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Aerospace & Defense is a multidisciplinary academic journal published by the Elrom Center for Air and Space Policy and Strategy Research at Tel Aviv University. The journal serves as an exclusive platform for scholarly discourse on critical issues pertaining to air, space, and security. It actively promotes the dissemination of research articles that offer rigorous, critical, and innovative analytical perspectives. Our mission is to foster a comprehensive understanding of these domains, particularly in the context of contemporary advancements in technology, strategic frameworks, geopolitical dynamics, military operations, and policy development.

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Editorial Note

Two years have passed since the outbreak of the Iron Swords War, and the conflict continues to reshape the strategic landscape of the Middle East. The war has accelerated developments in the air and space domains, which have become highly active arenas marked by unprecedented use of unmanned aerial vehicles, rockets, and precision ballistic missiles. Air power is now frequently employed for operational, deterrent, and cognitive purposes, alongside cyber warfare targeting command and control systems.

These developments result from a convergence of key factors, including the integration of advanced technologies, the adoption of new operational concepts, and the strategic adaptation of states and security organizations to a shifting balance of power in both regional and global arenas. In this reality, air and space power are not only central to military effectiveness but also serve as diplomatic, economic, and cognitive instruments of influence.

This issue presents four research articles that reflect the evolving strategic reality in the Middle East and offer conceptual and analytical tools for scholars, decision-makers, and stakeholders seeking to understand the role of air and space power in the region:

The first article examines the Israeli Air Force following the October 7 attack and proposes operational and conceptual lessons for reshaping its force structure. The second article explores the Israel Defense Forces' force-building in an era where traditional threats are diminishing and new, often non-state, threats are emerging. The third article analyzes parallel developments in the regional arena, focusing on Egypt's use of air power to enhance both its security and strategic standing. The fourth and final article introduces a new framework for understanding contemporary strategic partnerships, distinguishing between types of partnerships and their impact on the Middle East and North Africa.

We extend our sincere appreciation to the reviewers for their valuable contribution to the scholarly quality of this issue.

Eviatar Matania, Editor in Chief
Nir Hasid, Editor

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A Conceptual Shift in the Air Force: Lessons from October 7, 2023

Alex Dan[1]

Abstract

This article examines the necessary conceptual shift in the Israeli Air Force's (IAF) role in land border defense, based on lessons learned from the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack. The study analyzes how these events exposed significant gaps in air power's role when confronting extensive ground incursions through a mixed-methods approach combining comparative case study analysis with doctrinal examination. The research reveals that existing doctrine, based on separation between defensive and offensive missions and over-reliance on intelligence and static defense mechanisms, proved inadequate against sudden, multi-front threats (Lupovici, 2024). The findings indicate a critical need to transition from viewing the Air Force as a supporting element to a leading force providing comprehensive border defense responses, particularly in scenarios involving coordinated mass infiltrations into populated border areas (Finkel, 2024). The study proposes a new framework integrating real-time situational awareness, rapid lethal response capabilities, and enhanced air-ground operational coordination specifically for large-scale coordinated attacks. The conclusions emphasize the importance of a paradigm shift from reactive to proactive, comprehensive air-centric border defense doctrine that distinguishes between routine security operations and responses to coordinated military-style assaults.

Keywords: Border defense, Air Force doctrine, ground incursions, military doctrine, command and control, October 7 attack, air-ground integration, Israeli Air Force

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Introduction

The October 7, 2023, Hamas attack marked a watershed moment in understanding Israel's border defense challenges, particularly air power's role in responding to large-scale, coordinated ground infiltrations. The coordinated assault involved approximately 3,000 terrorists infiltrating through multiple breach points along the Gaza Strip border using diverse means, including motorized paragliders, motorcycles, and explosive devices (Lupovici, 2024). Differing from routine security threats, this attack represents what military analysts characterize as a hybrid warfare operation combining conventional military tactics with irregular methods to achieve strategic surprise (Dostri, 2023).

Border defense operational concepts are based on threat type and context. Conventional military defense employs defensive arrays with depth, minefields, and prepared positions to channel and delay attacking forces (Rodman, 2001). Routine security defense against terrorist infiltrations relies on fences, observation posts, and rapid response teams optimized for detecting and neutralizing small groups or individuals (Andreas, 2009). The October 7 attack represents a third category: coordinated mass infiltration combining elements of both conventional military assault and terrorist tactics, creating unprecedented challenges for existing defensive concepts.

Military literature documents evolution of air power doctrine (Olsen, 2010; Lambeth, 2000), with contemporary analyses highlighting that current air doctrine proved inadequate for addressing the hybrid nature of the October 7 assault (Lupovici, 2024). The primary failure was not technological inadequacy but a gap in understanding air power's role when routine security measures are overwhelmed by coordinated military-style attacks targeting civilian border communities (Arad, 2025; Horev, 2024).

The IAF's initial response revealed structural and conceptual limitations, resulting in critical delays (Shmuely, 2025; Shimony, 2025). According to published reports, only limited fighter aircraft were on alert when the attack began, delaying an effective aerial response (Shimon, 2025; Dostri, 2023; Selijan, 2024). Command structure constraints prevented rapid autonomous response, necessitating significant organizational changes. Similar challenges in rapid air response have been documented elsewhere (Vick et al., 2001), with the IAF's delayed response at the beginning of the October 7 war exemplifying air response protocols ineffectively applied in real time.

Traditional IAF operational doctrine distinguished between warfare support roles and routine security assistance missions. For conventional threats, the IAF maintained "blocking" plans using attack helicopters to stop tanks and heavy bombs to block roads under high alert conditions. For routine Gaza

border security, the IAF provided UAV patrols, attack helicopters, and minimal fighter aircraft, all operating without air superiority concerns (Finkel, 2024; Heller, 2024).

The October 7 attack exposed critical gaps when coordinated mass infiltration overwhelmed security measures while not triggering full defensive array activation. Settlements located directly on border lines created additional complexities, as civilian population protection constrained military responses and complicated air power employment (Regev, 2025).

The IAF's initial response revealed structural and conceptual limitations, particularly regarding engagement authorities and procedures for employing lethal force against infiltrators (Shmuely, 2025; Shimony, 2025). While tactical air assets maintained direct attachment to ground units at battalion level, and Gaza Division commanders possessed full authority over fixed-wing preplanned targets, no doctrine existed for immediate air engagement of infiltrators operating within Israeli territory—a scenario unplanned for despite decades of border security operations (Heller, 2024).

This study examines implications of this operational failure for fundamental conceptual change in air power's border defense role. Contrary to traditional approaches that view air forces as supporting elements (Finkel, 2024), this research advances the necessity of positioning air power as the central component in comprehensive border threat responses, maintaining a balance between offensive and defensive capabilities, immediate and strategic responses, and operational flexibility (Bar Yosef, 2024). This aligns with concepts of multi-domain operations (Perkins, 2017), addressing the gap between security operations and responses to mass infiltrations targeting civilian border populations.

Our research question examines how the IAF's land border defense role should henceforth be adapted to effectively respond to large-scale infiltrations: How are coordinated mass infiltrations different from conventional attacks or routine threats in terms of air power needs? How can air-ground cooperation better protect civilians in border settlements during such attacks? What changes in engagement rules and operations are needed for faster air response inside Israeli territory?

Methodology

Using a qualitative, comparative case study approach, this study focuses on Israel's experience (Yin, 2017). The methodology applies multiple analyses to understand air power's evolving role in countering coordinated mass infiltrations.

International approaches to air border defense are compared to identify operational challenges, effective practices, and key contextual factors (George

& Bennett, 2005). This framework examines how different nations transition from routine security to coordinated threat response.

The Israeli case is built from open sources, journalism, military publications, and academic analysis to trace doctrinal changes before and after October 7to ensure reliability and transparency.

Theoretical analysis draws on classical and modern literature on military doctrine and asymmetric warfare, building an analytical framework to understand requirements for doctrinal transformation (Rosen, 1991; Farrell & Terriff, 2002).

Limitations include restricted access to detailed military data and recency of key events (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Theoretical Background

Fundamental Concepts in Land Border Defense

Historical analyses of border defense strategies have examined approaches across geographical contexts (Jones, 2012; Donaldson & Williams, 2008). Land border defense encompasses diverse missions and challenges, varying by nature of the threat, geographical constraints, and available resources. Traditional "warning and security zones" concepts refer to areas designed for early detection of enemy activity and creation of sufficient depth for gradual defensive maneuvers and force concentration (Fravel, 2007).

