid.

8 Mahood and Rane, 'Islamist narratives'.

9 Ibid.

10 Almoammad, 'Seven Years of Terror'.

11 Rogers, 'The death of Baghdadi'.

Muslims to support its endeavour. This is exemplified by the group's anti-Shia strategy and attacks, aimed at making use of the anti-Shia tendencies of some Sunni Muslim communities. ISIS presents itself as the champion and guardian of Sunni Islam.<sup>12</sup>

This specific strategy is a result of ISIS's own strategic evolution and thinking. The movement's roots go all the way back to the early 2000s when its founder, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, led his militant group from Afghanistan to Iraq, where it was rebranded as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2004. However, a rift between Zarqawi and the al-Qaeda leadership was soon evident as Zarqawi focused on a sectarian war in Syria and Iraq, and on building the caliphate quickly rather than focusing on global attacks.<sup>13</sup> The differing approaches and the resulting schism became even more evident after the US military killed Zarqawi in June 2006, and the movement declared the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) under the leadership of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. The group was later rebranded as ISIS in 2013.<sup>14</sup>

This was the group's first attempt at building a caliphate at a time when Iraq was in the midst of a political transition following the ousting of Saddam Hussein. The US had banned the former ruling Baath Party from the government and disbanded the military, creating a political vacuum and alienating hundreds of thousands of young men. At the same time, the Shia majority of Iraq seized power for the first time after centuries of Sunni rule, leading to outbreaks of sectarian tensions that the terrorist group was able to exploit.<sup>15</sup> Despite these promising circumstances, the endeavour was nonetheless quickly extinguished when US forces nearly destroyed the organization in 2007–2008. However, it was during this period and the subsequent reorganization of the movement that its strategy was largely formed and consolidated, and would become important in its successes in the 2010s.<sup>16</sup>

During this period, one document concerning ISIS's strategy is worth highlighting. On 18 December 2009, the group published a 55-page manifesto on strategy and doctrine named the *Fallujah Memorandum* or *Khoutah Istratigya li Ta'aziz al-Moqif al-Siyasi al-Dawlat al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq* (A Strategic Plan to Improve the Political Position of the Islamic State of Iraq). In the Fallujah Memorandum, ISIS emphasized the need to focus on Iraq's Sunni population. It was a priority to win political influence in Iraq by competing with the Iraqi Islamic Party, recruiting from local resistance groups, and forcing politicians, government officials, and tribal leaders to cooperate or face death. The memorandum also argued for the creation of tribal Awakening units, which would increase the group's influence among the rural population and the tribes.<sup>17</sup> Overall, these steps would aim to "improve the position of Islamic State; therefore it will be more powerful politically and militarily... so the Islamic [State] project will be ready to take over all Iraq after the enemy troops withdraw".<sup>18</sup>

The memorandum emphasizes the state-building aspect of ISIS's strategy. However, it should be stressed that the eventual aim of this is to expand the state globally. As Remy Low argues, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's sermon in 2014, 'A Message to the Mujahidin and the Muslim Ummah from Amirul-Mu'minin Abu Bakr al-Husayni al-Qurashi al-Baghdadi', highlighted that this caliphate would be for the whole Muslim *Ummah* (religious community). By giving himself the traditional title of *Amirul-Mu'minin* (Leader of the Faithful), Baghdadi emphasized the universality of his rule. He directly established himself as the legitimate authority over Muslims, with the caliphate as a solution for Muslims against states that oppress them, and called for them to actively participate in the struggle to build this Islamic State.<sup>19</sup>

12 Bunzel, 'The Kingdom'.

13 Byman, 'Comparing Al Qaeda'; Hashim, *From Al-Qaida Affiliate*.

14 For the sake of clarity, ISIS is the term used throughout this chapter regardless of the time period.

15 Hamasaeed and Nada, 'Iraq Timeline'.

16 *Khoutah Istratigya li Ta'aziz al-Moqif al-Siyasi al-Dawlat al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq*, ISIS publication. An abridged version translated into English is available in Ingram, Whiteside and Winter, *The ISIS Reader*.

17 Ibid.

18 *Khoutah Istratigya li Ta'aziz al-Moqif al-Siyasi al-Dawlat al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq*, ISIS publication. Cited in Al-Shishani, 'The Islamic State's Strategic'.

19 Low, 'Making up the Ummah'.

## Development of ISIS campaigns and operations

A major factor in the group's defeat in 2006–2007 was the armed opposition in Iraq's al-Anbar Governorate by Sunni Muslims, who had formed rival tribal rebellion groups, Awakening Councils, to fight against the ISI. While the US counterinsurgency operations had a major role in defeating the ISI, it was the Sunni resistance that shocked the group. This was evident from their self-critique entitled 'Analysis of the State of the Islamic State of Iraq'.<sup>20</sup> ISIS realized the need to co-opt the Sunnis before a renewed attempt to build the Islamic State could succeed. What followed can be described as preparatory campaigns aimed at ensuring that the group could rise again and that its goals could be achieved.

ISIS purposefully de-escalated its activities and retreated from Baghdad into the Mosul region to re-examine its approach and build tactics that would rely not only on coercion but also on persuasion. ISIS started to integrate local Sunni Muslims into its project and to implement Sharia law in the region to ensure that the local people would not be alienated. ISIS helped and urged the local Sunnis to form groups that would take control of the security in their areas. This indeed led to increasing numbers of Iraqis joining the group's ranks, as well as to the creation of alliances with local tribes in Fallujah.<sup>21</sup>

Total de-escalation also helped ISIS because it allowed the group to regain power while leaving room for the US to withdraw from Iraq. As the Fallujah Memorandum established, ISIS would engage in political battles only after the "Crusaders" had left.<sup>22</sup> The fragile border between Iraq and Syria, as well as the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011, also enabled ISIS to retreat, reconstitute itself and establish training camps and logistics bases in Syria before re-emerging in Iraq.<sup>23</sup>

By the end of 2011, the US had largely withdrawn from Iraq, and from January 2012 on, ISIS

immediately escalated its actions into a more overt and offensive destabilization phase. ISIS campaigns included a wave of high-explosive truck bombings against prisons, security installations, and "soft" targets. The main priorities were to release jihadist prisoners to strengthen the group's manpower and to regain control of the territory previously held by the ISI. For this purpose, they also began to target Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki's Shia-dominated government.<sup>24</sup> In an important achievement in March 2012, ISIS managed to take over the city of Haditha in the Iraqi al-Anbar Governorate, executing numerous police officers and Awakening Council leaders.<sup>25</sup>

From 2013, ISIS developed into a military organization able to wage war using robust guerrilla and semi-conventional mobile warfare. The following years represented a total escalation as the group used brutal force to create its own proto-state in Iraq and Syria, coerce local populations into accepting its rule over them, and to terrorize its enemies, including Western states. In 2014 the group announced that it had officially established a caliphate. In the same year, ISIS captured large territories in Iraq's countryside, as well as major cities like Mosul and Tikrit and important infrastructure such as hydroelectric dams and oil refineries.<sup>26</sup>

After the declaration, ISIS managed to attract an unprecedented number of foreign fighters. Controlling large territory had given the group the necessary legitimacy to inspire aspirant jihadists worldwide, and ISIS actively encouraged this migration with media campaigns. In many ways, ISIS competed with pre-existing states by claiming that its socioeconomic project could compete with what Western modernity could offer.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the successes were due to a combination of military planning and operations, socio-economic projects and careful promotion of the group's ideology and narratives.

