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Civil-Military Relations in Arab States

Security Assistance in the Middle East: A Three- Dimensional Chessboard

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and John Zavage

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+ CONTENTS

Introduction	1
A Non-American Approach	2
The Three-Dimensional Game of MENA Security Assistance	4
Iranian Security Assistance	8
Russian Security Assistance	12
U.S. Security Assistance	19
Conclusion	27
About the Authors	31
Notes	32

Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is the world’s testing ground for the effectiveness of security assistance provided by global and regional powers. That security assistance has contributed to the intensity and frequency of proxy wars—such as those under way or recently wound down in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq—and to the militarization of state and substate actors in the MENA region. Security assistance is at the core of struggles for military, strategic, ideological, and even economic preeminence in the Middle East. Yet despite the broad and growing importance of security assistance for the region and for competition within it between global and regional actors, security assistance has been the subject of relatively little comparative analysis. Efforts to assess relationships between the strategic objectives and operational methods of security assistance providers and their relative impacts on recipients are similarly rare.

The most abundant literature on the effectiveness of security assistance in general is that produced in the United States, primarily by government agencies or researchers and institutions under contract to them.¹ These studies are concerned overwhelmingly with the issue of whether or not the United States has achieved its goals through the provision of security assistance, a key component of which is referred to as “building partner capacity” (BPC). According to the Congressional Research Service (CRS), these goals include victory in war or war termination; managing regional security challenges; indirectly supporting a party to a conflict; conflict mitigation; building institutional and interpersonal linkages; enhancing coalition participation; and alliance building.²

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The emerging consensus from these studies is that hopes that security assistance would enable the United States to achieve its objectives at less cost in personnel and materiel than through direct military intervention have not been realized. According to Stephen Biddle, for example, although “small-footprint” security force assistance “has become a major pillar of U.S. national security policy . . . small footprints usually mean small payoffs.”³ This is because of “large interest misalignments between the provider (the principal) and the recipient (the agent),

difficult monitoring challenges, and difficult conditions for enforcement: a combination that typically leaves principals with limited real leverage and that promotes inefficiency in aid provision.”⁴ As a result of problems inherent in principal-agent relations, the more expansive U.S. security assistance objectives are, the less likely they are to be achieved. Victory in war or war termination, for example, is rarely accomplished, but facilitation of personal linkages and alliance building frequently are successful.⁵

The key factor identified in this U.S. literature as facilitative of effective principal-agent relations, hence of security assistance, is of special relevance in the Middle East. It is the existence of “a legitimate, relatively effective institution of governance.” The CRS goes on to note that “the least effective BPC efforts were conducted either during conflicts and wars (situations in which governance is contested by opposing parties) or in countries where legitimate governance was relatively nascent.” It concludes with the observation that “corruption and graft in a partner can significantly inhibit BPC effectiveness. Little evidence exists to suggest that BPC will be effective without a willing and capable partner on the ground.”⁶

These preconditions of effective, corruption-free, legitimate governance coupled with the absence of “conflicts and wars” are comparatively rare in the Middle East. It is the most conflict-prone region in the world and one in which governance is typically hobbled by limited legitimacy and excessive corruption. In recent years ungoverned or violently contested spaces have emerged in fragile or failed states such as Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, as well as in regions of extant nation-states, such as Egypt’s northern Sinai or Lebanon’s border areas with Syria. The Middle East, in sum, is paradoxically a region particularly inhospitable to effective security assistance, at least of the U.S. variety, but is nevertheless virtually swamped by it. This immediately begs the question of whether conditions of instability, poor governance, and violence common in the region might be more hospitable to other providers of security assistance, whose approaches are more suited to such conditions.

The Middle East, in sum, is paradoxically a region particularly inhospitable to effective security assistance, at least of the U.S. variety, but is nevertheless virtually swamped by it.

A Non-American Approach

The widely shared interpretation in the United States of preconditions for effective security assistance may indeed reflect only the particularities of America’s objectives and methods. After all, its principal competitors in the region in the provision of security assistance—Russia and Iran—have assisted their proxies to achieve notable battlefield successes, the former in Syria and increasingly in Libya; the latter also in Syria as well as in Lebanon and, to a lesser extent, Yemen and Iraq. In addition, Russia seems to have accomplished, in varying degrees, a number of the objectives of security assistance identified by the Congressional Research Service. Its increasingly central role in the region, hinging largely on its demonstrated capacity as a security assistance provider, coupled with skilled diplomacy, have enabled it to manage regional security challenges in the Mashreq and Maghreb, such

as those involving Turkish-Arab relations, and to build institutional and interpersonal linkages with military and political elites not only in Syria, but also in Egypt, Sudan, and Algeria. Coupled with similar inroads in other countries, these linkages could in the future enable Russia to forge at least informal alliances over which it exercises considerable influence.

For its part, Iran has been able to capitalize politically and economically on the success of its proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon over the government of which it has exercised veto power, and on that of various proxy militias in Iraq, which as in Lebanon circumscribe the Baghdad government's policy options and lay major claims on governmental largesse, both official and illegal. By comparison, U.S. security partner states in the Arab region have typically been hedging their bets on Washington by seeking security relationships with other external actors, including Russia. U.S.-supported militias, most especially those in Syria, have not enjoyed battlefield success in the same measure as those backed by Russia and/or Iran, with the partial exception of the Kurdish-dominated People's Defense Units, from which the United States abruptly withdrew its support in October 2019, causing those units to turn to Russia for assistance.⁷

It may be premature, however, to claim definitively that, in the Middle East, U.S. security assistance has been less effective than that provided by Russia and Iran. As anti-status-quo actors in the region, their objectives tend to be more focused and limited than those of the United States. Moreover, both of those states have capitalized on conditions precisely the opposite of those identified by the CRS as being favorable to U.S. security assistance. Iran built Hezbollah in the shadow of the Lebanese civil war and subsequently has used it to prevent the state from consolidating and legitimating its power. Its support for al-Dawa and other militias that now jointly form Iraq's Hashd al Shaabi similarly reflects the weakness of the Baghdad government. In both cases, however, popular uprisings that began in October 2019 against Iranian-backed governments reflect the precariousness of Tehran's strategy, based as it is on manipulation capitalizing upon and intended to prevent consolidation of a broadly based, popular government. Much the same can be said of Iranian support for the Yemeni Houthis, whose initial success depended upon the Sanaa government's weakening in the wake of the 2011 uprising and whose future in Yemen remains unknown, but is unlikely to take the form of undisputed control over a united Yemen. Conversion of security assistance to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad into broader, firmer government-to-government linkages is yet to occur. Indeed, in Syria Iran's strategy of sustaining a weak, dependent state headed by the enfeebled Assad is being directly opposed by Russia, which views its interests in the country, including subordination of Iranian-backed militias to central government control, as better served by a stronger state.⁸ In none of these countries has Iran succeeded in transforming its proxies into a legitimate, dominant position within a stable government whose writ runs throughout the nation, despite having cloaked those militias in camouflage civilian political garb.

Russia's recent success in the Middle East has also been achieved largely because of the region's widespread unrest and violence. A recent study of the Wagner Group—the Kremlin's "not-so-secret" mercenaries—notes that it and Russia more generally "gains the most traction in weak or isolated states open to the Kremlin's advances."⁹ It is predicted that it will continue to succeed "in areas with limited rule of law, weak democratic institutions, high levels of corruption, and problematic human rights records."¹⁰ In other words, Russia is anticipated to succeed in precisely the circumstances in which U.S. security assistance is deemed likely to flounder. But in such highly fluid, noninstitutionalized settings, today's gains can easily become tomorrow's losses. Russian support for Sudan's former president Omar al-Bashir, including the provision of mercenaries, is a case in point. Its backing of Libya's General Khalifa Haftar may be destined for similar failure, like that previously for Muammar Qaddafi.¹¹

The Three-Dimensional Game of MENA Security Assistance

A definitive comparative evaluation of the effectiveness of security assistance in the Middle East is problematical because effectiveness results from many factors, because indicators for its measurement are numerous and not standardized, and because it is delivered in dynamic contexts that can quickly turn success into failure. One method of undertaking this challenging comparison is to characterize the Iranian, Russian, and U.S. approaches and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each. The key apparent difference between these approaches is differing roles assigned to statehood. Iran, Russia, and the United States are engaged in what resembles a three-dimensional chess game, the defining dimension of which is the degree of "stateness" embedded in their respective security assistance strategies.¹²

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Iran predicates its strategy on what is virtually contempt for statehood in the MENA region. The partner capacities it has built, including those of Lebanese Hezbollah, Yemeni Houthis, and various Iraqi militias, are virtually exclusively those of substate actors either brought into existence by Iran itself or nurtured to strength by it. Their combination of coercive and political capacities facilitates penetration of their respective states, from which these proxies then extract resources while using those states as fig leaves behind which they hide from potential retribution and from which they derive legitimacy. Further material resources necessary to sustain these proxies and especially their sociopolitical bases are garnered through illegal activities also typically facilitated and supported by Iran, most profitable of which frequently, as in Lebanon, are production and smuggling of drugs. Iran's relations with these states are necessarily problematic given its ongoing, cloaked subversion of them, but that liability is compensated for by

substantial leverage over the states, combined with extraction of material and legitimacy resources from them. While this anti-state approach requires Iran and its proxies to continually finesse the issue of to which nation-state those proxies are truly loyal—Iran or the respective Arab state—it is well tailored to Iran’s strategic role as an anti-status-quo actor in the MENA region and one with fewer resources than its main competitors, key of which is the United States.