Conventional border threat responses combine static and dynamic elements: fixed observation posts, fortified positions, physical and technological barriers, and mobile defense force deployment. Mobile defense offers operational flexibility but requires rapid response times. During massive invasions, temporary territorial loss may occur until counterattacks can be executed. Military literature has analyzed defense in depth (Mearsheimer, 1989; Biddle, 2004; Betts, 1982).

Modern military doctrine acknowledges a range of border threats spanning from individual terrorist or smuggler infiltrations to large-scale, coordinated military attacks. While each threat type requires different tactical responses, they share common operational characteristics, including critical need for early detection systems, rapid response, and effective threat neutralization (Andreas, 2009; Vallet, 2014; Kilcullen, 2009).

Characteristics of Large-Scale Ground Incursions

In the evolution of asymmetric tactics, several distinguishing features of large-scale ground incursions set them apart from traditional border threats. These operations involve coordinated, multi-point attacks, complicating the defense force's ability to concentrate resources and adequately respond. Modern incursions employ diverse tactics, combining infantry units, vehicles, and simple aerial

assets such as motorized paragliders or drones (Kilcullen, 2009; Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001).

Studies of surprise attacks have identified their defensive vulnerabilities. Such incursions are defined by their speed and initial attack intensity. They require meticulous planning, extensive training, and precise timing from attackers, who exploit the element of surprise to overcome the defender's quantitative or technological superiority (Betts, 1982; Handel, 1989).

Large-scale incursions present challenges requiring rapid decision-making under high-uncertainty conditions. During initial stages, determining the attack's scope, primary objectives, and involved forces proves difficult, creating critical command dilemmas. Commanders must decide whether to respond with full force based on partial information, risking excessive force application, or await additional intelligence, potentially resulting in missed defensive opportunities (Klein, 1993; Klein, 1999; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; McChrystal et al., 2015).

Air Force Operations Doctrine Against Border Incursions

Traditional Air Force defense operations have relied on clear distinctions between offensive and defensive missions (Hallion, 1992; Heller & Shelach, 2023; Heller, 2024; Finkel, 2024). Offensive missions encompassed deep strikes against enemy targets, disrupting supply lines and communications, and attacking command centers; defensive missions focused on air defense, hostile aircraft interception, and direct combat support to ground forces (Meilinger, 2003; Gray, 2012; Forsyth, 2024).

Scholars have analyzed adaptation of air power to irregular warfare, revealing the efficacy of traditional offensive-defensive approaches in military doctrine, including air superiority operations, deep strike missions, and coordinated air-ground maneuver warfare in interstate wars with clear front lines and well-defined targets (Arve, 2023). Asymmetric threats, particularly rapid and multi-front incursions, reveal significant limitations. In such scenarios, traditional offensive-defensive mission distinctions become less relevant (Corum & Johnson, 2003; Drew, 1998).

Conceptual Gap Between Air Superiority and Air-Ground Border Control

"Air superiority" concepts were developed through experiences in World War II and subsequent conflicts (Hallion, 1992). This well-evolved doctrine enables controlling air and ground force freedom of action while neutralizing enemy air power (Watts, 2013; Heuser, 2010).

Air superiority concepts supported conventional interstate wars where each side possessed significant air forces and clear air targets, not ground

incursions by actors lacking substantial air power. Instead, "air-ground border area control" is required—the ability to use air power for ground activity control, threat identification, force movement tracking, and immediate lethal response provision (Shelah, 2024; Finkel, 2024). This conceptual shift aligns with broader discussions about air power in low-intensity conflicts (Hartman, 2012).

Transitioning from air superiority to air-ground control necessitates changes in thinking, training, and equipment. Emphasis shifts from enemy aircraft engagement and air base attacks to identifying and neutralizing ground forces, supporting defending units, and preventing rapid tactical gains by attackers. Other air forces have similarly transitioned to new operational environments (Kreps, 2016; Finkel, 2024; Topolnicki, 2024).

Routine security border defense addresses individual or small-group infiltrations: terrorist attacks, smuggling operations, or other illegal activities. These threats typically involve limited numbers of non-state actors using simple technologies and tactics. The Israeli experience demonstrates that routine security operations have historically employed air power successfully through UAV patrols, attack helicopter presence, and intelligence collection systems operating under established rules of engagement (Finkel, 2024).

The October 7 attack revealed a third category: coordinated mass infiltration combining military-scale organization and planning with irregular tactics designed to target civilians in border communities. This hybrid approach employs sufficient numbers and coordination to overwhelm security measures while avoiding military signatures that would trigger full defensive array activation. Distinct characteristics of this threat category require doctrinal approaches that bridge the gap between routine security operations and conventional military response.

Challenges of Civilian Population Protection in Border Defense

Civilian settlements located directly on borders complicate air power operations, as protection often conflicts with conventional military doctrines that separate combat zones from populated areas (Andreas, 2009; Kilcullen, 2009). Mass infiltrations force defenders to balance rapid threat response with minimizing civilian casualties. October 7 highlighted the need for air power procedures that distinguish defensive actions from those risking non-combatants. These circumstances challenge traditional air doctrine by requiring new approaches that reconcile speed and accuracy in protecting civilians.

The Gap Between Existing Capabilities and Coordinated Mass Infiltration Response

While Israeli air power has long provided border security, including surveillance, intelligence collection, and fire support, the October 7 attack revealed gaps in addressing mass infiltrations that exceed routine security threat parameters. Existing capabilities, including multi-layered sensor architectures, real-time intelligence fusion, and immediate lethal response systems, proved adequate for routine security operations but insufficient for the scale and coordination of the October 7 assault.

Critical gaps emerged not in technological capability but in operational authority and engagement procedures where infiltrators had breached border defenses. Doctrine provided clear procedures for engaging threats approaching or at the border but lacked frameworks for immediate air power employment against infiltrators who were actively attacking civilian communities.

This gap reflected broader conceptual limitations in understanding how air power should respond when security measures are overwhelmed but conventional military threat indicators remain absent. The hybrid nature of mass infiltrations required new doctrinal concepts bridging operational spaces between routine security support and conventional military engagement.

International Comparative Analysis

Comparative analysis of international border defense reveals limited precedents for addressing mass infiltrations targeting civilian border communities, highlighting the distinctive nature of the Israeli challenge while providing insights into air power adaptation for complex border scenarios (Williams, 2007; Neocleous, 2013).

NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission demonstrates both advantages and limitations of multinational air power cooperation in border defense contexts. Since 2004, the alliance has maintained a permanent fighter aircraft presence for rapid response to airspace violations. However, the mission operates under peacetime legal constraints, limiting aircraft to visual identification and interception, lacking guidance for scenarios involving coordinated ground infiltrations (Shlapak & Johnson, 2016).

The Baltic experience highlights that response protocols optimized for state-level airspace violations prove inadequate for addressing sudden, coordinated ground threats. Emphasis on multinational coordination, while politically essential, delays immediate decision-making in mass infiltration scenarios.

American border security operations with Mexico provide insights into sustained air power employment for border surveillance and interdiction,

though within legal frameworks that constrain military force employment for domestic law enforcement. US Customs and Border Protection operate extensive unmanned aircraft systems, successfully detecting illegal border crossings and supporting interdiction operations across vast geographical areas (Andreas, 2009; Blazakis, 2006).

The American experience addresses primarily individual or small-group infiltrations and operates under legal constraints that separate military from law enforcement capabilities. Desert terrain along the US-Mexico border provides greater geographical depth for detection and response compared to Israeli border communities, limiting applicability of American operational concepts.

Recent European border management developments have accelerated the integration of unmanned systems and artificial intelligence in border surveillance while highlighting persistent challenges in rapid response coordination (Wagner, 2022). European experiences reveal critical needs for comprehensive intelligence integration between air assets, ground sensors, and human intelligence networks to reduce response times.

The Australian border protection model demonstrates long-range maritime surveillance and rapid response capabilities through coordinated multi-agency operations. Australia's Coastwatch program conducts over 15,000 flight hours annually across 8.2 million square kilometers in civil maritime surveillance operations (Coyne, 2019). Maritime environments, however, differ operationally from land border defense.

Indian border management along Pakistan and China illustrates the challenges of mountainous terrain and the need for specialized air-ground coordination protocols. Recent aerial engagements have highlighted the effectiveness of rapid air response capabilities but revealed coordination gaps between service branches during multi-vector attacks.

Clearly, while air power provides essential capabilities for border defense, existing operational concepts focus primarily on state-level threats or individual infiltrations rather than mass infiltrations targeting civilians. A paradigm shift involves developing new operational concepts that can rapidly transition from routine security support to mass infiltration response while maintaining civilian protection.