The success in controlling and expanding territory also allowed ISIS to project power elsewhere

20 *Analysis of the State of the Islamic State of Iraq*, ISIS publication.

21 Al-Shishani, 'The Islamic State's Strategic'.

22 *Khoutah Istratigiya li Ta'aziz al-Moqif al-Siyasi al-Dawlat al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq*, ISIS publication.

23 Westphal, 'Violence'.

24 Wyer, 'The Islamic State of Iraq'.

25 Ingram, Whiteside and Winter, 'Lessons'.

26 Byman, 'Comparing Al Qaeda'.

27 Gerges, *ISIS: A History*.



in the world. In 2015, ISIS militants managed to capture some territory in Libya, and in 2015 African terrorist group Boko Haram and some members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan also pledged allegiance to ISIS. However, the success also strengthened outside powers' interest in combatting the terrorist group, and the US-led anti-ISIS coalition conducted significant military campaigns against it. As a result, ISIS started to lose its territory from 2015 on, which prompted it to deploy a series of terror attacks in Europe. By late 2017, the coalition had encircled the group and kept pressuring it with air campaigns, making ISIS's defeat begin to seem inevitable.

However, the resulting decline in territory, resources, and personnel demonstrated the group's flexibility and its ability to de-escalate and refocus. After the group lost its last territory in Syria, Baghouz, in March 2019, rather than trying to regain lost territory with desperate mass attacks, ISIS duly transitioned to urban guerrilla operations and covert missions, including assassinations, ambush operations and mortar fire. The group also redistributed weapon caches, hideouts, and money to support future insurgency. Moreover, ISIS began to emphasize that it still had a global reach and controlled *wilayas* (states or provinces) from West Africa to East Asia.<sup>28</sup> Hence, it was able to wait for another opportunity, such as 2011–2012, while maintaining its capabilities but staying much more under the radar than during its territorial expansion. As Andreas Jacobs and Guillaume Lasconjarias have pointed out, ISIS has been highly adaptable and has reacted to both opportunities and pressures.<sup>29</sup>

## Tools and domains

ISIS has used various tools in multiple domains in different phases of its operations to achieve its goals. This section takes a closer look at these tools and domains and is divided into six subsections accordingly: military and intelligence; cyber and information; culture and societal; legal; polit-

ical, diplomatic and public administration; and economic and infrastructure. It is worth noting that the actions of ISIS in one domain are often highly interlinked with actions in other domains. Similarly, actions in one domain may be aimed at affecting other domains. Moreover, it is important to note that in some domains the group's actions have changed significantly in different phases of its hybrid threat activity, whereas other domains have been less affected.

### Military and intelligence

The military domain has remained a significant part of ISIS's operations across the different phases of its hybrid threat activity. However, the methods, as well as the short-term purposes of its military actions have adapted to the changing situations.

In the first decade of the 2000s, the group mainly focused on developing a formal military structure and creating functional and specialized military capabilities. Its actual military operations were largely limited to terrorist attacks such as suicide bombings and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks.<sup>30</sup> Only after the defeat in 2006–2007 did the group manage to build the military apparatus capable of gaining territory. Major steps towards this goal were taken when ISIS conducted two insurgency campaigns in 2012 and 2013 called “Breaking the Walls” and “Soldiers’ Harvest”. The first targeted prisons, security installations and soft targets in order to free jihadist prisoners in Iraq and provoke the Shia to retaliate, while the second was aimed at weakening and intimidating the Iraqi security forces with targeted assassinations and bombings.<sup>31</sup> Importantly, the “Soldiers’ Harvest” campaign was also designed to weaken relations between the government and the people, thus aiming to extort the support of the local population.<sup>32</sup> These campaigns highlighted the group's capabilities to execute well-planned and complex military operations, and allowed it to escalate its activities towards conventional warfare while maintaining operational flexibility.

28 Ingram, Whiteside and Winter, 'Lessons'.

29 Jacobs and Lasconjarias, 'NATO's Hybrid Flanks'.

30 Hashim, 'The Islamic State's Way'.

31 Ibid.

32 Beccaro, 'Modern Irregular Warfare'.

Notably, ISIS has been seeking and seizing military opportunities wherever security and governance vacuums exist. It has conducted decisive military action whenever it assesses that it has an opportunity to gain local or regional power due to weak governance or a sympathetic population, for example. A prime example was the ISIS campaign in the border region of Iraq and Syria in mid-2013 to gain control in the area. Bashir al-Assad's government in Syria was struggling against a rebellion, the Iraqi government was suffering from factional infighting, and US forces were withdrawing from the region.<sup>33</sup> Both the Syrian and Iraqi governments were unable to sufficiently protect the vulnerable border areas, leaving room for ISIS to take advantage of the situation. This timely focus on these resource-rich areas allowed ISIS to significantly strengthen its power and capabilities.

ISIS was also able to build its military capabilities due to the defeat of Syrian and Iraqi military forces in 2014. The group seized Russian and American artillery from the Iraqi army and Russian artillery from the Syrian army, and acquired tanks and man-portable air-defence systems (MANPADS).<sup>34</sup> At the same time, ISIS began to modify captured weapons and to manufacture ammunitions itself.<sup>35</sup> These significant military capabilities allowed the group to conduct massive conventional military campaigns, to rapidly expand its territory, and to protect it. It used these capabilities in both offensive and defensive operations, and defeated Syrian forces in Tabqa, Menagh, Deir-Ez-Zor, and Palmyra, as well as Iraqi forces in Mosul, Tikrit, and Ramadi, among others.<sup>36</sup>

ISIS also had remarkable intelligence and reconnaissance skills, which were based on both technical skills and its network of local supporters and informants.<sup>37</sup> ISIS had built its own special forces that were able to conduct sophisticated reconnaissance operations. Moreover, the group used drones

not only to drop munitions and grenades, but also for reconnaissance and surveillance.<sup>38</sup>

However, ISIS's military successes largely depended on conventional small-unit infantry capability. The group seized garrisons and military bases in Iraq and Syria, highlighting and boosting the effectiveness of its conventional capability. At the same time, from 2013 to 2015, ISIS significantly improved its operational methods and was able to command, control and coordinate its troops effectively. It also improved its own IED manufacturing capabilities and began to produce suicide vehicle-borne IEDs on an almost industrial scale. Thus, ISIS was also able to resort to traditional methods such as suicide attacks, particularly in urban warfare.<sup>39</sup>

When the group rapidly lost territory in Syria and Iraq from 2016 on, it also lost much of this conventional military capability as many of its skilled personnel were killed and equipment destroyed. Thus, to continue to remain relevant, the group switched to regular terrorist and guerrilla attacks on civilians, military forces, police and anti-ISIS militias in both Syria and Iraq.<sup>40</sup> Such attacks have continued to date, and as of 2019 ISIS had approximately 10,000 remaining members in these countries.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the group switched to promoting local smaller-scale attacks further from its main area of operation. After losing territory in Iraq and Syria, ISIS and its supporters also started to increasingly conduct terrorist attacks across the world, including in Brussels, Paris, London, Jakarta, New York, and many other places.