Russia seeks to occupy a middle position on the three-dimensional chessboard, balancing its security assistance between state and nonstate actors, seeking in all cases to create relationships of dependency from which it can benefit strategically and/or economically.

Russia seeks to occupy a middle position on the three-dimensional chessboard, balancing its security assistance between state and nonstate actors, seeking in all cases to create relationships of dependency from which it can benefit strategically and/or economically. That dependency need not be of a direct coercive or financial nature. It can also flow from the need for Russian mediation with any of the many MENA state or substate actors with which it nurtures and maintains security, diplomatic, and other contacts. Russia does not directly control proxies in the same degree as Iran, but it does train, equip, and directly assist some, such as with Haftar’s self-styled Libyan National Army. It generally prefers, however, to base its

military assistance on state-to-state relationships, as in Syria, where Assad permitted Russia to take over key elements of his military to ensure his survival. But Russia’s state-to-state relations are more narrowly based than those of the United States, typically resting on shakier foundations of personalized, authoritarian rule, such as in Assad’s Syria, Bashir’s Sudan, the so-called *pouvoir* in Algeria, or potentially in Sisi’s Egypt. This half-and-half strategy reflects Russia’s marginal status as a global superpower, lacking the financial and associated resources of the United States, which limits its appeal to well-established regional state actors while magnifying it for shakier rulers and nonstate actors. Russia, in sum, predicates its security assistance strategy in the MENA region on the weaknesses of its partners, both state and nonstate, so has little interest in developing and institutionalizing broader state capacities.

U.S. security assistance operates overwhelmingly at the level of states and, as the CRS and other analyses cited above suggest, its effectiveness is in direct proportion to the capacities of those states. It is more likely to succeed in conditions associated with strong statehood, precisely the opposite environment favorable to Iranian and, to a lesser extent, Russian security assistance. A major determinant of the centrality of statehood to effective U.S. security assistance is that as the predominant status quo power in the region, U.S. choices for partners and the types of capacities it seeks to build are limited by that role. Even in conditions of failing or failed states U.S. support for substate actors is constrained by its relationships with regional and even nonregional states; by the

need dictated by its own interests to bolster the very concept of statehood in the MENA region, where virtually all states face erosion of their capacities; and by restraints imposed by international norms regarding criminal activities, human rights, and rule of law, those norms underpinning the international order of which the United States has traditionally been the champion.

These broad U.S. strategic concerns influence choices of security partners, which in turn shape assistance programs. Various attributes of those partners—including their preference for the status quo, their access to resources, their desire to project sovereign power and influence into the region, and in several cases, their limited population bases—drive security assistance toward high technology weaponry capable of power projection beyond borders. This trend is reinforced by the natural tendency to foster partner militaries in the image of their American counterpart, to which global power projection is vital and for which its major weapons systems are typically designed. The U.S. emphasis on air power as a vital component of security assistance partly reflects this and differentiates that assistance from both the Iranian approach, which is predicated heavily on literally ground-up capacity building, combined with asymmetric air capacities; and Russian security assistance, which occupies a middle position between the United States and Iran, as it includes support for ground forces ranging from militias to state armies, as well as state air forces, albeit to a lesser extent than the United States.

The three major providers of security assistance in the MENA region operate at different strategic and tactical levels, determined primarily by the degree of stateness associated with their approach.

In sum, the three major providers of security assistance in the MENA region operate at different strategic and tactical levels, determined primarily by the degree of stateness associated with their approach. This in turn raises the question of their comparatively likely long-term effectiveness in light of the prospects for stateness in the MENA. Above it was noted that the rise of fragile and failed states there, associated in turn with expanding ungoverned spaces, has opened the door to both Iran and

Russia, whose comfort with substate and weak state actors is considerably greater than it is for the United States. In this view U.S. security assistance appears to be on the wrong side of history, associated as it is with an eroding status quo and declining sovereignty.

But this view may be overly pessimistic. The decline of stateness may be a temporary phenomenon, associated with the Arab uprisings of 2011 and intensification of the MENA regional “civil war” between Iran, its Shia allies, and Sunni Islamist fellow travelers, on the one hand, and most Sunni Arab governments, on the other. Writing off statehood in our Metternichian world order is usually

premature as almost all states prove to be quite tenacious, as indeed even the cases of Syria and Iraq suggest. Rising resentment against Iran even among Iraqi Shia militia members may, for example, be a current indicator of persisting Iraqi nationalism, itself a primary basis for and indicator of sovereignty.¹³ The same can be said of Lebanese Shia protesting in the fall of 2019 against Hezbollah and another Lebanese party, Amal, while loudly proclaiming their Lebanese patriotism.¹⁴

A related qualification to the pessimistic view of the future of MENA states is that while they may be down, they are not yet out. They continue collectively to dispose of considerable power and resources while demonstrating substantial awareness of shared interests. The informal coalition in which some rather strange MENA state bedfellows are presently enmeshed, and which the United States nurtures but wisely has not sought to convert into a formal alliance, attests to that. Its members, depending on circumstances and the issue at hand, include Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and most other Gulf states, Egypt, and Morocco. U.S. security assistance is vital to sustaining and empowering this informal alliance. Moreover, this collection of MENA states includes some of the world's biggest spenders on militaries and their associated impressive military capacities, especially air forces.

One tangible consequence of this alliance and security assistance to its member states is that warfare in the MENA region has increasingly pitted the conventional air power it possesses against asymmetric ground and air forces, the latter of which consists primarily of missiles and drones, as evidenced so spectacularly in the attack on the Saudi oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais on September 14, 2019. Which force structure will ultimately prove operationally to be the more effective is presently an open question, with the attack on Abqaiq and Khurais and the situation in Yemen suggesting that advantage may lie with those employing asymmetric methods. What is already clear, however, is that while many MENA states have weakened, providing opportunities for both Iran and Russia, none has totally disappeared from national or global consciousness. Most remain sufficiently committed to participating in the established world order and its global financial institutions, heavily influenced by Washington, to be wary of Iran and strictly transactional in relationships with a Russia that has comparatively little to offer them.

The remainder of this paper is devoted to more in-depth discussion of the security assistance strategies and tactics of these three competitors in the MENA region. Each is assessed in terms of the ends of that assistance; the ways by which it is provided, meaning the types of organizations supported and the nature of the relationships developed with them; and the means employed, referring to the commercial value, quantity, and types of equipment provided.

Iranian Security Assistance

Ends

Of the three providers of security assistance, Iran is not only the least supportive of stateness, it is actively disruptive of it. This does not imply, however, that Iran's strategy of security assistance has as its objective undermining the concept and practice of state sovereignty. Instead, Iran's assistance to like-minded actors supportive of the Iranian revolutionary narrative necessarily excludes states opposed to that narrative, so undermines their sovereignty as a secondary effect rather than as an

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objective in and of itself, as Afshon Ostovar, for example, implies. Put differently, Iran's security assistance is provided primarily to advance the ideals of the Islamic Revolution, with the secondary effect being to challenge MENA stateness.¹⁵ For Iran, ideological alignment is more important than internationally recognized institutions, including states and the borders that demarcate them.¹⁶ From Iran's view of the security assistance landscape, a nonstate actor loyal to Iran's revolutionary narrative has more institutional status and credibility than an internationally recognized state opposed to that revolutionary narrative.