Israeli Air Force Doctrine Before October 7

Israeli military doctrine pre-October 7 reflected decades of operational experience addressing threat categories through specialized air power employment. The central framework distinguished between conventional military threats requiring

full defensive array activation and routine security operations addressing individual or small-group infiltrations (Rodman, 2001; Kober, 2015).

For conventional threats, the IAF maintained comprehensive "blocking" plans designed to stop advancing forces through coordinated air-ground operations. These plans employed attack helicopters for tank engagement, heavy bombs for road interdiction, and fighter aircraft for air superiority and close air support missions.

Routine security operations in Gaza were optimized for persistent surveillance and rapid response to individual or small-group infiltrations. The IAF provided continuous UAV patrols for intelligence collection and surveillance, attack helicopters for immediate response, and minimal fighter aircraft. These ground activity monitoring and selective engagement operations occurred without air superiority concerns (Finkel, 2024; Heller, 2024).

The doctrine included well-established air-ground coordination mechanisms, with UAV and attack helicopter assets attached directly to ground units at battalion level, providing tactical commanders with immediate air support capabilities. Gaza Division commanders possessed full authority over fixed-wing aircraft employment for preplanned targets, enabling rapid response to emerging threats within established parameters. These arrangements effectively handled routine security operations (Heller, 2024).

However, the doctrine contained a critical gap regarding coordinated mass infiltrations that exceeded security parameters while falling short of conventional military attack indicators. No systematic planning addressed scenarios where infiltrators breached border defenses and operated within Israeli territory against civilian targets, creating operational uncertainty.

The technological foundation of Israeli border defense emphasized advanced surveillance systems, electronic monitoring capabilities, and automated threat detection algorithms designed to identify and track individual or small-group infiltrations. This technological approach, while highly effective for routine security operations, created potential vulnerabilities to coordinated attacks designed to overwhelm sophisticated detection systems through numerical superiority and tactical surprise (Regev, 2025; Horev, 2024).

October 7 Event Analysis

The October 7 attack exposed gaps in existing air power doctrine through operational failures that revealed limitations in addressing mass infiltrations targeting border communities. Hamas achieved tactical surprise through coordinated breaches at multiple points along the Gaza border, rapidly

overwhelming defensive measures and penetrating Israeli territory before an effective air power response could be organized (Bar Yosef, 2024; Horev, 2024).

Command Structure Failures and Procedural Bottlenecks

The IAF's initial response delay on October 7 stemmed from procedural hurdles and approval processes attributable to pre-existing "supporting" doctrine. Traditional command procedures required ground force coordination and central approval before engaging targets in border areas, creating multi-layered, time-consuming approval processes. Doctrine mandated that air assets await specific targeting intelligence from ground units before engaging in combat. However, these ground units were themselves under attack and unable to provide coherent intelligence or targeting data (Shmueli, 2025; Shimoni, 2025; Heller, 2024; Finkel, 2024).

When command headquarters lost connectivity with forward positions, communication breakdowns created information gaps that prevented accurate threat assessment transmission to air units. Centralized command structure required engagement decisions to flow through higher headquarters facilities that were simultaneously managing multiple crises and lacked real-time situational awareness of individual breach points (Shmueli 2025).

This rigid command hierarchy proved inadequate for the rapid, distributed nature of the coordinated border assault, highlighting the need for a more flexible, decentralized air power employment doctrine.

Targeting Authority and Engagement Procedure Limitations

The October 7 attack revealed gaps in engagement authorities and procedures for air power employment against infiltrators operating within Israeli territory. While existing doctrine provided clear frameworks for engaging threats at or approaching the border, no systematic planning addressed immediate air engagement of infiltrators who had breached defensive lines.

Absence of predetermined engagement zones or pre-approved strike areas created decision-making delays during critical initial hours when rapid air response could have significantly reduced infiltrator effectiveness. Traditional rules of engagement emphasized positive target identification and civilian casualty avoidance through detailed coordination procedures, but these requirements proved difficult to fulfill under chaotic conditions where ground forces were simultaneously under attack and unable to provide coherent targeting intelligence (Shmuely, 2025; Shimony, 2025).

Authorization procedures for employing lethal air power within Israeli territory against infiltrators who had breached border defenses was a scenario

for which systematic planning had not been developed. This gap reflected broader conceptual limitations in understanding how air power employment should transition from border security support to civilian population protection (Heller, 2024).

Intelligence and Situational Awareness Limitations

Intelligence assessment frameworks optimized for routine security operations proved inadequate for understanding and responding to coordinated mass infiltration. Existing systems excelled at detecting and tracking individual or small-group infiltrations but lacked analytical frameworks for assessing coordinated, multi-point attacks (Regev, 2025; Shimon, 2025).

Reliance on technological solutions for threat detection and assessment created vulnerabilities when attackers employed tactics specifically designed to overwhelm sophisticated systems through coordinated action. Intelligence assessments focused on conventional military capabilities while potentially underestimating organizational capacity for coordinated ground infiltration using simple technologies (Allen & Chan, 2017). Air doctrine was optimized for responding to traditional attacks and conducting precision strikes, thereby lacking procedures for addressing swarm-style ground infiltrations requiring immediate area engagement rather than precision targeting (Dostri, 2023).

Constructing coherent operational pictures during mass infiltrations proved inherently difficult due to the dynamic, distributed nature of simultaneous attacks across multiple locations. Challenges extended beyond intelligence collection to real-time intelligence processing and decision-making under hybrid threat conditions where traditional analytical frameworks provided insufficient guidance (Shelach, 2024; Heller, 2024, Finkel, 2024)

Air-Ground Coordination Under Crisis Conditions

The October 7 experience revealed air-ground coordination limitations when security operations rapidly escalated to mass infiltration. While existing procedures proved effective for routine operations, they were not designed for simultaneous air support of ground forces and civilian population protection (Shimon, 2025; Shimony, 2025)

Communication breakdowns in command headquarters during the attacks created information gaps that prevented accurate threat assessment transmission to air units. Distributed simultaneous infiltrations at multiple points complicated coordination efforts and overwhelmed command structures designed for sequential crisis management.

Beyond technical communication capabilities, questions arise about command authority and decision-making procedures when routine security operations escalated to scenarios requiring immediate civilian population protection. Existing mechanisms assumed sufficient planning and coordination time, but mass infiltrations created time-critical situations requiring immediate response based on incomplete information (Shelach, 2024; Heller 2025).

Discussion

Doctrinal Gaps and Required Conceptual Changes

The October 7 analysis reveals specific doctrinal gaps requiring systematic address rather than general air power enhancement. The primary gap centers on developing operational concepts for scenarios where coordinated mass infiltrations exceed routine security parameters.

Lessons from the October 7 events suggest a fundamental paradigm shift is necessary in IAF border defense roles. The traditional concept of viewing the IAF as supporting or complementary ground force elements proved inadequate against sudden, multi-front events. Instead, a transition is required toward viewing the IAF as a leading element providing comprehensive border threat responses, fundamentally altering operational relationships between air and ground forces.

Traditional air power doctrine distinguishes between supporting ground forces in conventional military operations and providing assistance for routine security operations. Lacking are frameworks for scenarios where air power must rapidly transition from security support to civilian population protection under active attack. This gap reflects broader conceptual limitations in understanding air power's role when defensive measures are overwhelmed but absent conventional military threat.

Such conceptual change involves developing air power employment doctrine specifically for mass infiltration that recognizes the operational requirements of rapid transition from routine security support to immediate civilian protection response. This doctrine must address engagement authorities, coordination procedures, and command relationships when traditional boundaries between border security and territorial defense become operationally irrelevant.

Real-Time Situational Awareness: Operational Mechanisms

Transformation to air-centric border defense requires sophisticated real-time situational awareness capabilities that integrate multiple sensor inputs into actionable intelligence. The IAF must develop a multi-layered sensor architecture combining electro-optical/infrared systems mounted on persistent UAVs, ground-

based radar networks optimized for low-altitude detection, signals intelligence collection platforms, and human intelligence reporting systems.

Technical integration of these disparate data streams requires AI and machine learning algorithms designed for multi-source data fusion in order to create an instantaneous and coherent threat assessments. These sources include inputs from: radar tracks, visual confirmations, communication intercepts, and human reports.

Dissemination mechanisms must ensure that processed intelligence reaches air and ground units within seconds, not minutes, requiring secure, low-latency communication networks with redundant pathways and mobile command nodes that can maintain connectivity during electronic warfare attacks.

Rapid Lethal Response: Command and Control Mechanisms

Transition to rapid, semi-autonomous lethal response capabilities requires fundamental restructuring of command-and-control relationships between air and ground forces. Delegating operational control for light attack aircraft to territorial division commanders represents a departure from centralized air power employment doctrine.