In this endeavour, the information domain has also played a significant role. In its *Rumiyah* magazine, ISIS gave specific instructions to its supporters on how to carry out attacks and leave evidence so that the group could claim responsibility. This was part of the group's strategy to remain relevant by demonstrating that it was not restricted geo-

33 Jasper and Moreland, 'ISIS'.

34 Byman, 'Comparing Al Qaeda'.

35 Hashim, 'The Islamic State's Way'.

36 Jasper and Moreland, 'ISIS'.

37 Jacobs and Lasconjarias, 'NATO's Hybrid Flanks'.

38 Hashim, 'The Islamic State's Way'.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Bunzel, 'Explainer'.

graphically, but could also conduct attacks globally.<sup>42</sup> This also demonstrates the interplay between different domains: military operations are used in information campaigns and vice versa.

However, ISIS has not given up on controlling territory either. The group has been flexible and adaptive and aims to take advantage of regional opportunities. While the loss of territory in Iraq and Syria has (for now) destroyed its state-building project there, the group has been able to exploit failures of governance elsewhere. For example, in 2020 ISIS gained significant support in Cabo Delgado, northern Mozambique, largely because the central government has neglected the people of this region. This has allowed the group to seize important cities and key infrastructure.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, ISIS continues to plan for a resurgence in Iraq and Syria. Perhaps the best indication of this is that since 2018 its media outlets have been promoting a second “Soldiers’ Harvest” campaign.<sup>44</sup> The group significantly increased its attacks in both Syria and Iraq in 2020, as well as amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the US withdrawal of forces, leaving governance and security vacuums in the region.<sup>45</sup> Notably, in late January 2022, approximately 100 ISIS members attacked al-Sina Prison in north-eastern Syria, which was holding about 3,500 detained ISIS members. The attack lasted for almost nine days and resulted in some ISIS members escaping from the prison, although the number remained low and dozens of ISIS fighters were killed during the attack.<sup>46</sup>

### Cyber and information

ISIS has used modern and sophisticated information operations to gain international volunteers and financial support, as well as to push the narrative of the “caliphate” for a religious source of legitimacy, and as a tool to undermine the Muslim identity of its regional opponents.

ISIS published its first official treatise on media jihad as early as 2010 when it was struggling after its defeat a few years earlier. Remarkably, its subsequent publications on the topic in 2015 during its strong period, and in 2019 while struggling, once again highlight largely the same main principles as the first one. All three highlight that information operations should legitimize ISIS ideologically and intimidate its opponents.<sup>47</sup> These continuous priorities stress that these operations are a tool to achieve the group’s strategic goals. However, the emphasis and methods of execution have changed.

Intimidation of opponents has been particularly important when ISIS has felt the need to project strength. In the 2010 treaty, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir urged the group’s supporters to “sow terror in the hearts of our enemy using everything permitted by sharia” to show ISIS’s strength and the determination of its fighters.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, when its territory started to shrink, ISIS’s media campaigns began to emphasize attacks against the group’s perceived opponents globally. In this line of effort, ISIS is well known for its use of extreme violence in political messaging and propaganda. The group has broadcast multiple beheadings and other execution videos with extremely graphic content.

On the other hand, ISIS has emphasized state-building and legitimization when it has been at its strongest, and expanding. For example, in 2015 ISIS published hundreds of propaganda pieces that focused on portraying a utopian view of the quality of life in its caliphate,<sup>49</sup> largely to recruit jihadists and to support migration to its caliphate. As Peter Wignell et al. put it, “ISIS presented itself as an expanding, victorious and administratively competent organisation, successfully carving out an ever-growing ‘promised land’ for their believers.”<sup>50</sup> Glossy videos portraying ISIS fighters as heroes further portray the image of the caliphate as an attractive destination.

42 Alkaff, ‘Crowdsourcing Local Attacks’.

43 Kossoff, ‘Islamic State’.

44 Cafarella, Wallace and Zhou, ‘ISIS’s Second Comeback’.

45 Dent, ‘US Policy’.

46 Hassan and al-Ahmed, ‘A closer look’.

47 Ingram, Whiteside and Winter, ‘Lessons’.

48 Ingram, Whiteside and Winter, *The ISIS Reader*.

49 Jasper and Moreland, ‘ISIS’.

50 Wignell, Tan, O’Halloran and Lange, ‘A Mixed Methods’.

A noticeable feature of the information operations is their advanced use of online outlets and social media sites. ISIS has published several magazines and newsletters online (e.g. *Dabiq*, *Rumiyah*, and *al-Naba*) in multiple languages and aimed at different audiences. Particularly significant has been the group's use of social media sites to spread and amplify these messages. ISIS originally used Twitter as the primary platform for this amplification but is also known to have numerous accounts on other platforms.<sup>51</sup> In this way, the group can easily magnify its efforts in other domains as it can, among other things, celebrate and exaggerate military achievements, call for physical and financial support, and build shared cultural and social understanding. On the other hand, ISIS can also encourage and support its backers in conducting attacks through these channels.

While limited in scope thus far outside of information operations, ISIS or its supporters can also use direct cyberattacks to attack or vandalize websites they oppose and to intimidate their opponents. As early as 2015, the group's supporters reportedly hacked US Central Command's Twitter and YouTube accounts to publish lists of generals and their addresses in order to threaten them.<sup>52</sup> However, ISIS has not been able to cause direct physical damage with cyberattacks, likely due to the fact that such capabilities would need large resources and highly skilled/specialized personnel.<sup>53</sup>

As in the military domain, ISIS also continues to look for opportunities to exploit vulnerabilities in the cyber and information domains. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has given ISIS new ways to promote its own project at the expense of the West. In early 2020, the group warned its followers against travelling to Europe due to the virus,<sup>54</sup> and ISIS and its supporters have argued that the virus was sent by Allah to kill only infidels,<sup>55</sup> highlighting

how the group aims to take advantage of developments and situations that they have not themselves created.

### Culture and societal

In the culture and societal domains, ISIS has been active in attempting to build shared heritage and in emphasizing common culture, as well as in trying to delegitimize, undermine and even destroy other cultures. Much of this is carried out through religious arguments and narratives, and thus these are tightly connected to the information domain. However, the group also physically targets cultural icons and religious centres with the aim of eradicating entire societies. The group demolishes churches, shrines, and mosques, as well as statues and archaeological digs to destroy symbols that represent a sense of shared heritage other than that built by ISIS.