This perspective shapes Iran's security assistance activities toward Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria, and abridges the stateness of those countries. In at least three of those four cases it is substate actors that champion Iran's revolution and by so doing become its primary recipient of support in that country. In Lebanon, for example, Iran seeks to increase its regional influence, especially vis-à-vis Israel and Saudi Arabia, by strengthening Hezbollah, an organization that propagates the values of the Iranian revolution at the expense of the Lebanese state.¹⁷ In fact, Iran's primary response to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon was to create Hezbollah, ensuring that both shared goals drove that security assistance.¹⁸ In Iraq, Iran backs Shia militias, including Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Kita'ib Hezbollah (KH), and the Badr Organization, groups that also subscribe to the Iranian revolutionary narrative and are in significant measure also indebted to Iran for their creation and very existence.¹⁹ Strengthening these organizations necessarily weakens the elected Iraqi government, hence Iraq's stateness.²⁰

Iranian goals in supporting the Houthi movement in Yemen inherently challenge Saudi Arabia and the Republic of Yemen by countering the former's political and religious influence in the latter by seeking to replace its internationally recognized government with a Houthi-led regime aligned with

Iran.²¹ As for Syria, Iran's security assistance activities benefit the Assad regime, but its goals are sufficiently diffuse for it to support ideologically aligned militia groups as an insurance policy in the event that the Assad regime collapses. Support directly to the Assad regime, to the extent it is proffered, can be characterized as the tail wagging the dog because it results in part from Iran's support to Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militia elements operating in Syria, although the long-standing Syria-Iran alliance also motivates Tehran's direct support of Bashar al-Assad's government.²² The Syrian case nevertheless can be interpreted to reinforce the claim that Iran's security assistance policy diverges from normal preferencing of states.

Thus, the specific ends of Iran's security assistance in the MENA region include the following:

- Advance the religious, social, and political ideals of the Islamic Revolution throughout the region.
- Undermine the influence of those states in the region who oppose the Islamic Revolution.
- Strengthen substate actors who champion the Iranian ideal, including but not limited to Hezbollah, KH, AAH, and the Badr Organization.

Ways

Iran's disruption of stateness assumes an additional level of nuance when those ways are considered, for they are centered on the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Within the IRGC, the Quds Force has emerged as the key proponent of and the implementing actor through which the lion's share of security assistance activities are conducted.²³

The IRGC's role in Iranian security assistance, and that security assistance's impact on stateness, are reflected in three different ways. First, the IRGC itself was founded upon the principle of opposition to modern institutional state control. Locally organized Islamic militias that agreed to coalesce and form the IRGC in the wake of the overthrow of the shah were accustomed to organizational flexibility and independence of action. They agreed to coalesce into the IRGC largely because Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Council offered them autonomy from the formal government declared on the heels of the 1979 revolution.²⁴ Second, the loosely knit Islamic militias that formed the IRGC had come into existence prior to the culmination of the 1979 revolution in order to support the Shia clergy.²⁵ In this foundational sense, devotion to religion before state has been a core precept reflecting the history of the IRGC from the outset. Finally, as the IRGC evolved, its adherence to spreading ideological precepts of the Islamic Revolution to like-minded groups abroad became the *raison d'être* of the organization.²⁶ Bringing these three inherent features of the IRGC together—anti-institutional independence of action, prioritizing support for Islam and its clergy over that for the state, and commitment to spreading the revolution abroad—the IRGC's very existence is inherently subversive of stateness, as its practice also reveals.

Due to the IRGC's central role in creating Hezbollah in response to Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, that organization's interests are virtually by definition aligned with Iran's.²⁷ From the outset its capable militia has depended overwhelmingly on the IRGC for financial and military assistance, and indeed, its financial solvency. Hence, its political standing rests largely on patronage it provides loyal clients.²⁸ Moreover, through ideological and political outreach supported by the IRGC, Iran has endeavored to render Hezbollah an extension of Iranian national interests, if need be at the expense of Lebanese ones. In accordance with J. P. Terfry's observations, Iran's ways of providing security assistance through the IRGC undermine Lebanon's stateness by the sheer fact of it communicating expectations that Hezbollah pursues an Iranian agenda, even when it conflicts with Lebanese national aspirations and possibly even with Hezbollah's own interests within Lebanon.²⁹

Similar to the situation in Lebanon, Iraqi Shia militias AAH, KH, and the Badr Organization share an ideological alignment with the IRGC, primarily because of the IRGC's central role in the formation in 1982 of the Badr Organization in Iraq under Saddam Hussein.³⁰ The 2003 U.S.-led military intervention in Iraq stimulated political reactions that facilitated the emergence of AAH, KH, and other Shia militias under Iran's tutelage, with IRGC security assistance expanded to include these groups as well as the original recipient, the Badr Organization, as Kenneth Katzman details.³¹ The ideological alignment of the KH, AAH, and Badr Organization with the IRGC, reinforced by security assistance, enables Iran to exert significant influence on the Iraqi government, thereby undermining Iraqi state coherence and capacities that constitute its stateness.³²

While Iran's relationship with the Houthi movement in Yemen is weaker from a Shia ideological perspective, the two share the critical interest of seeking to counter Saudi influence in Yemen.³³ United Nations (UN) resolutions forbid outside military assistance to the Houthis, a fact that reinforces the Houthis' reliance on Iran and the IRGC, thereby overcoming the potential obstacle of the Houthis' lack of enthusiastic support for Iranian dogma, while simultaneously rendering the bifurcated or even trifurcated Yemeni state incapable of asserting unified control over its nominal sovereign territory.³⁴

Means

While it is commonly assumed that Iran's security assistance material investments are meager compared to the United States and Russia, in fact their monetary value is significant in those countries where the money is concentrated—Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. CRS reports that Iran provides Hezbollah approximately \$700 million in total economic and military aid annually.³⁵ This surpasses the annual average of approximately \$200 million in economic and military assistance value the United States has granted the government of Lebanon and Lebanese Armed Forces since 2006.³⁶ Likewise, reports indicate that Iran may provide Syria's Assad Regime nearly \$6 billion

annually.³⁷ Regarding specific figures of military assistance to Iraq, some evidence indicates that support to Iranian-backed Shia militias and parties in Iraq since 2014 has amounted to about \$1 billion annually.³⁸ Iranian support for the Houthi rebellion in Yemen occurs in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2216, making reliable figures even more difficult to obtain, although Thomas Juneau's research suggests the monetary value of Iranian assistance is less than that provided to recipients in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.³⁹ The monetary value of Iran's security assistance to proxies in the Middle East, in sum, is significant but considerably less than that provided by the United States to all its partners, thus suggesting that the cost of security assistance does not provide a good guide to its effectiveness.

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The other means consist of the types of military equipment Iran provides. They are concentrated overwhelmingly on development of asymmetric capabilities intended among other things to produce a strategic effect by targeting the institutional capacities of states—in essence, gaining strategic effect by eroding stateness through irregular tactics. This preference for asymmetric capabilities stems in part from the IRGC's organizational history, for which asymmetric capabilities have been vital to its creation and subsequent development, as Maryam Alemzadeh contends. She also notes that the IRGC continues to provide formidable, effective assistance to its proxies because Iran's leaders trust and empower the leadership of the IRGC to preside over Iranian advisers and local commanders who are in turn permitted to operate independently within the broader framework of pursuing the ideals of the Islamic Revolution. This decentralized operational flexibility is an essential component of asymmetric warfare.⁴⁰

The centrality of asymmetric means to the IRGC and recipients of its security assistance is reflected in the continuing improvement of ballistic missiles and capacities to deploy them, coupled with ever greater dependence upon them.⁴¹ Iranian support to Hezbollah in the form of air defense rockets, for example, allowed it to score significant military gains at Israel's expense in the 2006 war, thereby improving Hezbollah's strategic position vis-à-vis both Israel and the state of Lebanon.⁴² Iranian contributions to Houthi ballistic missile capabilities that enable them to threaten Riyadh and Jeddah from the environs of Sanaa is another example of Iran's use of asymmetric capabilities to undermine the stateness of its opponents.⁴³ Iran's supply to recipient militias in Iraq of improvised rocket-assisted munitions placed strategic pressure on the United States to terminate its military occupation of Iraq, thus achieving a strategic gain against the United States while also undermining Iraq's stateness.⁴⁴ In similar fashion the Houthis have gained strategic leverage vis-à-vis the Saudi-led coalition and the international community by threatening shipping in the Bab al-Mandeb Strait with anti-ship cruise missiles and explosive boats, asymmetric capabilities resulting from Iranian assistance.⁴⁵ In these ways Iranian means, which are rooted in the IRGC's own history, have

contributed to countering the effectiveness of U.S. security assistance, while simultaneously undermining the capacities of those Arab states in which Iranian proxies are operating, as well, possibly, as those of Saudi Arabia and even Gulf countries closely allied to it. Iranian assistance, in other words, maximizes the strategic utility of military resources provided to recipients by focusing on and developing capabilities that create the greatest leverage in specific theaters while supporting Iranian objectives.