Enhanced Engagement Authorities for Territory Defense

Addressing the engagement authority gap requires developing predetermined frameworks for air power employment within Israeli territory against infiltrators who have breached border defenses. These frameworks must balance rapid response against civilian protection while providing clear legal and operational guidance for air crews.

The solution involves establishing pre-approved engagement zones and streamlined authorization procedures for air power employment against confirmed infiltrators. These zones must account for civilian population locations while providing sufficient operational flexibility to address dynamic threat situations.

Implementation requires new rules of engagement that specifically address mass infiltration scenarios, including clear identification requirements for fast-moving, unconventional threats and explicit authorization procedures for engaging targets within populated areas. These rules must provide operational guidance that enables immediate action while adhering to international humanitarian law principles and maintaining civilian protection standards.

Air-Ground Coordination Enhancement for Civilian Protection

Enhancing air-ground coordination for civilian protection requires operational procedures that account for the challenges of protecting dispersed civilian

populations under active attack. Traditional coordination mechanisms assume military-to-military communication between organized units, but civilian protection scenarios may require coordination with local security forces, emergency services, and civilian authorities.

The enhanced coordination framework must provide mechanisms for rapid information sharing between air assets, ground forces, and civilian protection agencies while maintaining operational security and avoiding information overload. This requires communication protocols that prioritize critical information flow and decision-making support rather than potentially unattainable comprehensive situational awareness.

Implementation involves creating joint training programs that address coordination between air power, ground forces, and civilian protection agencies under mass infiltrations. These programs must replicate the stress and uncertainty of October 7-type situations to build practical coordination capabilities.

Technological Integration for Enhanced Response Capabilities

While existing technological capabilities provide substantial border security support, coordinated mass infiltrations require enhanced integration of detection, assessment, and response systems to enable rapid transition from routine monitoring to active defensive operations. Technological enhancement focuses on decision-making support rather than expanded surveillance capabilities.

Enhanced sensor integration must provide real-time assessment capabilities that can reliably distinguish between routine security incidents and mass infiltration indicators. This requires developing analytical algorithms specifically designed for coordinated threat detection.

The technological framework must support rapid decision-making under conditions of incomplete information by providing assessment tools that can operate effectively with limited initial data, updated as situations develop. This approach recognizes that perfect situational awareness may be unattainable during coordinated attacks and focuses on providing sufficient information for effective decision-making rather than comprehensive threat assessment.

Implications for Force Development and Air Doctrine

Training Requirements

Addressing doctrinal gaps revealed by October 7 requires creating specialized training programs that focus on coordinated mass infiltration response rather than general air power enhancement. These programs must address the challenges of rapid transition from routine security to civilian population protection.

Pilot and air crew training must emphasize rapid decision-making under conditions of incomplete information and civilian protection, focusing on scenarios where traditional rules of engagement may provide insufficient guidance. Advanced simulator-based training should replicate the cognitive load and time pressure of mass infiltrations, incorporating realistic threat presentations and communication degradation.

Ground controller and coordination personnel training must address challenges of managing air support for civilian protection where traditional military coordination procedures may prove inadequate. This training should emphasize information prioritization, rapid decision-making support, and crisis coordination with civilian protection agencies.

Equipment and Capability Requirements

Equipment requirements focus on enhancing response capabilities for mass infiltration scenarios. Priority areas include communication systems that can maintain connectivity during coordinated attacks, decision-making support tools that can operate effectively with incomplete information, and engagement systems that can provide precise response capabilities in populated areas.

Enhanced communication capabilities must provide redundant pathways for coordination among air assets, ground forces, and civilian protection agencies while maintaining operational security. These systems should prioritize flow of critical information over comprehensive data sharing for focused decision-making.

Decision-making support systems must provide rapid assessment capabilities that can distinguish between routine security incidents and indicators of mass infiltration while supporting rapid response escalation decisions based on incomplete initial information. These systems should focus on providing actionable intelligence rather than comprehensive situational awareness

Doctrine Development for Hybrid Threat Response

Doctrine for coordinated mass infiltration response requires creating new operational concepts that bridge the gap between routine security operations and conventional military response while addressing requirements of civilian protection in border communities. This doctrine must provide clear guidance for rapid transition between operational modes without unnecessary escalation or inappropriate force employment.

The doctrine must address command relationships and authority distribution where traditional service boundaries become operationally irrelevant, providing clear guidance for decision-making and resource allocation during coordinated

attacks. This includes frameworks for prioritizing civilian protection, establishing engagement authorities, and establishing time-critical coordination procedures.

Implementation requires extensive joint training and exercise programs that test doctrinal concepts under realistic conditions while building coordination capabilities between air power, ground forces, and civilian protection agencies. These programs must address challenges of mass infiltrations rather than general joint operations training.

Command and Control System Integration

Creating effective air-ground force integration in command-and-control systems is the most significant challenge in the doctrinal transformation. The rapid, multi-directional attack of October 7 exposed fundamental incompatibilities between traditional air and ground force command cultures, decision-making processes, and operational timelines.

Proposed integrated command centers at the divisional level must create shared authority structures. Each integrated center should be co-commanded by senior IAF and Army officers with equal authority over border defense operations within their respective geographic sectors.

Authority distribution should designate air commanders with autonomous control over intelligence collection, airspace management, and immediate threat engagement. In contrast, ground commanders retain authority over territorial defense, population protection, and sustained operations. This structure requires new legal frameworks that clarify command relationships and responsibility allocation.

Findings and Analysis

Implementation Methodology

The analysis answers the research questions defined at the beginning of this study. First, regarding the characteristics of large-scale ground incursions, four key characteristics are recognized: multi-front nature, initial speed and intensity, tactical diversity, and exploitation of surprise.

Secondly, key components for creation of air-ground force integration include transitioning to integrated command and control models, developing joint situational awareness platforms, and creating continuous joint training programs.

Finally, regarding required force building and doctrine changes four primary areas of change are identified: human resources, equipment and technology, training programs, and doctrine and procedures.

Legal and Ethical Considerations

The conceptual shift raises important questions in key areas. Increasing IAF autonomy in border threat response necessitates the development of new control and oversight mechanisms suitable for rapid and dynamic operational environments. These changes must strictly adhere to international humanitarian law while maintaining operational effectiveness.

Operating in civilian protection areas requires developing special procedures to minimize collateral damage, including advanced identification technologies, specialized training for pilots and system operators, and continuous quality control. These requirements must be balanced against operational necessity for rapid response.

Limitations

This study faces several limitations. Open-source reliance restricts access to detailed operational data, classified intelligence, and specific technological capabilities relevant to October 7. Recency of events limits historical context and may bias interpretation. Focusing on Israel may reduce the relevance of findings for other regions.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should investigate psychological and social factors impacting military institutional change for mass infiltration response doctrine, organizational resistance, and effective change management. Comparative studies should analyze how different nations address mass infiltration and similar threats, highlighting effective air power and air-ground coordination for civilian protection. Technical research must prioritize communication systems tailored to rapid response decision-making under uncertainty, upholding civilian safety. Operational research should use real-world simulations and exercises to assess challenges of implementing new doctrine.

Conclusions

The October 7 attack revealed doctrinal gaps in IAF border defense capabilities that require systematic address through targeted conceptual changes. The analysis demonstrates that while existing air power capabilities provide substantial border security support, coordinated mass infiltrations targeting civilian border communities create operational requirements inadequately addressed by current doctrine.

This conceptual shift involves developing air power employment doctrine specifically for scenarios where coordinated attacks targeting civilians exceed

routine security parameters. Enhanced engagement authorities, improved air-ground coordination procedures, and specialized training programs must address the challenges of mass infiltration response.

Implementation requires careful balance between operational effectiveness and civilian protection, recognition of the distinct challenges created by civilian settlements located on international borders, and development of coordination mechanisms that function under crisis conditions. Success depends on addressing specific operational gaps revealed by October 7 rather than general air power modernization.

Transforming IAF roles in border defense from supporting to leading represents a fundamental evolution in military thinking, reflecting contemporary realities, where security threats are increasingly diverse, rapid, and unpredictable. Successful change implementation not only determines the effectiveness of Israeli border security but also serves as a model for other nations facing similar asymmetric challenges.