To culturally and societally present ISIS's caliphate as good and the rest of the international system as bad, ISIS divides the world into believers and disbelievers. ISIS then depicts the disbelievers as an existential threat to Islam and the Muslim community.<sup>56</sup> ISIS records a long list of negative characteristics that it associates with disbelievers, including "filthy" and "evil",<sup>57</sup> and applies delegitimizing labels to those that do not support it.<sup>58</sup>

In this line of effort, religious arguments are prominent. ISIS refers extensively to the Quranic verses and the Hadiths for justification of its actions. Most importantly, however, the group argues that it is executing a divine project, which is reflected in its information campaigns and military operations as well. For example, ISIS used to emphasize the importance of the strategically unimportant Syrian city of Dabiq as the group believed that the Prophet had said that Dabiq would be the last battleground where Allah's fighters would beat the "armies of Rome". Thus, ISIS

51 Beccaro, 'Modern Irregular Warfare'.

52 Jasper and Moreland, 'ISIS'.

53 LSE, 'Global Strategies'.

54 Al-Naba 225, ISIS publication.

55 For example, Bin Khaled, Twitter post.

56 Westphal, 'Violence'.

57 Ingram, 'An analysis'.

58 Greene, 'ISIS'.

named its propaganda magazine *Dabiq*, went to great lengths to secure the capture of the city, and celebrated it extensively.<sup>59</sup>

Important aspects of such religious arguments are the delegitimization of other religions and ideologies, as well as those Muslims who do not support ISIS's interpretation. ISIS spreads hostile rhetoric against Jews, Shi'as and several other regional minorities, and has even targeted them in genocidal attacks. ISIS has also targeted cultural icons and religious centres. For example, in Mosul in July 2014, the group's fighters destroyed Jonah's Tomb, which was revered by Jewish, Christian, and Islamic communities.<sup>60</sup> The mere ability to control territory has also allowed ISIS to portray opposing jihadist organizations such as al-Qaeda as inadequate in pursuing a caliphate and thus unable to fulfil their divine purpose.<sup>61</sup> This strengthens ISIS's argument that their path is the right one to follow, creating and cultivating a social identity for its followers.

Yet, particularly when ISIS controlled extensive territory, many of the Muslims living under the caliphate did not necessarily believe in its interpretation of Islam and its ideology, but were convinced that it could provide security and welfare.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, ISIS has also actively argued that life in the caliphate is superior. ISIS portrays its caliphate as the only place where Muslims can avoid persecution and where they can live freely. In contrast, the group has claimed that Western democracies are hypocritical and degenerate, and oppress the weak.<sup>63</sup>

Notably, ISIS has been able to continue to pursue its goals with cultural and societal efforts even when the basis of many of these methods and tools, the caliphate and the control of territory, has been lost. With continuous reliance on the argument of divine plans, the group's former spokesperson, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami, stated in 2016 that the losses were Allah's way of testing the fighters and that they would not lose as long as they had

the will to fight. To this end, he was able to divert the attention away from territorial control towards the global fight of "true Muslims" against the rest of the world.<sup>64</sup> As ISIS's military operations shifted to global terrorist attacks rather than territorial expansion in the Middle East, so did its cultural and societal efforts begin to emphasize the perceived global injustice against Muslims more strongly than the caliphate as a righteous project.

### Legal

In the legal domain, ISIS already challenges Western states and potential democratization in the region simply by showing a complete disregard for international law and universal human rights. For example, it has committed numerous mass murders of minority groups,<sup>65</sup> and has reportedly used chemical weapons.<sup>66</sup>

Most importantly, however, ISIS directly challenges the democratic norms and internationally accepted basis for statehood. ISIS's whole legal structure and arguments categorically reject any man-made legal systems. According to the group, no state or ruler can gain legitimacy through democratic processes. Rather, ISIS bases its claims of sovereignty and legitimacy on divine power alone.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, while a considerable amount of material has been written on whether ISIS met the international legal requirements for statehood when it controlled extensive territory,<sup>68</sup> the question is of no importance to the group. As it claims divine legitimacy and rejects man-made laws, international law is not only irrelevant, but claiming legitimacy based on it is considered heresy.

As a result of this rejection, ISIS also rejects the Westphalian state system. For example, ISIS refuses to recognize borders and directly attacks this system. After announcing the caliphate, the group also announced the end of the Sykes-Picot order, which had established colonial borders in the Middle East, and literally demolished the border

59 Wood, 'What ISIS Really Wants'.

60 Moreland and Moreland, 'The Islamic State'.

61 Gambhir, 'Dabiq'.

62 Pomerantsev, 'Brave New War'.

63 LSE, 'Global Strategies'.

64 Ingram, Whiteside and Winter, *The ISIS Reader*.

65 Moreland and Moreland, 'The Islamic State'.

66 UN Security Council, 'Letter dated 1 May 2021'.

67 Khadem, 'Why Should Law'.

68 See, for example, Bernstein, 'Is the Islamic State'.

between Iraq and Syria with bulldozers. Unsurprisingly, ISIS used a video of this in its propaganda.<sup>69</sup> This rejection not only allows the group to delegitimize the whole international system, but also other Islamist groups. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas have participated in elections and/or other democratic processes, which allows ISIS to accuse them of apostasy.<sup>70</sup>

As Mara Revkin argued, “(i)n order to destroy an existing world order based on man-made laws and institutions, the Islamic State must logically assert an alternative legal framework to fill the vacuum.”<sup>71</sup> Such frameworks and institutions then help it to justify its capture and control of territory and to gain the trust and goodwill of the civilians in its territory.<sup>72</sup>

ISIS indeed has complex legal institutions and systems that it uses to justify its claim to divine legitimacy and statehood, which are fundamental to the group for its control of land and people.<sup>73</sup> ISIS generally relies on its interpretation of Islamic Sharia law, which is extremely strict and aims to follow the seventh-century legal environment. The caliphate, in turn, is the only accepted institution that has authority over Muslims as it enforces these rules and is the custodian of the divine law. Former leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, stressed that living under the caliphate is an obligation for Muslims.<sup>74</sup>

Despite the rejection of democracy and man-made laws, ISIS has its own social contract. The group asks Muslims to pledge allegiance (*bay'ah*) to the caliphate, which establishes a contract (*'aqq*) and reciprocal duties between the caliph and the people. To ensure that the caliphate fulfils its duties, ISIS has established a Sharia council that oversees regional governors (*walis*), which in turn oversee official regional courts.<sup>75</sup>

This legal system and its institutions play a fundamental role in ISIS's state-building objective and particularly in ensuring the group retains and expands its support base. ISIS has been able to por-

tray its legal system as superior to existing structures. For example, corruption had been rampant in both Iraq and Syria for decades, crime had been widespread in both countries, and Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria has been particularly vehement in continuing to use the country's legal institutions for suppression of political dissent. ISIS's strict rules enforced by relatively effective but ruthless institutions have made it comparatively easy for the group to argue that its rule marks a clear improvement in these aspects.<sup>76</sup>

However, when ISIS lost its territory, it also essentially lost its capability to run such legal institutions. Moreover, it can no longer protect its supporters from corruption, theft and other crimes in a similar manner. Yet it can continue to use its former legal system to delegitimize the alternatives. ISIS can continue to highlight any cases of inefficiency or perceived injustice, for example in Iraq and Syria, and argue that such cases show that the caliphate would be a better and more just governance structure than its alternatives. Similarly, ISIS still has the capability to establish similar institutions in new areas if it gains control, as it has already acquired the knowledge and experience required to run them.