In sum, the ends, ways, and means of Iranian security assistance directed to recipients in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen collectively illustrate how that assistance erodes the state capacities and even the very stateness of its rivals. Since the ends of Iranian military assistance are to generate support for Iran's revolutionary ideals and practices, those ends necessarily encompass the erosion of its rivals' stateness. This is not because Iran disdains states per se, especially including its own, but because it seeks adherence

to its revolutionary narrative at the expense of other loyalties, including to Arab states. Additionally, Iran's ways of military assistance center on the IRGC and its foundational principles of independence of action, support from and for the Islamic clergy, and commitment to expanding the Islamic Revolution outside Iran's borders, all of which are inimical to the stateness of rival Arab countries. While the monetary value of Iranian security assistance programs seems not be a precise indicator of its effectiveness, that value is by no means negligible. Still, it is more the types of equipment provided by Iran, coupled with their integration into strategic doctrine that provides its recipients with the ability to achieve tactical leverage in support of broader ends, key to which is reducing the comparative effectiveness of the Arab states within which those recipients operate as well as those of other Arab states opposed to Iran.

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Russian Security Assistance

Ends

Befitting its status as the world's second-largest provider of security assistance, Russia pursues ambitious ends through that assistance, especially in the MENA region. The former director of its agency for "military and technical cooperation"—the Russian term for security assistance—declared the objective of "arms trade and the entire military and technical cooperation system" to be a "Russian foreign policy instrument designed to mark Russia's presence in a region and influence a region's balance of forces."⁴⁶ The U.S. Foreign Assistance Act and the subsequent Arms Export

Control Act declare the ends of American security assistance—defined as “military training and equipment that is granted, sold or leased to foreign nations”—as being “to further U.S. foreign policy.”⁴⁷ The specific objectives of both nations’ security assistance, according to Charles K. Bartles, are “remarkably similar,” including development of alliances, promotion of interoperability within a unified doctrine, and support for their respective military-industrial complexes.⁴⁸

Reflecting the common goals of their security assistance, the United States and Russia deliver that assistance through similar institutions, including those responsible for financial relations, for interacting with their respective military-industrial complexes, and for monitoring of exports and licensing. But, as Bartles notes, the Russian state, as a majority stakeholder in most major components of its military-industrial complex, has a much larger, more direct financial interest in security assistance than does the U.S. government. Moreover, given that the Russian economy is one-tenth the size of America’s, the relative importance to it of arms sales is substantially greater than such sales are to the U.S. economy, even though the United States is the world’s largest arms exporter.

Manifest similarities in Russian and American security assistance programs do, however, mask substantial differences in their ends, ways, and means. The key factor underlying those differences is, as just suggested, economic. The relative weakness of the Russian economy in terms of size, lack of diversification, poor integration into global production chains, growing dependence on China, and the rent seeking within it by cronies of those who have captured the state paradoxically drives ever greater reliance on security assistance. That assistance, coupled with the diplomacy based on it, are virtually the only tools left in Moscow’s foreign policy kitbag. Whereas in 1989 the Soviet Union’s gross domestic product was twice that of China’s, now China’s is six times larger than Russia’s. Once a major arms exporter to China, Russia now depends on Chinese electronic and other components for its weapons systems. About one half of its oil and gas drilling equipment is Chinese. China is Russia’s second-largest export market, but Russia ranks only tenth among China’s.⁴⁹ China is making steady inroads into Russia’s backyard in Central Asia, while most western appendages of the Soviet Union have already gained sovereign, cultural, and economic independence.

Investment and public foreign assistance, tools that typically accompany security assistance, are notable in their near absence from the Russian tool kit. In Egypt, for example, Moscow commenced negotiations in February 2015 to invest \$7 billion in a Russian industrial zone near Port Said. Agreement was finally reached in January 2019 to commence a three-stage project in which by 2031 some Russian companies are scheduled to be in operation, about sixteen years after the initial negotiations and very premature announcement of the Russian investment of \$7 billion. As of August 2019, no Russian funds had been provided.⁵⁰ In the meantime China had by early 2019 invested \$3 billion in Egypt and committed to another \$20 billion, causing one observer to comment that “unlike Russia, China has very deep pockets.”⁵¹

Russia's security assistance, therefore, is driven primarily by the country's weaknesses and its pervasive sense of vulnerability, requiring an active defense strategy. In the words of the vice rector of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, which trains some 95 percent of Russia's diplomats, the goals of Russian foreign policy are "to be an autonomous player, to uphold its identity of a great power which is strategically independent." Currently, according to him, Russia is "being mistreated . . . betrayed."⁵² Russia's leaders, the *siloviki* who emerged from the KGB and FSB, were trained to "see the world in terms of threats," so according to Andrei Soldatov, an investigative journalist specialized in security, they "do not have a strategy" and "rely on tactics" because they "don't know what the next threat might be," so can "only respond."⁵³ He and other analysts of Russia's security policies interpret "Russia's strides back onto the world stage as improvised reactions, tactics, gambles that were at times more worrisome than masterful."⁵⁴

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The second determinant of Russia's security assistance policy that differentiates it from that of the United States is authoritarianism and the institutions, ideologies, and behaviors that underlie it. Foremost among such institutions are militaries and militias, typically backed by intelligence services. They have replaced communist parties as Moscow's key allies and chief recipients of its assistance. Ideology has given way to utilitarianism focused on control as chief motivating factors for both Russia and recipients of its assistance. Far from

encouraging civilian oversight of coercive agencies and working to develop institutions through which that might be achieved, Russian security assistance seeks to elevate executive branches and the military and security agencies associated with them over all other governmental and nongovernmental actors. The unfolding of security assistance to Syria since Russia's intervention there in late 2015 is indicative of this broader pattern. It commenced with support to key units of the Syrian military, which it steadily brought under its direct control, subordinating even generals to lower ranking Russian officers. It then turned to harnessing in similar fashion the various militias loyal to regime elements or to Iran, before finally commencing an effort to penetrate and control the regime's various intelligence agencies.⁵⁵ The broader Syrian body politic, to say nothing of the country's economy, Russia has simply ignored.

The third factor impacting the ends of Russian security assistance that cause it to differ from that provided by the United States is the presence on the country's periphery of significant Muslim populations that were brought under Moscow's influence, then control, first by the Russian Empire, then by the Soviet Union. The emergence of separatist movements and terrorism, to say nothing of the potential for bordering states in Central Asia to fall under the sway of competitors, key of which

is China, pose profound worries for Russian decisionmakers. The war in Afghanistan, in which Russian troops faced mujahideen backed by the United States, brought down the Soviet Union, an obvious disaster in the eyes of the *siloviki*. Fears associated with Islam are most relevant to security assistance policies in the MENA region, where Islamism is most widespread and destabilizing, and a major cause of division between states, such as between Qatar and Turkey, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt, on the other.

The *New York Times*' investigation of Putin's global strategy concludes that "Russia's aims, taken at face value, are far less expansive than America's, its interests more narrow and steady. And notably, they do not extend into questions of human rights or democracy."⁵⁶ While the report does not directly address the issue of whether "face value" accurately reflects Russian strategy, or is intended more to deceive potential opponents, given the limitations on Russian capacities the view of Russian aims as "less expansive" seems correct, at least until such time as either those capacities are further developed or a bolder, riskier strategy takes hold in the Kremlin.

In sum, the specific ends of Russia's security assistance in the MENA region, which reflect its overall strategy and the constraints that shape it, include the following:

- Economic gain through transfer of arms, training, and military assistance
- Reinforcement of "friendly" authoritarian regimes
- Containment of Islamism
- Enhancement of Russia's regional role and standing by encouraging reliance on its diplomatic/ security leverage
- Undermining the U.S. position in the region

Ways

These strategic objectives in turn shape choices as to whom to support and oppose in the region and how to do so. Russia's reaction to turmoil in 2019 in Sudan is instructive. Based on documents leaked to the *Guardian* by exiled Russian businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky's London-based Dossier Centre, Russia sought to delegitimize the Sudanese opposition through fake news and videos designed to "portray demonstrators as anti-Islamic, pro-Israeli and pro-LGBT."⁵⁷ It simultaneously dispatched a contingent of mercenaries employed by the state-owned Wagner Group to train Sudanese military officers as part of an effort to cement a partnership with the Transitional Military Council (TMC), which had "agreed to uphold Russia's substantial contracts in Sudan's defense, mining and energy sectors."⁵⁸ By 2019 Sudan had become the second-largest purchaser of Russian arms in Africa after Algeria, with half of Sudan's total arms acquisitions sourced from Russia. Former president Bashir had personally approved entry of a Russian gold mining company into his country and was negotiating construction of a Russian oil refinery, as well as a Russian naval base on the Red