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The Vanishing Enemy: Force Buildup in Israel Post Hezbollah, Hamas, the Assad Regime, and the Campaign Aagainst Iran

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Abstract

For approximately two decades, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) force buildup has relied on threat-based planning, grounded in specific threats and scenarios. This approach emerged as the risk of state military invasions into Israel diminished, while the threat posed by the Iran-led axis, including Hezbollah and Hamas, increased. Following the Gaza War (Iron Swords), a new strategic reality has unfolded in the Middle East. On one hand, the primary threats that shaped much of Israel's force buildup have significantly weakened. On the other hand, the emergence of new actors and the potential instability of regimes could disrupt the existing order and give rise to new threats. A comparable strategic situation arose for U.S. force developers after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In response to uncertainty about future scenarios, they opted for capabilities-based planning, emphasizing versatile capabilities over specific threats. This article proposes re-evaluating Israel's force-building approach by integrating capabilities-based planning, focused on generic missions, alongside the use of specific scenarios as benchmarks for assessing the validity of force-building decisions.

Keywords: Force Buildup, Capabilities-Based Planning, Threat-Based Planning, Iron Swords

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Introduction

During the Cold War, the United States built its military power in anticipation of a potential conflict with the Soviet Union. However, the collapse of the Eastern Bloc presented a new challenge for American force-building. As the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, articulated, "I'm running out of villains [...] I'm down to Castro and Kim Il-Sung" (Troxell, 2001, p. 10). In the absence of a clear and distinct adversary posing a severe threat, a different approach was needed to define the necessity of force-building and justify the significant investments allocated to national security. Consequently, the U.S. transitioned from Threat-Based Planning (TBP) to Capabilities-Based Planning (CBP). Israel finds itself in a comparable situation, albeit with notable differences. For the past two decades, the buildup of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has been aimed at countering "the axis" led by Iran. However, this axis has been significantly weakened following the elimination of most of Hamas's military power, severe blows sustained by Hezbollah, the collapse of Assad's regime along with the crippling of its primary weapons systems, and the degradation of Iran's military capabilities. This scenario bears some resemblance to the post-Cold War context faced by the United States. However, key differences remain: the future threat from Iran persists as a significant and severe concern, including the potential for a nuclear threat, while proximate fronts continue to pose unresolved challenges.

The question we aim to examine is whether it is necessary to reassess the approach underpinning the IDF's force-building considering the evolving situation following the regional war. Our argument is that, over the years, the IDF's force buildup has been guided by clear adversaries and defined scenarios. At present, however, it is increasingly challenging to outline such scenarios, and there is insufficient foundation for planning future force-building efforts. This challenge parallels Colin Powell's observation that it was no longer realistic for the United States to base its force-building solely on the remaining adversaries it faced in the 1990s. The article focuses on long-term force-building processes that require a relatively extended period for implementation—primarily weapons systems, infrastructure, and procurement-oriented doctrines. It places less emphasis on components that can be executed over a shorter time frame, such as training and operational plans.

The methodology we have chosen involves analyzing the considerations that led to the revision of the force-building approach in the United States following the Cold War, as well as the factors that drove the evolution of Israel's force-building approach over the years. Based on this analysis, we will argue that

the strategic context that has emerged in the aftermath of the Gaza War (Iron Swords) should influence an update to Israel's force-building approach.

The Challenge of Military Force-Building

Military force-building is designed to provide the military with the capabilities required for future deployment, whether in times of war or routine operations. It is commonly divided into several components: combat doctrine, organizational structure, weaponry, manpower, training and exercises, and infrastructure (Zigdon, 2004, pp. 42-45). The process of force-building aims to prepare forces for future use, yet its first challenge lies in the inherent uncertainty regarding the circumstances in which the force will need to be deployed. Questions such as when fighting will be necessary, who the enemy will be, what capabilities the adversary will possess, what objectives they will pursue, and what methods they will employ all contribute to this uncertainty. Similarly, considerations include what objectives the state aims to achieve, the initial conditions of a future war, whether advance intelligence warnings will be provided, and whether the political leadership will have the strategic freedom to decide on a preemptive strike. Significant force-building processes, particularly those involving new weapons systems, often require more than two decades from the initiation of research and development to full integration and operational deployment within the military (Ben-Israel, 1997). Consequently, as the level of certainty about the characteristics of future scenarios decreases, it becomes increasingly challenging to define the specific context and the inherent needs that must be addressed.

Military force-building demands substantial resources, and it is not practically feasible to develop all the required capabilities. Resources are always limited, as there are additional national needs competing for funding. The second challenge of force-building is prioritization under conditions of scarcity—deciding which military capabilities to develop, to what extent to invest in their acquisition, and which capabilities to forgo entirely. The decision on how much to invest in force-building and where to allocate resources depends on factors beyond merely defining the capabilities needed for the future. These factors include the following: the assessment of the likelihood of successfully developing the required technology; confidence in the ability to sustain necessary resource allocation throughout the development process; ensuring the project can be completed within a reasonable timeframe; evaluation of the availability of resources for future procurement of weapon systems; and consideration of the interdependencies between various force-building components that must be prepared in unison for the anticipated scenario.

Decisions regarding force-building—what to develop, when, and with what priority—are inherently risky. These decisions are made under conditions of uncertainty and numerous constraints. Force planners are tasked with designing a force structure that will provide the required solutions for the state's needs with a sufficient level of certainty and within an acceptable level of risk (Troxell, 2001).

Threat-Based Planning and Capabilities-Based Planning

Throughout the Cold War, U.S. force development was predominantly guided by the Threat-Based Planning (TBP) approach. This methodology is founded on the premise that military forces should be structured to achieve victory over an adversary in a future scenario in which they are deployed, or in a small set of anticipated scenarios. The approach provides a benchmark—the future scenario—against which the adequacy of force development can be assessed. It also facilitates justification for the allocation of resources needed to achieve specific output within a defined scenario and coherently links national strategy, military operational concepts, and force development toward that aim. This approach enables clear communication between the military echelon responsible for force development and the political decision-makers allocating resources for these efforts (Troxell, 2001). However, the approach has a critical limitation: it requires a well-defined future scenario from which to identify forthcoming needs and guide planning accordingly. During the Cold War, the prospect of a future war with the Soviet Union was considered a suitable scenario for guiding U.S. force development.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and Russia's repositioning under Yeltsin's rule presented a new challenge for U.S. force developers, whose primary scenario had vanished. While it was evident that a global superpower required a military force, it was unclear what scenarios it should prepare for. During the last decade of the 20th century, the focus on building forces for a global war with the Soviet Union was replaced by the requirement to prepare for two simultaneous major theater wars (MTWs). The dilemmas surrounding the formulation of specific requirements led to tailored policies for each scenario, such as the "Base Force" plan under the Bush administration and the "Bottom-Up Review" under the Clinton administration. These efforts aimed to balance scenario-focused force development with a more generic readiness. The U.S. Department of Defense 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) introduced the concept of Capabilities-Based Planning (CBP). It stipulated that the United States would build its forces based on capabilities, enabling their deployment across a broad spectrum of future scenarios. This included the requirement to defeat adversaries in two major theaters simultaneously but not exclusively

limited to that. The document also highlighted the transformation of the military force—technologically, intellectually, and socially—as a central component of the force development doctrine (DoD, 2001).

Capabilities-Based Planning is designed to address situations in which there is no clear future scenario or only a small set of potential scenarios. It provides planning tools that do not measure success based on a specific scenario (Troxell, 2001). Some view CBP as input-focused, in contrast to Threat-Based Planning, which is output-focused. However, focusing solely on inputs does not explain how specific military capabilities are determined within CBP, particularly in terms of their scope and scale. Capabilities are not required simply for their acquisition; their determination involves an operational understanding of how these capabilities will be employed and what they are intended to achieve. A common approach in CBP is planning based on the capabilities needed to achieve output in generic missions. Unlike TBP, these outputs are not derived from a specific context but rather reflect typical outcomes across a broad range of scenarios. Examples include halting ground offensive, disrupting the launch of ballistic missiles, neutralizing fortified enemy positions, achieving air superiority, or rapidly initiating a large-scale counteroffensive (Davis, 2002).

Mission-based planning (Capabilities-Based Planning grounded in the analysis of generic missions) begins with selecting operational concepts suitable for these generic missions. This is followed by identifying the capabilities required to implement those concepts. While this planning approach is detached from any specific context, it still necessitates a fundamental military understanding of the adversary and the characteristics of warfare. Planning capabilities based on outcomes in generic missions enables a productive dialogue between the military and political leadership regarding force-building. Such mission-based planning does so because it allows for the connection between inputs and outputs, even in the absence of a concrete scenario to serve as a benchmark for the required achievements of force-building efforts. Given the need to address diverse future scenarios, the capabilities targeted by CBP are characterized by being generic, robust, flexible, and adaptable. It is important to note that, according to this approach, the need is defined by operational outcomes rather than inputs, such as "increased force size," or operational outputs, like "broader communication bandwidth" or "enhanced integrated multi-branch planning" (Davis, 2002).