### **Political, diplomatic and public administration**

Much has already been said in previous sections on how ISIS has been using the political, diplomatic and public administration domains to achieve its goals. For example, the legal aspects of state-building are inherently linked to public administration, and many of the military and information operations have integral political dimensions. Similarly, the provision of welfare is an important function of public administration, but also a societal issue. However, two points are worth making here: ISIS has been able to co-opt key individuals and groups in the areas it has aimed at controlling, and it has also been able to ignite the political nerve endings of the targets it aims to delegitimize or weaken.

69 Revkin, 'The legal foundations'.

70 Wood, 'What ISIS Really Wants'.

71 Revkin, 'The legal foundations'.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Wood, 'What ISIS Really Wants'.

75 Revkin, 'The legal foundations'.

76 Ibid.

As mentioned earlier, one of the key reasons why ISIS's predecessor the Islamic State of Iraq failed was its inability to gain support among the tribes, and thus the group started to pay more attention to co-opting them. ISIS began to create alliances with tribes and allowed some autonomy in local governance to appease them and satisfy their traditions.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, ISIS incorporated local militia groups, which helped them to form capable, disciplined and organized military units.<sup>78</sup>

Similarly, the recruitment (or abduction) of key foreign individuals has given ISIS both specialized knowledge and propaganda value. For example, it has been reported that a Chechen lieutenant has been in a key position in the group. Moreover, ISIS abducted British war correspondent John Cantlie in 2012, and made him appear in videos and write propaganda articles that were heavily critical of the West.<sup>79</sup> For ISIS, it was politically significant that a Western non-Muslim could be used in such information campaigns.

In the political domain, ISIS has also tried and been able to stir up the political environment in its target countries. For example, in Turkey it has reportedly deliberately not claimed responsibility for some terror activities, knowing full well that this would help it to misdirect the focus of the security forces and to stir up the political environment. After the Suruç and Ankara Train Station suicide bomb attacks of 2015, ISIS's failure to immediately claim responsibility allowed other actors to be blamed. Officials of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) accused the government of the attacks, while the ruling AK Party members blamed the HDP and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).<sup>80</sup>

### **Economic and infrastructure**

Much has already been said about the economic and infrastructure domains in previous sections. In short, revenues and control of adequate infrastructure are essential for any group aiming to build a state, and to sustain military and propa-

ganda efforts. Similarly, the provision of welfare is impossible without adequate finances and infrastructure. This section will provide a short overview of how ISIS has been able to finance its efforts and how it has used its control of strategic infrastructure such as dams as a direct weapon to pressure local populations.

ISIS has developed a self-sustaining financial system and gained significant revenues. As Andrea Beccaro lists, the group's means of financing itself have included: "extortion, theft, bank looting, human trafficking (including kidnapping for ransom), control of oil and gas reservoirs, smuggling of cultural and historical artefacts, taxation of the local population and goods transiting territory controlled by ISIS, and donations by private individuals or non-profit organizations."<sup>81</sup>

This further highlights the interlinkage between the finances of ISIS and its state-building efforts: without adequate revenues, ISIS cannot sustain its operations, but without a state-like entity, it will also lose much of its revenues, particularly from taxation and the sale of oil. When the group controlled oil fields, it was able to produce an estimated 50,000 barrels a day and thus gain over USD 1 million a day selling oil on the black market.<sup>82</sup> It was also able to impose significant taxes by allowing people under the caliphate to work in agriculture or other sectors rather than engage in a holy war, but forcing them in return to pay zakat taxes, obligatory charitable donations.<sup>83</sup> In addition, ISIS also used water as a weapon. Controlling several dams of the Euphrates Basin and Tigris, it was able to pressure the local population or to slow down enemy movements by reducing the flow of water to certain areas.<sup>84</sup> Once it lost control of territory, ISIS also lost its ability to use its control of infrastructure as a direct weapon.

In contrast, many types of criminal activity and individual donations continue to provide revenues for ISIS, as these do not depend on the control of territory. Despite the loss of control over oil fields,

77 Beaupere, 'ISIS and Protracted War'.

78 Moreland and Moreland, 'The Islamic State'.

79 Carter Center, 'Overview'.

80 Doğru, 'Hybrid Warfare'.

81 Beccaro, 'Modern Irregular Warfare'; see also Khadem, 'Why Should Law'.

82 Jasper and Moreland, 'The Islamic State'.

83 Revkin, 'Legal foundations'.

84 Beccaro, 'Modern Irregular Warfare'.



ISIS continues to extort oil-supply lines across the region. Similarly, it continues to extort people and businesses in areas with weak governance.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, according to estimates in late 2018, ISIS still had a reserve of USD 400 million that it had acquired earlier and could use to fund a future resurgence.<sup>86</sup> Besides illegal business operations and extortion, it also receives funds from technically legitimate businesses in Iraq through tribal leaders or businessmen who act as middlemen and can conceal their links to the terrorist group.<sup>87</sup>

Similarly, ISIS still receives donations from individuals around the world. Historically, most donations came from wealthy individuals in the Gulf states, but these states themselves oppose such funding and have taken legal steps to prevent it.<sup>88</sup> It is hard to estimate how significant foreign funding is at present, but it is thought to be a relatively small part of the group's financing.<sup>89</sup>

### **Strategic outlook: A new rise in (North) Africa?**

ISIS continues to look for opportunities to exploit security and governance vacuums and has increased its attacks in Iraq and Syria amid the COVID-19 pandemic. A resurgence in these countries in the coming years is entirely possible as they continue to struggle to stabilize their political situations, and security challenges could re-escalate.<sup>90</sup> However, ISIS has at the same time increased its presence and significantly strengthened its capabilities in multiple countries in Africa. After the fall of the caliphate, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the former leader of ISIS, directly asked ISIS supporters to focus on strengthening its networks outside of Iraq and Syria.<sup>91</sup> Thus, it is likely that Africa will form a notable part of the group's future endeavours and strategic calculations.