Sea, when he was overthrown. The Wagner Group's mercenaries may have been involved in repressive measures undertaken by the TMC. The Sudanese opposition perceives Russia as fully supporting diehards in the TMC as part of its overall strategy of preserving its substantial military, strategic, and economic investments made under Bashir.⁵⁹

Recent Russian activities in Libya mirror those in Sudan. Nominally recognizing the Tripoli-based GNA and the UN settlement plan, Russia began courting Haftar and his self-styled Libyan National Army in about 2016. Russia blocked the March 2019 UN resolution calling on Haftar to stop his offensive against Tripoli, followed three days later by Haftar's visit to Moscow.⁶⁰ Haftar apparently began to receive arms from Russia in 2016 in return for promises to permit Russian bases to be established in Benghazi and Tobruk once the struggle ended. At that time or slightly later, mercenaries from the Wagner Group and a second Kremlin-controlled military contracting company, RSB, began to bolster Haftar's forces. In 2018 Haftar met with the nominal owner of the Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Putin crony, ex-convict, and former restaurant owner under sanctions for running the troll factory used by Moscow to interfere in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.⁶¹ In 2019, 300 Wagner mercenaries were committed to securing the ports of Tobruk and Derna for the Russian fleet and for control of the flow of Libyan oil.⁶² The previous year, Russian daily *RBC* reported that Russia sent troops to eastern Libya to support a variety of Haftar's operations,⁶³ and since that time various reports have surfaced of Haftar's soldiers being treated in Russian hospitals.⁶⁴ In 2017, Rosneft signed an agreement with the Libyan National Oil Company to enhance oil extraction. A close observer of Russia's penetration of Libya after Qaddafi notes that "Russia thinks that stability in Libya is best guaranteed by autocratic rule and a leader with a military background. Moreover, for the Kremlin, Haftar is the one who will guarantee Russian military, economic and military presence in the country."⁶⁵

Russia's track record in Ukraine, Crimea, and the Baltic states of establishing sleeper cells, also termed "enemies within," may suggest another way it employs security assistance in the MENA region. Its seizure of Crimea in 2014 and instigation of separatist fighting in the east of Ukraine then was facilitated by local agents "cultivated by Russia's intelligence agencies and Spetsnaz special forces." Some such agents were ensconced in Ukraine's Ministry of Defense, where they delayed the country's response to the Russian seizure of its territory. Currently the GRU (Russian military intelligence) is recruiting gang bosses in eastern Ukraine by offering them jobs in a future Russian administration. These precedents, coupled with Russian propaganda to the effect that Baltic states were "gifts from Moscow in Soviet times and therefore belong to Russia," have stimulated those states to weed out possible sleeper cells and *agents provocateurs*. Although there are no credible reports of similar contemporary subversion efforts in the MENA region, it would hardly be surprising if Moscow also sought to recruit "enemies within" there as well.⁶⁶ The Soviet Union did so in Egypt, for example, when at the height of its influence there it recruited, among others, Sami Sharaf, *chef de*

cabinet for Egypt's former president, Gamal Abdel Nasser. Subsequently he became one of the key conspirators in the 1971 plot to overthrow then president Anwar Sadat, deemed rightly by the Russians to be a threat to their interests.⁶⁷

Russia's standard opening bid to gain influence with established MENA governments, especially those with long-standing, close relations with the United States, is through arms transfers. Presumably a major purpose is to cultivate relations with military and civilian decisionmakers. Egypt, Turkey, and Lebanon are all cases in point. When former president Barack Obama's administration halted the supply of weapons systems to Egypt, Russia quickly stepped into the gap, selling Cairo a \$1 billion anti-aircraft system in 2015 and following that with numerous deliveries of aircraft and other military equipment. In November 2018 then prime minister Saad Hariri's government in Lebanon accepted a long-standing offer of \$5 million in Russian military aid, a manifestation of the Kremlin's desire "to cultivate religious, cultural, economic and military ties in Beirut as part of a strategy to expand Russian influence in the Middle East, elevate its role as a peacemaker, and sideline the United States."⁶⁸ Earlier in that year a Russian oil company was part of a consortium that won a contract to exploit two offshore blocks in Lebanese waters. Since 2011 Moscow has supported Lebanon's Orthodox Gathering, one of whose key leaders is the deputy speaker of parliament, as part of its broader effort to link Russia with eastern Orthodox faiths. Hariri has been a frequent visitor to Moscow, apparently due to his desire to enlist Russia's support in managing the relationship with Syria. Turkey agreed in 2019 to purchase a Russian S-400 air defense system, apparently in part because of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's slipping popularity and concomitant desire to bolster it by stirring up anti-Americanism.⁶⁹

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These cases suggest that Russia targets security assistance, typically bolstered by economic and political ties, primarily at authoritarian leaders, especially those whose grasp on power lacks institutionalized popular support. Presumably, this enhances Russia's leverage over elites in need of external support, who it can then induce to provide payoffs in the form of further arms purchases, economic concessions, diplomatic favors, and so on.

Means

Evgenia Sokolovskaya, a Russian journalist, contends that the Kremlin has a three-step plan for expanding its influence in Africa, which appears also to reflect its approach to the MENA region. The first step is weapons sales, as the cases just reviewed seem to confirm. The second step is sending

“mercenaries . . . to get a broader understanding on the ground without the Kremlin being officially involved.” Their primary roles are to guard leaders, train forces, and introduce Russian weapons, as Sokolovskaya observes has been the case in Libya and Sudan.⁷⁰ The third step is the quantum leap in that it involves dispatch of Russian military personnel. Their duties and involvement are variable and may escalate, as the Syrian case suggests. The initial deployment is most commonly to instruct local militaries on use and maintenance of Russian weapons systems, the primary purpose of which in Africa is to pave the way for broader Russian involvement, especially in economies. But in the MENA region, where the level of conflict is higher, such involvement also takes the form of direct Russian participation in battle, as in Syria. For that to occur, however, the host country has to surrender substantial control over its own forces to Russia, again as has been the case in Syria.

This purported three-step Kremlin plan captures the broad outlines of Russian strategy and the means used to achieve ends, albeit not in every setting nor in precise detail. It does not, for example, draw clear connections between ends and the relative quantity and quality of weapons provided, deliverables presumably also dependent upon the capacities of recipients. Nor does it address the quality of military technical assistance provided, a subject that has received comparatively little attention.

Russian means of security assistance include a range of weapons systems, training on their use by personnel drawn from the military or from thinly disguised “private” security contractors, extension of protection to local elites, and disinformation campaigns that sometimes involve support for local military forces.

Norvell B. DeAtkine has addressed this issue in Egypt, where, as a serving U.S. Army officer, he assessed the performance of his Russian counterparts.⁷¹ He notes that prior to their dismissal by Sadat, “Soviet advisers were at every level involved in every aspect of Egyptian planning, training and logistics.” The strengths of their involvement were due primarily to the comparatively simple approach adopted. “Trainees were never expected to exercise initiative or innovation but rather go through drills repeatedly until it was second nature.” Soviet advisers spent reasonably lengthy periods in Egypt. They were willing to endure considerable hardships in daily life. The equipment they deployed was simple to operate and maintain, while the logistic system was much less

complex than its American equivalent. The weaknesses included language problems, never fully addressed, as well as broader cultural ones, which DeAtkine illustrates in some detail, and which turn on the relative rigidity of Soviet advisers. They tended to alienate Egyptians, who he observes were generally pleased when Sadat expelled them. As for Russian lessons learned from the intense experience in Egypt, according to him they are now being applied in Syria. There Russia’s specialized military advisers, the Spetsnaz, engage in combat alongside or in command of Syrian forces, a sort of

on-the-job training program rather than the more formal instruction methods utilized in Egypt. Overall Russian involvement in Syria takes the form of hybrid warfare involving “irregular forces, mercenaries, clandestine methods, information and disinformation programs.”⁷²

In sum, Russian means of security assistance include a range of weapons systems, training on their use by personnel drawn from the military or from thinly disguised “private” security contractors, extension of protection to local elites, and disinformation campaigns that sometimes involve support for local military forces, as they have in the Sudan. These means are well tailored to Russian ends and to the partners with which Russia has chosen to work. Russia’s ends, ways, and means are all shaped by its own and recipients’ authoritarian systems, the strengths and weaknesses of which become apparent in comparison to U.S. security assistance.