Alongside the advantages of mission-based planning, there are also inherent challenges. First, if the missions are generic, how does one determine the required scope? For instance, even if maneuvering divisions are needed, there is a significant difference between requiring ten divisions versus twenty. Similarly, while a broad airstrike capability might be essential, there is a considerable gap

between needing 1,000 bombs per day and requiring 3,000. In the absence of an external benchmark to estimate the necessary scale of military resources, the standard becomes an internal one—essentially resource-based planning. Consequently, this approach risks being influenced by internal economic and political constraints, which, in turn, may shape strategy in unintended ways. Another significant risk is the inclination toward technology-driven force-building. This tendency emerges when no external benchmark exists to define the requisite force-building parameters.

The American approach to force-building, at least until the outbreak of the Russo-Ukraine War, largely relied on capabilities as its primary framework. The latest U.S. National Security Strategy emphasizes, in broad terms, homeland defense capabilities, strategic deterrence, and the development of military advantages. It also highlights force-building aimed at generic capabilities such as lethality, resilience, survivability, flexibility, and readiness (DoD, 2022). These capabilities address a wide spectrum of generic scenarios, and even the emphasis on two specific adversaries—China and Russia—does not focus on concrete scenarios. At the theoretical level, there remains a tension within the U.S. defense establishment between capabilities-based planning and threat-based planning. However, this tension primarily arises when these approaches are presented in exaggerated terms: threat-based planning centered on a single scenario while ignoring the possibility of alternative scenarios, versus capabilities-based planning devoid of an assessment of specific threats. It is essential to avoid these two extreme positions. Various texts advocate integrating the two approaches, emphasizing capabilities-based planning as the foundational framework for force development while utilizing threat-based planning as a tool for critique and prioritization in force-building efforts (Hicks, 2017).

The American approach has influenced other nations in the Western world, including Western Europe, Scandinavia, and Australia. These countries tend to adopt capabilities-based planning as a leading approach, while also identifying key threats that shape force-building through a threat-based planning framework (Borzillo et al., 2021). However, looking ahead, the potential for change in the coming years cannot be ignored. As the Russian threat in Europe and the Chinese threat in the Pacific region are increasingly perceived as more likely to materialize, future scenarios are being outlined with greater precision. From the perspective of the United States and its allies, this may enhance the relevance of TBP in force-building efforts.

The Israeli Approach

The Israeli approach to force-building has undergone gradual changes over the years. A few years after its establishment, Israel developed a strategy to address the security threats it faced. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) focused its force-building efforts on countering the existential threat posed, according to Israel's leadership, by a potential "second round" of war with the Arab states. This threat assumed that the Arab states would attempt once again to destroy the young state, as they did in 1948, but with enhanced military and organizational capabilities. In a government briefing famously known as the "18 Points Document," Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion stated that the Arabs were "now transitioning to offensive planning, their self-confidence is growing, and their fear of us is diminishing" (Bar-On, 1997). During this period, the IDF began planning its long-term force development. The Chief of Staff appointed a planning team led by the Assistant Head of Operations (AGAM) to design the structure and organization of the IDF. This team presented its conclusions on August 25, 1953. The report's fundamental assumption was that Israel would face a full-scale attack by Arab states, which would require the mobilization of all the state's military potential, even if the war began with a preemptive strike by Israel (Oren, 2002). This assumption served as the foundation for the IDF's and the government's long-term planning methodology. This methodology relied on the concept of a "reference threat," which at the time was clearly defined as a full-scale war with all Arab states . It involved evaluation of the operational requirements to contend with the threat and determine the IDF's primary force structure and procurement levels needed to ensure Israel's preparedness for such an attack. Simultaneously, the defense budget, which had been reduced by 20% in 1952-1953 to reallocate funds for the absorption of mass immigration, began to rise again (Greenberg, 1997).

The Israeli approach to force-building was capabilities-based. Israel systematically "counted" the main assets in the militaries of Arab states—tanks, aircraft, ships, artillery, and so on—and sought to equip itself accordingly to contend with the combined capabilities of the Arab states. This approach operated within budgetary constraints while factoring in Israel's qualitative advantage. This advantage stemmed from the superior quality of its human capital, which was a product of a more advanced education system compared to that of the Arab states. Notably, the weapon systems acquired by Israel were similar in quality to those purchased by the Arab states. The primary arms race during the 1950s was between Israel and Egypt. This was due to Egypt's efforts under Nasser's leadership to construct a large military force and the relative internal instability in other Arab states (Yaniv, 1994).

The capabilities-based force-building approach continued in the following decades, with an emphasis on expanding the stock of key assets, particularly tanks and aircraft, as the primary tools for achieving decisive victory. In the lead-up to the Six-Day War (1967), the IDF developed a capability for rapid decisive action on three fronts. By the Yom Kippur War (1973), the IDF had significantly increased its tank force, doubled the number of armored divisions, and doubled the number of combat aircraft, while also upgrading their quality (Shelah, 2023). The shock of the Yom Kippur War (1973) led to an accelerated investment in military expansion to prevent the possibility of a similar surprise attack in the future. In the nine years leading up to the First Lebanon War (1982), the number of divisions rose from seven to twelve, the number of tanks increased from 2,100 to 3,600, and the number of armored personnel carriers (APCs) and half-tracks grew from approximately 3,500 to over 8,000. The Air Force acquired modern American aircraft (F-15s, F-16s) and attack helicopters, and there was also a significant growth in the number of artillery pieces. By the mid-1970s, defense spending reached 30 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP). Over time, it gradually decreased to 20 percent of the GDP, until the economic crisis of the mid-1980s (Bar-Yosef, 2023).

Operational failures during the Yom Kippur War highlighted, among other things, that acquiring capabilities must also account for the challenges likely to characterize future battlefields. Relying solely on acquiring "more of the same" is insufficient. The significant investment of resources in expanding the tank inventory and preparing for tank-on-tank warfare overlooked the threat posed by anti-tank missiles encountered by armored forces in the Sinai. Similarly, the investment in combat aircraft underestimated the severity of the threat from surface-to-air missiles.

Alongside the capabilities-based planning approach, the IDF began to systematically integrate elements of threat-based planning, focusing on specific scenarios identified as critical for future warfare. Following the Six-Day War, the IDF's positioning along the Suez Canal prompted force development tailored to a specific scenario that required crossing the canal. Capabilities such as the "roller bridge" and barges were developed to facilitate crossing. However, due to the prevailing assessment within IDF that war was unlikely in the near future, these capabilities did not reach full operational maturity by the time the war eventually broke out (Nadel, 2006). Threat-based force development was also evident after the Air Force's inability to effectively counter surface-to-air missiles during the Yom Kippur War. The Air Force embarked on a unique force-building process aimed at achieving air superiority against air defense systems. This approach included the development of real-time command and

control mechanisms, integration of automated systems, new intelligence-gathering tools, advanced weaponry for offensive and electronic warfare, and comprehensive training and systemic exercises. The process came to fruition by the First Lebanon War, where it was implemented with significant success (Finkel, 2020). This is a prominent example of the success of focused, problem-specific force-building initiatives. A third example of threat-based and scenario-specific force development is the "Central Project," developed in the 1990s to thwart a potential Syrian invasion. This initiative echoed, in principle, the American AirLand Battle concept, which was designed to counter a Soviet invasion of Western Europe (Ben, 2022).

Several processes that took place at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century led to a shift in Israel's approach to force development. During the 1980s, Israel faced a severe economic crisis that necessitated an economic recovery plan, under which the IDF was required to undergo significant downsizing. The defense budget gradually decreased from 18 percent of GDP in 1983 to less than 10 percent a decade later. The existential threat posed by a coordinated attack from Arab state armies dissipated following the 1979 peace treaty with Egypt, the collapse of the Soviet Union—which had, until the 1990s, supplied weapons to Arab states hostile to Israel—and the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The final remaining state-based threat came from Syria, but this too dissolved with the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. In place of the threats posed by state militaries, new challenges emerged: terrorist organizations and semi-military entities, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. These were not perceived as having the potential to pose an existential threat.

The high costs associated with capabilities-based force development, which leads to the creation of a significantly large military, alongside the delineation of operational challenges into a set of defined problems, resulted in a shift toward force development that relies less on generic capabilities and more on responses to specific scenarios and threats. This process also influenced the planning of the IDF's multi-year programs, wherein the approach effectively changed after the 2006 Second Lebanon War, as well as government decisions regarding force development policy.