Since ISIS was forced on the defensive in Syria and Iraq, it has chosen to increasingly turn its attention elsewhere and to promote individual attacks. Yet it has not given up its goal of controlling territory and using that to increase its power until it can again establish a caliphate. North Africa is a viable option for its potential rise as ISIS already has a support base stemming from there, formed from the thousands of earlier recruits from the area. Even before ISIS established its caliphate, North Africa – particularly Libya, Tunisia and Morocco – was the most significant source of foreign recruits.<sup>92</sup> During the group's strongest periods, it also established its first "province" outside of Iraq and Syria in Libya. By 2015, ISIS had gained significant control in the eastern city of Derna and in major areas of Sirte. Although the group had lost control of these territories by the end of 2017, some ISIS fighters are still present in Libya. Moreover, North Africa's strategic location at the crossroads of sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and Europe would provide the means for further expansion and the exertion of influence.

Perhaps the main factor in the potential for ISIS to establish a new stronghold in North Africa is the existing governance and security problems in certain areas of the region. ISIS has been trying and able to take advantage of such situations previously in Iraq and Syria, as well as in Africa (i.e. Libya, Mozambique). Corruption, weak rule of law, human rights abuses, and the repression of ethnic and religious communities continue to pose major vulnerabilities that ISIS can exploit.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, almost half of the population in the region is under the age of 25, and the region has suffered high youth unemployment rates for decades,<sup>94</sup> increasing the pool of people who can potentially be radicalized. In fact, it has been shown that most of the areas with high rates of recruits were also economically and politically marginalized.<sup>95</sup>

85 Kenner, 'All ISIS Has Left'.

86 Warrick, 'Retreating ISIS army'.

87 Mansour and al-Hashimi, 'ISIS Inc'.

88 Levitt and Boghardt, 'Funding ISIS (Infographic)'; Lister, 'Cutting off'.

89 Windrem, 'Who's Funding ISIS?'.

90 Bahney and Johnston, 'ISIS Could Rise Again'.

91 Reva, 'How will ISIS'.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.

94 Basaraba and Nistor, 'The North African "Extremistan"'.

95 Sterman and Rosenblatt, 'All Jihad is Local'.

ISIS is currently increasing its presence and strengthening its capabilities precisely in those areas that are suffering from governmental neglect. In 2019, the group's military potential and attacks on the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt and in West Africa surpassed those in Iraq and Syria. In West Africa, ISIS conducted close to 200 attacks in Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, and Burkina Faso. In Sinai, the group carried out approximately 160 attacks. In 2020, hundreds more were killed in ISIS attacks in the region than during the previous year.<sup>96</sup> Notably, the group has also recently seized and controlled territory in Nigeria and reportedly remains in control of at least two villages in Sinai.<sup>97</sup> In West Africa, the rise of ISIS has been particularly supported by the failure of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger to govern and secure their common border areas, which has resulted in ISIS seizing control and expelling criminal gangs, imposing its own breed of "law and order".<sup>98</sup> North Sinai in Egypt has similarly been described as largely ungoverned and has been under a state of emergency since 2014.<sup>99</sup> The area has suffered from weak or non-existent Egyptian state control and extremely poor government services for years or even decades.<sup>100</sup> As the situation remains unstable, ISIS can continue to exploit it.

Libya, Algeria and Tunisia have seen much less ISIS activity in the past couple of years, but continue to have sustained small-scale presence and occasional attacks.<sup>101</sup> Libya remains extremely unstable with an ongoing civil war and numerous militias fighting for control, coupled with active outside interference. Even though ISIS has largely been defeated in Libya, the conflict and severe local grievances in the country continue to make it possible for ISIS remnants to regroup and even use the country as a springboard to attack other states in the region.<sup>102</sup> While Algeria and Tunisia are relatively stable, despite massive protests in Algeria from 2019–2020, there is also a strong likelihood that violence from West Africa or Libya would spill over to these countries.

ISIS is now using in Africa many of the tools that it used earlier in Iraq and Syria, and wider control of territory would allow it to expand its toolbox further. For example, the group has financed its activities in Libya through control of oil resources, and in West Africa with smuggling activities, while its propaganda machine promotes all successful attacks across the region. Particularly in those areas it controls or where it has controlled territory in North and West Africa, as well as Mozambique in Southern Africa, it has also strengthened its military capacity, weakened local governments, and aimed at providing its own security, legal, social and economic services.<sup>103</sup>

The potential rise of ISIS in Africa, and the currently increasing activities there, can pose significant challenges to the states in the region as well as Southern European states. The presence of ISIS is harmful to the economy and security and can also prevent potential liberalization and democratization processes. Moreover, ISIS is a direct threat to some European states' military operations in the region. ISIS's rise in North Africa could also increase spillover terrorist attacks in Southern Europe or lead to a rapid growth in migration to Europe.

As ISIS remains flexible and able to use multiple tools and methods to achieve its goals, the response cannot be limited to military retaliation but needs to consider the social, political, economic, and other realities that allow the group to seek influence and to strengthen its capabilities. While democratization can be a successful road to an increased livelihood and thus lessened the risk of radicalization, the Tunisian political transition after the revolution of 2011 serves as a reminder of the fact that the process has to be managed well and with sensitivity. In this case, the uprisings and democratic transition process created rapidly rising expectations and hopes about the future, which were unfortunately unrealistic due to the state's low institutional capacity and challenging

96 Paquette, Mekhennet and Warrick, 'ISIS attacks surge'.

97 Rolbiecki, Van Ostaeyen, and Winter, 'The Islamic State's Strategic'.

98 Harding, 'ISIS operating'.

99 Tisdall, 'The "iron fist" response'.

100 Milton-Edwards, 'Egypt mosque attack'.

101 Rolbiecki, Ostaeyen and Winter, 'The Islamic State's Strategic'.

102 International Crisis Group, 'How the Islamic State'.

103 Ibid.; Harding, 'ISIS operating'.

constitution-drafting and electoral processes, among other issues. The resulting disillusionment and anger provided a breeding ground for ISIS to radicalize parts of the population.<sup>104</sup>

## Conclusion

ISIS's ultimate goal is to build a caliphate, God's state for Muslims, first in the Muslim world and then by expansion everywhere. ISIS has tried to achieve this goal particularly by delegitimizing its opponents, legitimizing itself, and by careful state-building. Depending on the political and security situation, the group has used multiple methods in combination in various different domains at any given time to further this aim. Importantly, ISIS has proved that it is highly adaptive and flexible, taking advantage of opportunities but also waiting patiently for them to occur.

ISIS often makes its targets advance the group's goals with their own actions. For example, terrorist attacks in Europe have in some cases led to increasing anti-Muslim rhetoric at the highest political levels. ISIS has then been able to use it to gain support through careful crafting of narratives that stress how this highlights inherent Western animosity towards Muslims. Moreover, encouraging supporters to conduct lone wolf-type attacks has given the group plausible deniability when needed. Contrary to usual state actors, ISIS mostly uses plausible deniability when the attacks are not successful. Successful global attacks allow the group to emphasize its continued relevance, influence and outreach,

while unsuccessful attacks can be ignored in order to hide the group's actual weakness.