U.S. Security Assistance

Ends

U.S. ends in the MENA region have traditionally been to promote stable global energy markets by ensuring the free flow of oil and gas in the region, to maintain a balance of power favorable to U.S. interests, and most importantly to foster regional stability.⁷³ In this last objective the United States stands in stark contrast to Iran, whose use of like-minded nonstate actors tends to undermine sovereignty and foster instability, at least in the short term. Since September 11, 2001, an additional U.S. objective has been to prevent terrorist attacks on the United States or its interests. This in turn has engendered a strategy of preventing or containing “ungoverned spaces” where extremist organizations might find refuge and organize attacks.⁷⁴

In order to further these objectives, the preferred U.S. strategy has been to partner with governments in the region to establish and maintain long-term professional contacts, build partner nation capacity to enable self-defense and enhance commonality with U.S. forces in coalition operations, and facilitate access for U.S. military forces. In some cases, the U.S. has partnered with nonstate actors to achieve its goals, as is the case in Syria and, to a limited extent, Yemen. Nonetheless, the strategic imperative to sustain a stable status quo generally militates against support for nonstate actors while bolstering state capacities.

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Ensuring stability requires more than support for recognized and functioning governments as opposed to nonstate actors. While the United States has and will no doubt continue to work with repressive regimes when necessary in order to further its goals, there is broad recognition, at least within the U.S. military, that severe repression is not conducive to long-term stability. For that reason, the strengthening of national institutions, the encouragement of civilian oversight of the military, and the furtherance of democratic values and human rights where possible are U.S. objectives not only in and of themselves, but also because they support the desired end state of regional stability.

In addition to promoting governmental stability, the United States seeks to enhance regional cooperation in order to foster trust, communication, and, if necessary, coalition military operations to counter threats to regional and U.S. interests.⁷⁵ U.S. security assistance and security cooperation programs in the MENA region are intended to further this strategy by developing partnerships and partner capabilities, by building alliances, and by facilitating U.S. access.⁷⁶ U.S. goals are similar across the region, as reflected in a brief overview of U.S. security assistance objectives in specific countries. In Lebanon, for example, U.S. policy is to “reinforce Lebanon’s sovereignty and secure its borders, counter internal threats, and build up its legitimate state institutions.”⁷⁷ The primary vehicle for furthering this strategy is support for the Lebanese Armed Forces, “with the aim of creating a national force strong enough to counter nonstate actors and secure the country’s borders.”⁷⁸ The United States has also sought to strengthen the capacity of the country’s civilian security services in order to counter terrorist threats.⁷⁹ In Saudi Arabia, U.S. goals include ensuring oil security, leveraging the kingdom’s regional importance and strategic location as a bulwark against Iran, and facilitating access and overflight rights for American forces, while protecting “Saudi Arabia, and the region, from the destabilizing effects of terrorism, countering Iranian influence, and other threats.”⁸⁰

Yemen presents a somewhat more complex picture of ends and the means for achieving them. The United States has conducted combat operations in Yemen since 2002, primarily through unmanned aerial vehicle strikes and an on-again/off-again Special Operations Forces (SOF) presence, with the objective of destroying or degrading the capabilities of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Yemen, and their various affiliates. After 2015, the United States began to provide various forms of assistance to the Saudi-led intervention forces. The goals were to “restore the UN-recognized government of Yemen and preserve Saudi territorial integrity from incursion by Yemen-based Houthi rebels,”⁸¹ and to “continue to support our regional partners . . . to help mitigate threats to civilian populations and critical infrastructure . . . [and to] improve Saudi Arabia’s operational performance and reduce civilian casualties.”⁸²

Following the defeat of the Islamic State forces in Iraq, the United States has continued to pursue the objectives of a stable Iraq that is not dominated by Iran or its proxies. As is the case elsewhere in the region, U.S. security assistance in Iraq is focused on developing a modern, professional military that is accountable to civilian authority and capable of defending national borders. In addition, U.S. programs promote “adherence to the rule of law, and the respect for human rights, while simultaneously increasing the Iraqi military’s capability to respond to threats and conduct counter-terrorism operations.”⁸³ While stated U.S. objectives in Syria have varied and sometimes contradicted one another, after an internal policy review in late 2018 U.S. officials “described policy toward Syria as seeking (1) the enduring defeat of the Islamic State; (2) a political settlement to the Syrian civil war; and (3) the withdrawal of Iranian-commanded forces.”⁸⁴

As these country programs indicate, the broad, long-term nature of U.S. ends, especially that of ensuring stability, largely drive a strategy of working with and through established governments, with occasional exceptions. While U.S. security assistance benefits from being embedded in state-to-state relations, the United States is sometimes held responsible for actions and policies, foreign and domestic, of its partners, whether or not it is in agreement with them and whether or not those actions and policies in fact further U.S. interests. These are examples of the principal-agent problem that was noted above as bedeviling security assistance relationships. As a result of its desire to maintain its relationships with state recipients of security assistance, the United States can also become an unwilling accomplice in partner nation misadventures, as its present support for Saudi-led operations in Yemen illustrates.

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Although the strategies applied vary from country to country, they are all designed to further the principle U.S. objectives in the region:

- Maintain a balance of power favorable to U.S. interests.
- Enhance regional stability.
- Prevent terrorist attacks on the United States or its interests.
- Promote stable global energy markets by ensuring the free flow of oil and gas.

Ways

U.S. ways of security assistance feature engagement at multiple points and at various levels within host nation governments, militaries, and security forces. Reflecting this diverse engagement, the Department of Defense is authorized by Congress to coordinate an extensive range of programs with security partners including:

- Contingency operations and related coalition operational support
- Noncontingency train and equip
- Operational support
- Counternarcotic, countertransnational organized crime, and counterproliferation
- Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief
- Exercises
- International armaments cooperation
- Education and exchange programs
- Military-to-military contacts
- Defense institution building and support
- Recovery and accounting of missing personnel⁸⁵

The broad-based approach inherent in the preferred U.S. model of security assistance presupposes a functioning, relatively stable and pro-Western government, such as those in Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco. Such circumstances, however, have become increasingly rare in the MENA region, as a brief country review suggests.

Saudi Arabia comes close to matching that model—a stable government with long-standing military, political, and commercial ties with the United States, one that shares many regional objectives, especially as regards Iran. The Saudi-led intervention in Yemen has changed that picture, however, involving the United States in a conflict it would have preferred to avoid. This has altered the type of support the United States provides to Saudi Arabia, while significantly impacting the mission and operations of the small U.S. force in Yemen. While U.S. and Saudi interests regarding Yemen may largely coincide, the ways the Saudis have chosen to achieve their goals have not advanced U.S. interests and in fact have done them considerable harm.⁸⁶

The U.S. collaborates with Saudi Arabia in numerous programs to improve training for special operations and counterterrorism forces, integrate air and missile defense systems, strengthen cyber defenses, bolster maritime security, and develop critical infrastructure security capabilities.⁸⁷ These programs are facilitated primarily by the United States Military Training Mission, the Office of the Program Manager–Saudi Arabian National Guard, and the Ministry of Interior–Military Assistance Group. The military training mission works with the Saudi Ministry of Defense and Aviation,

providing training instruction and advisory services as well as studies and recommendations. One hundred forty American core security assistance advisers are responsible for Foreign Military Sales (FMS) case coordination but also provide assistance and advice across the spectrum of doctrine, organization, training, and leadership.⁸⁸ At other levels, the military training mission:

- coordinates the provision of training services and equipment for the Royal Saudi Air Defense Force to strengthen air and missile defense capabilities;
- provides assistance to the Royal Saudi Land Forces to improve military education;
- assists the Royal Saudi Naval Forces Marine Forces and the Royal Saudi Naval Forces Special Forces to enhance self-defense and counterterrorism capabilities; and
- coordinates equipment purchases for the Royal Saudi Naval Forces.⁸⁹

The Office of the Program Manager–Saudi Arabian National Guard works with the Ministry of the National Guard to organize, train, and equip the kingdom’s second-largest land force, comprising several brigades of light armor, helicopters, and artillery.⁹⁰ The Ministry of Interior–Military Assistance Group focuses on the Border Guards, the Facilities Security Forces, and others to develop critical infrastructure security capabilities.⁹¹

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After the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, the United States began providing military advice, intelligence, and logistical support—most visibly in the form of aerial refueling operations—to coalition forces. The United States coordinated with the Saudis to improve that nation’s ability to defend against ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles. In light of the Saudis’ poor operational performance and mounting civilian casualties, the United States established a Joint Incident Assessment Team and began advising on targeting procedures and precision.⁹² U.S. SOF began a limited advise and assist mission with the Yemeni government and the coalition forces during operations in the city of Mukalla in 2016. SOF have reportedly provided intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assistance; maritime interdiction; and drone support to the coalition.⁹³ The September 2019 strikes on the Saudi oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais, combined with the failure to subdue the Houthi rebellion in Yemen, suggests that this varied U.S. security assistance has not adequately upgraded Saudi capacities either to defend its own territory or project its power into Yemen.