One of the focal points of the IDF's force development during the second decade of the 21st century was the creation of a capability for "strike output capacity," enabling the Air Force to conduct massive airstrikes on 3,000 targets per day, alongside the development of "target banks." Although this strike output was described as a generic capability, it was designed to address a specific operational challenge. According to statements made by IDF officials, the

rationale behind developing this capability was the need to rapidly neutralize the rocket threats posed to Israel by Hezbollah and Hamas (Ben-Yishai, 2014; Ben-Yishai and Zeitoun, 2021). The five -year plan of 2020 further emphasized the IDF's force development programs, which focused on countering the "terror armies" of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, as explicitly defined by the Chief of Staff. This approach differed from the development of generic capabilities aimed at addressing diverse threats under various scenarios. The IDF's force development strategy was tailored to the specific characteristics of Hezbollah and Hamas—their strategies, operational plans, doctrines of warfare, weaponry, organizational structures, and infrastructures (Ortal, 2020).

The emphasis on addressing specific threats and scenarios has been evident in government decisions regarding force buildup over the past two decades. The five -year plan of 2008 outlined which aircraft, tanks, ships, and defense systems the IDF decided to acquire, though priorities shifted subsequently. During this period, the government approved two significant force-building efforts aimed at addressing specific scenarios: the development of a strike capability against Iran and the construction of the border fence with Egypt (Prime Minister's Office, 2010). Following the Second Lebanon War, the government decided to procure the Iron Dome system as a central and urgent response to counter short-range rocket fire from Gaza and Lebanon. The system was developed amid budgetary disputes, without a defined set of operational requirements, and only after securing external funding for its development, despite opposition from the IDF and other parts of the defense establishment (State Comptroller, 2009). The issue of tunnel threats and operations in the subterranean domain emerged as a challenge for the IDF and the defense establishment as early as the 1990s (State Comptroller, 2007). However, it was only after Operation Protective Edge (2014) that it became clear the IDF had not adequately prepared to address this threat (State Comptroller, 2017). Consequently, the Cabinet decided to construct an underground barrier to counter Hamas's offensive tunnels, which was completed at the end of 2021. It is important to emphasize that the government's force-building initiatives were funded, to a significant extent, through budgets external to the IDF's regular allocation.

Formulation of the IDF's five -year plans is one of the primary decisions shaping the military's force buildup in the years following its approval. The process begins with a situation assessment that analyzes the anticipated evolution of threats against Israel. In the first decades after the state's establishment, it was relatively straightforward to define the primary threat as the prospect of a total war with the Arab states. However, since the late 1990s, this threat has ceased to be a concrete consideration in the multi-year planning framework (Eiland,

2011). Furthermore, the assumption that Israel might face a preemptive war initiated by an adversary also ceased to underpin planning—at least until October 7, 2023. With the decline of the conventional army threat, simple metrics such as the number of tanks, ships, armored personnel carriers (APCs), and aircraft could no longer suffice as the required response to Israel's military challenges. Consequently, the methodology for formulating the IDF's five -year plan and the government's decisions on military force buildup underwent significant changes after the Second Lebanon War (2006). Greater emphasis began to be placed on addressing specific threats and scenarios, including engaging in potential strikes on Iran, constructing border barriers, countering tunnel threats, and enhancing intelligence-gathering and strike capabilities in Lebanon and Gaza.

The Strategic Context After the Gaza War

Threat-based planning requires the ability to reasonably predict which threats and scenarios to prepare for. The Gaza War (Iron Swords) has brought about a strategic shift in Israel's environment and the threats it faces, significantly impacting the uncertainty surrounding the IDF's long-term force-building planning.

The primary threats to Israel have significantly weakened. In Gaza, the main military threat from Hamas and the Islamic Jihad has collapsed. Their ability to pose a threat through invasion or significant-scale rocket fire does not appear imminent. In the coming years, the potential threat is limited to terrorism and guerrilla activity targeting IDF presence in the Gaza Strip. The military threat from Hezbollah has been severely reduced due to the erosion of its military capabilities following a series of IDF offensives. These operations targeted the organization's leadership, many senior commanders, weapon stockpiles, production capabilities, and infrastructure. Hezbollah's logistical backbone crumbled when Syria ceased to function as a cornerstone of the Iranian axis after the Assad regime's collapse. The new rule of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), hostile to the Iranian axis, compounded this shift. Israel, during this power transition, struck most of the advanced weaponry in Syria that posed a potential threat—particularly surface-to-surface missiles, surface-to-air missiles, aircrafts, and naval assets. Iran has experienced a strategic failure following what appears to be the disintegration of the axis—marked by the loss of Syria, severe damage to Hezbollah and Hamas, the diminished effectiveness of the "ring of fire" proxy militias (in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen), and the degradation of its Air Defense and long range missiles capabilities, the degradation of its weapons industry, and the demonstrated limitations of Iran's offensive capabilities against Israel. Additionally, the U.S. threat, especially after the air strike on

nuclear facilities, poses an external risk to Iran, while the future strategy under President Trump remains unclear, and Internal pressures within Iran further constrain the regime's actions.

In several regions across the Middle East, there are risks to regime stability. The new regime in Syria has yet to stabilize. The Palestinian Authority has been weakened due to the war, largely because of a significant reduction in Palestinian employment within Israel, additional economic pressures stemming from Israeli policies, and the rise of local forces that do not operate under the Palestinian Authority's control. The PA's weakening, coupled with a power struggle anticipated in the post-Abbas era, increases the likelihood of violence erupting in the West Bank. In Jordan, persistent tensions exist among its populations—mainly between the Palestinian majority, Bedouins, and Syrian and Iraqi refugees. The kingdom is also under pressure from Iran, and it may soon face additional pressures from Syria. Egypt is grappling with economic instability, exacerbated by a decline in revenue from the Suez Canal due to threats to maritime routes, as well as rising wheat prices following the war in Ukraine. The success of Islamist groups in Syria could also embolden the Muslim Brotherhood to take action. In Iraq, inherent instability persists due to tensions between Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds, with the potential spillover of violence from these groups' conflicts into Syria. After a prolonged period during which Iran succeeded in influencing the Iraqi government to permit pro-Iranian militias to operate, tensions have emerged between these militias and the government regarding their actions against Israel. The United States is exerting pressure on the Iraqi government to curb these militias' activities.

New forces have entered the fray in the Middle East. Turkey is seizing the opportunity to strengthen its influence in Syria by supporting the new regime, potentially solidifying its capability to project military power from within Syrian territory. The increasing scope of Turkish military activity may put it on a potential collision course with Israel. For now, the new Syrian regime is focused solely on internal affairs. However, given its Islamist origins, it may opt for a strategy aimed at establishing regional influence. Sunni states, led by Saudi Arabia, are likely to attempt to expand their influence in the region, particularly in Syria and Lebanon, which will require financial support for reconstruction. Saudi Arabia's decision to pursue a defense alliance with the United States may be revisited in light of the setbacks Iran has experienced. The military involvement of the United States, supported by the United Kingdom, has created a presence in the region that cannot be ignored by local actors. The U.S. may seek to leverage this influence to promote regional stabilization, as suggested by proposals from the Trump administration. In contrast, Russia has demonstrated

both unwillingness and incapacity to invest significant military effort, given its focus on the war in Ukraine. However, its growing ties with Iran could signal an increase in involvement, particularly in the form of military assistance. China, on the other hand, is maintaining a low profile in the unfolding developments but may emerge as a key player in the region's economic reconstruction.

The implications of these developments suggest that the coming years are likely to be characterized by significant uncertainty. Over the past two decades, Israel has grown accustomed to threats emerging in its vicinity under Iranian sponsorship. However, the primary threats have diminished considerably, opening the door for new actors to step in and reshape the regional landscape. The difficulty in assessing these developments stems from the fact that all actors will need to evaluate the situation, probe each other's positions, and formulate new strategies. This evolving reality presents new opportunities to influence the shaping of the Middle East and to reassess Israel's relationships with regional states, as well as its Security Doctrine.

Against the backdrop of regional uncertainty, several questions and potential developments arise, whose outcomes are difficult to predict at this stage. Will Iran succeed in maintaining elements of the regional axis it leads? Will the development of a military nuclear capability serve as Iran's cornerstone for defense, or will it exercise caution in advancing toward nuclear armament? Will Israel find itself in near-term friction with Iran, or will an American-brokered arrangement emerge? Could Israel become entangled in prolonged presence in Gaza, or might a new regime under regional sponsorship take shape there? What will the Syrian regime's stance be toward Israel, Iran, and Hezbollah? Will it seek to exert influence over developments in Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq? How will the balance of power in Lebanon evolve in light of the new reality? How might external forces impact the situation, and will Hezbollah manage to maintain its status as an armed militia? Lastly, what will Turkey's strategy be, and will it entail friction with Israel?