With these careful actions, ISIS has been able to overcome or mitigate negative developments. Graeme Wood argued in 2015 that al-Qaeda can survive underground, but ISIS cannot because its existence relies on holding territory and being a caliphate, and losing this would make it lose the allegiance of its supporters as well as its propaganda value.<sup>105</sup> Wood underestimated the group's capability to retain enough legitimacy and support by turning its attention to global attacks and emphasizing its continued claims of control outside of Syria and Iraq, as well as its willingness and ability to strengthen itself while waiting for another opportunity to resurge.

ISIS is in much better shape now than in 2011. As the group's caliphate fell under the anti-ISIS coalition's attacks, the group deliberately withdrew and relocated fighters to important locations in its support zones in Iraq and Syria, ensuring continued dispersed presence in both countries. ISIS has been able to preserve arms and funding and reconstitute key military and media capabilities. It even resumed standardized media releases in July 2018.<sup>106</sup> Most importantly, however, both Syria and Iraq remain unstable and insecure, as do multiple countries in other important regions such as Africa. This could allow the group to use the same tactics it used before to build a state and to gain support and legitimacy. Hence, for the foreseeable future, ISIS will continue to use multiple tools in various domains to try and achieve its goals.

<sup>104</sup> Macdonald and Waggoner, 'Dashed Hopes'.

<sup>105</sup> Wood, 'What ISIS Really Wants'.

<sup>106</sup> Cafarella, Wallace and Zhou, 'ISIS's Second Comeback'.

## Author

**Jarno Välimäki** works at Hybrid CoE as an Analyst for the Research and Analysis function.

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# Conclusions

The five case studies in this edited collection covered hybrid threat activity in the MENA region conducted by Russia, China, Iran and ISIS. The authors of these case studies focused on different parts of the region, highlighting those areas where the particular hybrid threat actor is active. Taken as a whole, several lessons about hybrid threats in the MENA region emerge.

**The first lesson is that hybrid threat actors have various strategic goals that the hybrid threat activities serve, but in general all of these actors aim to increase their influence.** In the MENA region, the strategic goals often seem to combine regional and broader international goals. For Tehran, the strategic goal is to project influence in the Levant and the Mediterranean while threatening the interests of the US and deterring direct action against Iran. Iran wants to ensure its own security by preventing other states from becoming strong enough to attack it and by making sure that Middle Eastern governments are friendly towards it. Russia is a clear example of an actor whose hybrid threat activities in the MENA region serve wider strategic goals. For Russia, increasing influence in MENA helps it to gain and confirm its global superpower status. China also aims to increase its influence in the region as part of its global goals, but mostly in economic terms and by challenging Western economic and development projects in the region. Finally, ISIS's strategic goal is to expand gradually and to eventually replace the current international order with its own idea of governance.

**Second, these case studies have shown that hybrid threat activity is often a long process with different phases.** The hybrid threat actors can both escalate and de-escalate their activities depending on the current environment. These shifts can take place either as a result of gradual progress or when sudden opportunities arise. In the MENA region specifically, political turmoil and armed conflicts have frequently created such opportunities.

The opportunistic nature is apparent in Russia's approach to Libya. Whereas in Syria there is evidence of longer priming activity and Russia strongly supports the Assad regime to maintain its influence, in Libya Russia has seized the opportunity that arose due to the internal turmoil following the so-called Arab Spring uprisings and the demise of the Gaddafi regime. For example, Russia opportunistically used its support for the Libyan National Army (LNA) to expand its influence, but unlike in Syria, its leverage did not depend on this one actor.

While ISIS has at several junctures spent significant time planning its operations, it has also been remarkably good at seizing the opportunities that have arisen from turmoil in the MENA region. These include the US departure from Iraq and the Syrian civil war, among others. China and Iran, on the other hand, appear to have invested more in very long-term priming operations, which has resulted in more gradual progress rather than quick escalation. This may be a sign of successful hybrid threat activity without the need to escalate, but it should be kept in mind that it can also give these actors a good starting point for escalation if either the need or the opportunity arises.

**Third, hybrid threat activities in the MENA region often involve the use of local actors in the target state.** Iran uses Hezbollah as its proxy in Lebanon and multiple other pro-Iranian armed groups in other states. China relies on economic agreements that involve not only the local governments but also companies. ISIS at times tries to co-opt some key elites in target societies and has used tribal elements to support its goals. Russia supports, in some cases openly and in others covertly, certain local political figures and groups to maintain or increase influence.

**Finally, the hybrid threat actors in the MENA region use a wide range of tools in different domains, and these differ between the actors.** As mentioned, China relies heavily on economic

tools, including the use of trade and investments to gain leverage. For Iran, often through proxies, both military and political means play important roles, but Tehran also invests in cultural, educational and humanitarian programmes to broaden support. Russia is investing heavily in diplomatic, political and military domains, including direct military interventions and the orchestration of its own international negotiations. ISIS is also relying on tools in

the military domain, particularly on non-conventional methods such as terrorist attacks, but also focuses on cultural and social efforts to gain support and justify its actions, as well as information operations through social media and propaganda outlets.

The Table below provides a more detailed account of the different tools used by these actors, as identified from the case studies in this collection.

**Table 1. Hybrid threat actors' tools in the different domains in the MENA region**

	Russia	China	Iran	ISIS
<b>Infrastructure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishing itself as a critical investor in infrastructure to gain future leverage.</li> <li>• Controlling energy infrastructure.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investing significantly in (critical) infrastructure as a part of global projects.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investing in reconstruction programmes abroad to broaden local support.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Directly controlling critical infrastructure such as dams and oil refineries to pressure local populations.</li> </ul>
<b>Cyber</b>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hacking and leaking data to intimidate opponents.</li> </ul>
<b>Economy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing financial assistance and goods for those it supports.</li> <li>• Writing off old debt as assistance to create goodwill.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishing strong trade relations, which can result in dependencies.</li> <li>• Providing financial support as an ideological lever.</li> <li>• Presenting itself as an equal partner and defender of developing countries in contrast to the West.</li> <li>• Providing unconditional soft loans in contrast to IMF and World Bank conditionality.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Directly financing proxies to establish and maintain influence through patronage.</li> <li>• Creating a supply corridor from Iran into the Mediterranean to operationalize proxy militias.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating an elaborate financial system to fund other activities.</li> </ul>