In Iraq, a relatively stable if fractured government presides over deep divisions not just within the population but in the military, security forces, and political elite, while numerous militias operate more or less independently. The United States began providing military assistance to Iraq through FMS in 2003. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) began in 2012, intended to fund professional

military and other training as well as programs to enhance Iraq's logistics and sustainment capabilities. With the emergence of the Islamic State in 2014, however, portions of the FMF funds were reprogrammed for counterterrorism. Approximately 5,000 U.S. troops in Iraq provide advisory and training support to Iraqi security forces with priority until 2019 going to Iraqi forces conducting operations against the Islamic State.⁹⁴ Stabilization efforts in the wake of the military defeat of the Islamic State continue, complicating U.S. efforts to engage and to coordinate various forms of security assistance, tasks rendered yet more problematic by widespread demonstrations in the fall of 2019 and the killing on orders from U.S. President Donald Trump of Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani in January 2020. Through the Counter-Islamic State Train and Equip Fund, support has been provided to the Iraqi Counterterrorism Service, Army, Federal Police, Border Guards, Emergency Response Battalions, Energy Police, Special Forces, and Kurdish Regional Government Ministry of Peshmerga forces.⁹⁵ While elements of the U.S. military continue to support Iraqi military and security forces with training, advice, intelligence support, and combat operations, the Office of Security Cooperation–Iraq (OSC–I) administers security assistance programs including professional military, technical, and operational training funded by the U.S. International Military Education and Training program. Expanded authorities granted to OSC–I allow that office to offer professionalization and management assistance to all “military and other security forces with a national security mission,” enabling embassy engagement with police and local security forces.⁹⁶

In Lebanon, a government in perpetual free fall and a sectarian-militia-*cum*-political-party that is the strongest military force in the land limit U.S. options for coordination and cooperation. The United States enhances interoperability and encourages lasting military-to-military relationships by providing professional military education, technical instruction, and tactical training. Over 30,000 Lebanese service members received training in the United States or Lebanon between 2006 and 2017, including over 900 graduates of professional military education programs. U.S. programs have provided technical assistance and capacity building for Land Border Regiments, and supported development of aerial intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities and a national command and control system.⁹⁷ The U.S. sponsors Operation Resolute Response, an annual bilateral military exercise that includes elements of the U.S. Navy, Coast Guard, and Army as well as the Lebanese Armed Forces.⁹⁸ The U.S. SOF presence in Lebanon is estimated at approximately seventy personnel, a contingent which provides training for Lebanese special operations forces, including assistance for the Lebanese Special Forces School.⁹⁹

In Yemen and Syria, where the writ of the central government is limited and governmental opposition to America profound, U.S. forces have conducted antiterrorism operations while providing various forms of material, training, and direct support to proxies. Limited U.S. support for the Syrian opposition began in 2012, and in 2014 Congress authorized a train and equip program for vetted groups. By 2015 few units had engaged in combat operations or even been fielded, and the

program was redesigned and reduced in the face of mounting domestic criticism. At the same time, the growing influence of jihadist organizations among the rebels caused the United States to scale back its support of Syrian rebel groups in general and focus instead on the growing threat posed by the Islamic State. As a result, the revised program was redirected toward equipping and enabling vetted leaders and groups inside Syria who were fighting the Islamic State. Prior to announcing in December 2018 its intent to withdraw military forces from Syria, stated U.S. policy indicated an intent to train and equip local forces to hold and secure recaptured areas.¹⁰⁰ In February 2019, the White House announced that several hundred U.S. troops would remain in Syria, and that it was requesting \$300 million in the following year's defense funding to continue to equip and sustain Syrian partner forces.¹⁰¹ Prior to October 2019, U.S. train and equip, advise and assist, and direct support efforts were focused primarily on the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, although U.S. forces were authorized to assist other groups that had been vetted, even if they were not U.S. trained. Until October 2019 there were an estimated 1,000 U.S. troops in Syria, concentrated in the country's northeast but including a small contingent at al-Tanf in the southeast. The primary advise, assist, and accompany force in Syria was the Special Operations Joint Task Force, Operation Inherent Resolve.¹⁰² All U.S. assistance was suddenly terminated by Trump in October 2019.

While the preferred U.S. ways in the region emphasize wide ranging government-to-government contacts, long-term relationships, and a broad selection of instructional and training programs, circumstances have forced some narrower and less ambitious approaches, especially in Syria and Yemen.

Means

Although significant resources are devoted to U.S. training programs, exercises, and military-to-military contacts, most analysis of U.S. means in the Middle East focuses on equipment, as the expenditures are impressive and the resulting hardware equally so. Just as U.S. ends and ways in the region are wide-ranging, so too is the extent of hardware and instruction provided, as exemplified in several Arab countries. From 2008 until 2011, for example, the U.S. cleared \$45 billion in arms transfers alone for Saudi Arabia, followed by an additional \$17 billion from 2011 to 2015.¹⁰³ The enormous figures reflect not just the Saudis' deep pockets but their penchant, shared by other governments in the region, for high-end weaponry. The Saudis fly the advanced F-15 fighter aircraft outfitted with cutting edge weaponry, operate several batteries of PAC-3 Patriot air defense missiles, and possess large main battle tank and attack helicopter fleets. The 2017 request alone included four littoral combat ships, 115 M1A2 main battle tanks, additional helicopters, and PAC-3 Patriot missiles. Training and support aspects of U.S. means were also present and increasingly important in light of the Royal Saudi Air Force's much-criticized performance in Yemen. A memorandum of

intent was signed for \$18 billion to upgrade Saudi Arabia's command-and-control systems, to enhance training for the Royal Saudi Air Force to improve precision targeting capabilities and processes, and to provide further instruction on the law of armed conflict.¹⁰⁴

In Iraq, the United States has approved more than \$23 billion in FMS transactions since 2003,¹⁰⁵ and the Department of Defense has provided over \$2.3 billion through the Iraq Train and Equip Fund and the Counter-Islamic State Train and Equip Fund.¹⁰⁶ As in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, U.S. supplied equipment ranges from high-end F-16 tactical fighters to main battle tanks to small arms and ammunition to protective gear. Funding for training is similarly broad, with allocations for instructional programs on the law of armed conflict and human rights, command and general staff courses, military intelligence courses, and senior noncommissioned officer courses as well as technical and operational instruction.¹⁰⁷

Lebanon has received over \$2 billion in assistance since 2005, including nearly \$1.4 billion in FMF grants. The Lebanese Armed Forces operate a range of U.S. equipment, including self-propelled howitzers, armored personnel carriers, attack aircraft, helicopters, and Bradley fighting vehicles. On the other end of the spectrum, the United States supplies assault rifles, personal protective equipment, and bomb disposal robots.¹⁰⁸ In 2017, Lebanon received \$42.9 million in Counter-Terrorism Partnership Funds directed toward border security upgrades. International Military Education and Training funding since 2006 has totaled \$29.4 million and represents just one of the training programs in which over 30,000 Lebanese military personnel have participated.¹⁰⁹

In Syria, constrained as U.S. security assistance is by the political and military situation and the nature of its partnership, U.S. means are correspondingly less expansive, even though the dollar expenditure is significant. Although Defense Department figures for Syria-specific operations are not available, the cost of the counter-Islamic State campaign in Syria and Iraq—Operation Inherent Resolve—had reached \$28.5 billion by September 2018.¹¹⁰ The range of equipment and training provided is more narrowly focused as befits the situation, with instruction emphasizing tactical and

operational skills and equipment appropriate to the ground-centric, relatively small force employment that characterizes the Syrian Democratic Forces.

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U.S. means, then, while traditionally aimed at relatively stable national entities, have by necessity been modified to fit the various situations the United States is confronted with in the Middle East. The model developed for military operations within Saudi Arabia remains reasonably intact, albeit modified as a result of the Saudi incursion into

Yemen. In Iraq, the lingering threat of the Islamic State, combined with challenges posed by extra-governmental militias hostile to U.S. interests, coupled with a tense government-to-government relationship, present complications for developing and operating a coherent, effective security assistance program. To a lesser extent the same is true in Lebanon, where similar issues are present. Finally, in Syria and in Yemen the United States has been forced to work largely through proxies, with at best mixed results.

In sum, the ends, ways and means of U.S. security assistance have developed primarily within the framework of state-to-state relations. This background largely accounts for their strengths and weaknesses, among the latter of which is relative inflexibility associated with having operated primarily in the more fixed, stable environment provided by states as opposed to that which obtains in ungoverned and contested spaces.

Conclusion

The MENA region has become the world's testing ground for security assistance. Its three main providers—Iran, Russia, and the United States—operate at different levels of statehood. Iran's primary partners are substate actors; Russia's are typically weak, state-based actors; and those of the United States are overwhelmingly established states. These choices reflect the respective provider's strategic positions in the MENA region and the nature of both its own and its partners' military and economic capacities.

The vital question of which provider's assistance has been and will in the future be the most effective can be answered at operational and strategic levels. At the operational level, Iran appears to be the most effective, as attested to by the impressive asymmetric capacities it has built with partners in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, and the outcomes of the violent conflicts in which those partners have engaged. Russian security assistance has only been operationally decisive in Syria, where it has taken the form of direct control over units within the Syrian military. Elsewhere, Russia has dabbled in security assistance to substate actors, such as now in Libya, and with weakened state actors, such as Qaddafi in Libya or Bashir in Sudan, but that assistance has not been decisive and appears to have been driven primarily by short-term, opportunistic considerations. U.S. security assistance, provided overwhelmingly to state actors, appears to have been operationally defensive, concentrated heavily on airpower intended to deter potential opponents and, if necessary, inflict losses on their primarily ground-based forces.

The MENA region has become the world's testing ground for security assistance.

Translation of operational into lasting strategic gains, however, has been difficult for Iran. Its bottom-up support for substate actors in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen has not yet resulted in Iran having consolidated its control at the respective state levels and the inherent limitations of its approach may prevent it from ever doing so. Its security assistance, clearly intended to aggrandize Iranian influence, has generated reactions directed at Iran itself, most notably in the form of demonstrations against it in Lebanon and Iraq and by the sanctions regime that has enfeebled its economy and undermined its own power projection capabilities.

Similarly, Russia shows little sign of being able to consolidate its relationship with Bashar al-Assad in the form of a unified, legitimate government capable of rebuilding Syria and in which Russia would remain a senior partner. Elsewhere in the MENA region, Russia has regained footholds in some of the former strategic positions held by the Soviet Union, but has not translated those footholds, such as in Egypt, into more fundamental, broadly based relationships.

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By contrast, U.S. strategic assistance has been both weakened and strengthened by its connection to established states and the status quo order in which they are enmeshed. American soft power has been undermined by that association, an outcome that has contributed to operational setbacks in Lebanon, Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Yemen. Nonetheless, security assistance has helped to sustain the state-based MENA order, which is a primary U.S. strategic objective in the MENA region.

The rise of warlords and militias, however, poses an existential challenge to that order. It has caused some analysts, including Daniel Byman and Israa Saber, to observe that “the United States and other powers should recognize the unfortunate necessity of working with warlords and improve their bureaucratic capacity to do so.” Noting the potential liabilities of providing security assistance to substate actors, including interference with stabilization and statebuilding efforts as well as the propensity of those actors to abuse human rights, to say nothing of legal barriers to supporting them, they nevertheless advise development of “warlord-specific policies, focusing on how much access to give them to aid, how to integrate them into the broader state, and which if any illicit activities to tolerate.”¹¹¹ A full embrace of this approach could, however, entail costs to the MENA’s state system, hence its overall stability, to say nothing of the United States’ reputation for sustaining international order. Virtually universal condemnation by members of the Iraqi political elite in the wake of the January 2020 killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani at Baghdad International Airport by an American drone strike illustrates such reputational costs.

Policy Implications

This review begs the question of how much and in which directions these three leading providers of security assistance to the Middle East might be able to change the ends, ways, and means of their respective programs. The short answer is not much, although much more for the United States than for Iran and somewhat more for the United States than for Russia. In all three cases ends, ways, and means are determined by the interests and capacities of the security assistance providers, neither of which is likely to undergo dramatic, sudden alteration short of regime change.

Iran's interest in exporting its revolution primarily by developing its own asymmetric capacities and those of militias subordinate to it is, as has been argued here, part of its regime's DNA. After signing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, for example, it redoubled efforts to expand its influence in the region through provision of security assistance, rather than choosing the course of moderation and domestic development which the Obama administration hoped it would. Its further investment in asymmetric warfare, as demonstrated by the September 2019 attack on Saudi oil facilities, coupled with its simultaneous harsh crackdown on domestic dissent, indicates that the prospects for major reductions or alterations in existing patterns of security assistance are limited, even though Iran appears to be running up against serious opposition in various countries of the region. Its invariable response has been to seek to denigrate and extirpate opposition, rather than to alter policies.

Russian security assistance reflects the Putin regime's opportunism, rooted in its comparative global weakness combined, as in the case of Iran, with the inherent brittleness of its authoritarian regime. As also in Iran, while regime change in Moscow is possible, it seems unlikely in the near- or medium-term future. Short of regime change, the one factor that could change the security assistance behavior of Iran and Russia is that they would successfully assume legitimate, respected, significant roles in the Middle East region, and hence gain stakes in its status quo. In Iran's case its very method of security assistance renders that impossible as it is incompatible with stable, strong states. The Iranian leopard, in short, would have to change its spots.

By contrast, Russia's increasing emphasis on playing a diplomatic mediating role in several of the region's conflicts, combined with economic and other resources much superior to Iran's, suggest that unlike Iran, it could aspire to play such a stabilizing role in the foreseeable future without a prior transformation of its regime. Presumably, playing such a role would in turn moderate the more aggressive aspects of its security assistance, such as the provision of mercenaries to warlords and insecure governmental incumbents. Its role in the region and its security assistance would then come to more closely resemble that of the U.S. and other Western powers.

It is the United States that has the greatest potential flexibility and also the greatest need for flexibility in providing security assistance. Its primary interest in the region is preserving the stability of states and peaceful relationships between them. The

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ends, ways, and means of its security assistance are strongly shaped by that interest. Yet a stable, state-based order in the Middle East has become elusive. Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, followed by the eruption of popular protests in 2011, the prospects for the establishment of such a state-based order have appeared to recede.

This leaves the United States with three basic alternatives for the provision of security assistance in the region. One is to unilaterally double down on the state order, doing everything possible to bolster it, both through security and development assistance. Perceived failures of so-called state building endeavors in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, have tempered the U.S. political appetite toward endeavors of such scale, thus limiting U.S. security assistance to smaller-footprint training and acquisition programs of the kind described in this article.

A second alternative might be a hard-core, “realistic” approach, resting on the notion that the state order of the Middle East is inherently fragile, too weak to base U.S. interests and dealings on. This alternative would entail reshaping security assistance so that it is more like Russia’s, combining symmetric and asymmetric ways and means, although hopefully not with the brutal, single-minded pursuit of national self-interest that appears to be the case with Russia.

While technically downgrading ways and means so that a significant portion are of an asymmetric nature would be a challenge for the U.S. military and the industrial complex that supplies its weaponry, it would be much less of a challenge than Iran would face, for example, in trying to upgrade concentration of its security assistance from asymmetric to symmetric warfare capacity. Moreover, the technical challenge faced by the U.S. military-industrial complex would be less than the political one of presenting to the American people, and to Western and regional publics more generally, an apparent abandonment of Washington’s long-standing commitment to a peaceful global order that promotes free enterprise and liberal democracy. It might be argued, in defense of this second alternative, that during the Cold War U.S. security assistance was more varied than it has become, involving more asymmetric ways and means than now. U.S. decisionmakers might decide that the present combination of an unstable Middle East, Russian adventurism, and Iranian sabotage of state institutions necessitates a return to something similar to the security assistance characteristic of the Cold War.

A third alternative for the United States is similar the first, but with the addition of far greater attention paid to gaining the support of allies, especially those in Europe and Asia, than has been the case in recent years. The unilateral U.S. pursuit of security assistance and the objectives it is intended to realize has in considerable measure created the very conditions responsible for the present unpleasant, dyadic choice the United States now faces. Rebuilding or preserving failed and fragile Middle East states, and rendering the order linking the region's states and peoples more peaceful, will require a security assistance strategy based on assumptions of stateness that can, first, be made acceptable to an American public dubious of it, and second, be coordinated with the efforts of like-minded allies. Burden sharing is essential to the success of U.S. security assistance precisely because it can bolster the stateness upon which it depends. The United States simply cannot afford to go it alone, which in any case would be a less welcome strategy in the region. Moreover, a return to Cold War politics would likely entail substantial collateral financial, reputational, and even security costs. The preferable option is to convince allies to help share responsibility for rebuilding a Middle Eastern order that has frayed badly over a decade or so, and become a threat to global well-being.

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