	Russia	China	Iran	ISIS
<b>Military/defence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deploying ground troops to conflict areas.</li> <li>• Using private military companies in military operations to claim deniability.</li> <li>• Launching air strikes in support of allies and to pressure others.</li> <li>• Maintaining a naval base and threatening to expand and build new ones as leverage in the Mediterranean Sea.</li> <li>• Providing weaponry and training the troops of those that Russia supports.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing arms trade, including modern sophisticated weapons.</li> <li>• Providing military support as an ideological lever.</li> <li>• Providing military training to partner states.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Directly arming and training proxies such as Hezbollah.</li> <li>• Having proxies carry out suicide bombings, kidnappings, hostage-taking, assassinations, and hijackings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carrying out terrorist attacks such as suicide bombings.</li> <li>• Conducting insurgency campaigns.</li> <li>• Carrying out large-scale attacks to take over territory.</li> <li>• Using brutal violence such as public beheadings as intimidation.</li> </ul>
<b>Culture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holding cultural events and celebrations in target states to build a positive narrative.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signing exchange and cooperation agreements on culture, education, sport and media.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investing in cultural and educational programmes to broaden support.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Destroying cultural icons and religious centres to eradicate other ways of living.</li> </ul>
<b>Social/societal</b>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishing social welfare programmes to gain support.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using religious arguments to portray itself as supreme.</li> <li>• Using hostile rhetoric against other religions and ideologies to delegitimize them.</li> </ul>
<b>Public administration</b>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proxies lobbying local governments to implement pro-Iranian policies.</li> </ul>	
<b>Legal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using international law to justify its own interventions.</li> <li>• Discrediting the West with legal arguments and narratives against Western interventions.</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenging existing norms with a disregard for international law.</li> <li>• Using legal arguments against democratic norms.</li> </ul>

	Russia	China	Iran	ISIS
<b>Intelligence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining intelligence cooperation and a presence in target country, including two signal intelligence facilities in Syria.</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducting reconnaissance and surveillance with technological skills and a network of supporters and informants.</li> </ul>
<b>Space</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining military cooperation in satellite issues.</li> <li>• Establishing scientific cooperation on space science.</li> </ul>		
<b>Diplomacy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attempting to obtain a key role in international conflict resolution negotiations to establish and maintain status.</li> <li>• Organizing its own peace initiatives in Syria to establish status and to gain favourable agreements.</li> <li>• Vetoing resolutions in UN Security Council in support of allies.</li> <li>• Using diplomacy as a leverage tool against third states.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing and expecting mutual support in international organizations such as the UN.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having proxies such as Hezbollah lobby on its behalf in negotiations on international agreements.</li> <li>• Establishing a network of like-minded countries, the "Axis of Resistance".</li> </ul>	
<b>Political</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-opting key individuals and maintaining personal ties to well-connected elites.</li> <li>• Playing multiple sides and balancing between different actors to ensure adaptability to changing circumstances.</li> <li>• Employing political narratives to change the international view of the different actors playing a part in conflicts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing political support as an ideological lever.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proxies forming political alliances.</li> <li>• Proxies working in the electoral system to gain popularity and power and to co-opt institutions.</li> <li>• Using a population's non-national identities to subvert the authority of the government and the state apparatuses.</li> <li>• Carrying out kidnappings in exchange for high-value individuals.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-opting key individuals.</li> <li>• Using terrorist attacks and information operations to cause political division.</li> </ul>

	Russia	China	Iran	ISIS
<b>Information</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publishing dis-information and propaganda in traditional and new media outlets.</li> <li>• Denying its own malign activities and publishing conspiracy theories about the US through state media outlets.</li> <li>• Discrediting humanitarian groups supported by the West.</li> <li>• Bolstering the public image of those it supports.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employing a narrative of opposing foreign interference in domestic affairs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducting information campaigns to broaden domestic support and to manipulate perceptions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publishing propaganda through traditional and new media outlets.</li> <li>• Using social media for recruitment.</li> </ul>

While the Table categorizes certain actions into one domain, it is evident that many actions take place and have effects in multiple domains. For example, many information operations have clear links to the political and diplomatic domains either through their intended target or through their effects.

If a hybrid threat action usually associated with the specific actor is not in the above Table, it only means that this action was not identified as one of the most important actions in these specific cases. It is particularly important to note that hybrid threat actors may be able to resort to fewer tools in fewer domains in those cases where they are achieving their goals without the need to escalate and widen their actions. This is one of the reasons why we can see a large variety of tools used by Russia in this region. As seen in these case studies, Russia has needed to escalate its activities, which has also prompted it to use more tools. Meanwhile, China has been able to maintain an important position in Algeria and to expand its economic presence, and hence perhaps fewer tools have been needed.

Moreover, inclusion in this Table does not mean that all of these activities are always illegitimate. For example, investing in infrastructure and building trade relations constitute normal eco-

nomic activity for the most part. Such actions only become illegitimate and hybrid threats when they have malign purposes and are combined with other activities. This means that it can also be very difficult to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate activities, and that originally legitimate activities or their results can later be used as a part of hybrid threat operations. For example, the leverage that China can gain in Algeria by increasing trade relations can be used more pronouncedly later for escalation purposes if needed.

## Outlook and recommendations

These case studies have illustrated that hybrid threats in the MENA region will remain for the foreseeable future. Iran and China are continuing their gradual acquisition of further influence in the region. For China, this means increasing economic, diplomatic, and political ties to the states in the region. However, there is also potential for a significant increase in military influence through security cooperation. For Iran, security is the biggest priority. Tehran is continuing its attempts to turn the region to its advantage, particularly through proxies, which adds to the instability in the region.

While ISIS no longer controls territory in Iraq and Syria, it has already shown it can orchestrate

a new rise. The group is establishing an increasing presence in Africa, but it is also capable of taking advantage of opportunities elsewhere. New turmoil in Afghanistan can provide such an opportunity, but so can any new destabilizing developments in the Middle East.

Russia's global superpower status-seeking behaviour also continues. This has recently been exhibited more strongly in Europe, particularly in Ukraine and Belarus. However, conflicts in Syria and Libya are yet to be resolved. Engaging with other world powers in these regions may also form a part of Russia's strategy in Europe.

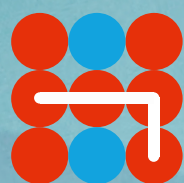
NATO, the EU and their member states should therefore prepare for and respond to these hybrid threats and their potential in the MENA region. Below are some recommendations to this end:

- **Build and improve common situational awareness.** Understanding regional and local political situations helps to anticipate threats, and sharing this situational awareness enables rapid joint actions. The situational awareness should include understanding of how actions in different domains affect each other, but also how actions in different regions can affect other regions.
- **Monitor trade relations and investments.** While these are often legitimate, they can lead to hybrid threat actors gaining leverage over the states in the region. Detecting developing dependencies can help prepare for the potential of hybrid threat actors using the resulting leverage.
- **Monitor current and potential proxy behaviour.** Many hybrid threat actions in the MENA region are conducted through proxies. When this is detected, sanctions can be imposed and other measures taken against the proxies.
- **Support local quality of life.** Continuing to support the freedoms, proper living conditions and general quality of life in the region through development aid and cooperation, for example, will help to counter malign actors' efforts to influence the population.
- **Prepare ways to respond holistically to hybrid threats.** As hybrid threats combine tools in multiple domains, there should also be ways to respond in different domains, both separately and jointly.









Hybrid CoE