The Need to Change Israel's Approach to Force-Building

The strategic shift confronting Israel is dramatic. While Colin Powell's statement about running out of villains is not entirely applicable to describe Israel's situation in light of the threat posed by Iran and its ambitions to develop military nuclear capabilities, there is no doubt that a significant gap exists between the potential long-term threat to Israel—particularly from its immediate surrounding region—and the severity of the threats expected in the coming years. In this sense, the challenge faced by American force-developers after the Cold War mirrors the challenge Israel encounters today. The approach the United States

adopted to address that challenge provides a relevant perspective for devising a suitable solution for Israel.

The uncertainty surrounding the manifestation of future threats to Israel is considerable, and the spectrum of potential threats is exceedingly broad. It ranges from the emergence of threats in various arenas similar to that posed by Hezbollah in Lebanon (long-range fire into Israel's interior, strong ground defenses, underground infrastructure) to the possibility of a wide-scale ground invasion using lightweight vehicles, akin to attacks by Hamas or ISIS, and even to an assault by regular armies possessing strong land, sea, and air forces, potentially following a revolution or radical policy change in one of the neighboring Arab states. This high level of uncertainty renders the threat-based planning approach ineffective. This approach assumes the enemy, the theater of combat, the adversary's capabilities, and their operational methods are known, allowing for the identification of gaps and the formulation of responses. Under current conditions, such assumptions are no longer applicable.

The mission-oriented force-building approach (i.e., capabilities-based planning for generic missions) can provide an effective framework for planning Israel's force buildup. This approach can be implemented alongside the use of distinct scenarios—such as another campaign against Iran or the containment of a mechanized assault on the Golan Heights—as concrete benchmarks for evaluating force-building plans. This method parallels the American model, which combines capabilities-based planning with tailoring force-building efforts to specific scenarios, such as countering a North Korean offensive or, in the past, an Iraqi assault (Troxell, 2001).

Even in the absence of a specific scenario, understanding technological capabilities and typical combat doctrines enables the identification of several generic missions that the IDF will need to address. These include the following: defending against ballistic missile attacks; halting a mechanized or armored assault; striking ballistic and cruise missile launch sites; achieving air superiority against modern integrated air defense systems; protecting maritime and air routes; conducting large-scale attacks on state infrastructure; targeting fortified fixed installations; neutralizing tunnel-based operational systems, and more.

To develop an appropriate response, it is necessary to concretely yet generically characterize the various missions, focusing on both the nature of the challenge and the objectives required to address it. This approach reflects a balanced working framework between two extremes and does not represent a contradiction. Achieving this balance requires an operational and technological understanding of both the "red side" (adversary) to depict its methods of operation and the "blue side" (friendly forces) to clearly define measurable objectives. For example, a

concrete yet generic characterization can be demonstrated for the first mission—defense against missile attacks. A detailed characterization includes the number of missiles launched per volley and over time, differentiated by types (e.g., several operational parameters: maximum launch rates within an hour at both long and short ranges, and total launches over a year at varying distances). It also details the missile mix (proportion between ballistic missiles and cruise missiles), missile characteristics (altitude, speed, precision, warhead type, radar and thermal signatures), general attributes of launch areas (the number of zones, their size, and their distances from targets), target characteristics (distribution between military and civilian targets and their geographic spread), and the required achievement in terms of the percentage of missiles that must be prevented from striking accurately. The generic nature of this characterization lies in its avoidance of specifying individual missiles, exact launch sites, exact trajectories, and specific targets. Similarly, a concrete characterization for the mission of achieving freedom of action in air includes approximate numbers of radars, interceptor aircraft, and long-, medium-, and short-range missile batteries in the adversary state, the size of the areas in which these are deployed, their operational principles (e.g., decentralized versus centralized control, mobility pace), basic technical parameters, and defining the required achievement in terms of the attrition rate of components and the reduction percentage in system performance.

In light of the characterization of the challenge and the required achievement for the mission, the next step is formulating the response concept. This involves describing the method of operation and defining the necessary capability components. Such an approach enables the conceptual linkage between different components in mission execution, identifying their interdependencies and even quantifying the required inputs relative to achievement milestones. While this quantification cannot provide an accurate estimate of future requirements due to scenario uncertainties, it facilitates balanced force development across the various capability components needed for the mission. Moreover, quantification serves another critical purpose—it enables assessment of the residual gaps in mission performance and supports risk management with a clear-eyed perspective. Juxtaposing the various missions in terms of their residual gaps is aimed at promoting a balanced force build-up across all missions. This approach ensures an integrated risk management framework that considers the broader perspective of mission priorities and resource allocation.

A rough characterization of the enemy's attributes does not allow for the creation of a tailored response to the threat, and thus a TBP approach is not as effective. Mission-oriented planning, however, focuses on solutions that are

more robust for the mission, more versatile across various tasks and modes of operation, and more adaptable to new situations. These qualities are precisely the capabilities required to confront an uncertain future—prioritizing adaptability over maximizing outputs for a narrowly defined scenario with a low probability of occurrence (Davis, 2002). The resulting implication is a preference for force-building designed to provide a reasonable response to a broad spectrum of scenarios, rather than an optimal response limited to specific scenarios.

Mission-oriented planning aligns with Itzhak Ben-Israel's longstanding concept, which advocates placing greater emphasis on developing a qualitative technological advantage in force-building, rather than adhering to the conventional approach aimed at merely reducing operational gaps identified in situational assessments (Ben-Israel, 1997). Firstly, mission-oriented analysis focuses on robust solutions rather than exploiting enemy vulnerabilities in a specific scenario, echoing Ben-Israel's proposal. Secondly, the implementation of Threat-Based Planning requires a high degree of certainty regarding the characteristics of a future scenario—certainty that is challenging to establish when addressing the distant future. In contrast, focusing on the development of technological comparative advantages remains relevant in such cases.

Conclusions

The strategic context emerging in the aftermath of the war generates significant uncertainty regarding Israel's future combat scenarios, particularly in areas along its borders where the ground forces are relevant. Potential future threats are substantially greater than the current threat, yet their realization is characterized by a wide spectrum of possibilities.

Threat-based force building, or its adaptation as capabilities-based planning within the context of a specific theater, is less suitable for Israel today compared to the past. A mission-oriented force-building approach better aligns with Israel's current needs. This approach should be complemented by the use of specific scenarios as benchmarks for force development—such as another campaign against Iran or a ground incursion in the Golan Heights. While these scenarios do not encompass the entire range of future possibilities, they nonetheless demand adequate preparation.

Mission-oriented force building necessitates an adjustment to the planning process. It requires defining the missions, the desired outcomes for each mission, and the operational concepts for their execution. This approach provides the added benefit of preserving operational thinking, even in the absence of specific reference scenarios. When implemented correctly, it enables a balanced force development across missions through an integrative view of resources within

each mission. Assessing residual gaps following the force-building process ensures balance between missions by facilitating a comparative evaluation of these residual gaps.

Capabilities-based planning involves three key risks that must be carefully considered and mitigated. The first is technology-driven planning, wherein technology may become the guiding principle for force development in the absence of a compelling operational benchmark. The second is budget-driven planning, stemming from the difficulty in quantitatively assessing needs. The third is planning influenced by organizational politics, whether through the socialization of resources or preferential treatment of a dominant actor.

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Like a Raging Storm: The Egyptian Air Force as a Key Instrument in Advancing Egypt's Revised National Interests Following the Revolutionary Years

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Abstract

The events of the Arab Spring and Egypt's internal crises between 2011 and 2013 undermined Egypt's standing in the international arena and affected its internal stability. Since 2014, the country has faced complex strategic challenges that include social and economic crises, regional pressures, a decline in its role as a leader in the Arab world, the expansion of civil wars near its borders, and increasing domestic threats from terrorist organizations jeopardizing its stability. Consequently, Egypt's national interests have been adapted and transformed to ensure regime survival and to strengthen the country. This article examines how this reality is reflected in the Egyptian Air Force. To this end, it analyzes the three main areas in which the Air Force has operated over the past decade: participation in regional and international coalitions; counterterrorism operations; and force build-up with various objectives. It is argued that the Egyptian Air Force constitutes a central element within the armed forces for advancing these national interests. The primary conclusion is that the Egyptian Air Force today is not merely an aerial component within the military apparatus. Rather, it also serves as an instrument for projecting and consolidating Egypt's power both domestically and

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regionally. This case highlights a broader phenomenon observed in many countries in the 21st century, where air power functions not only as a military tool but also as a strategic instrument in advancing national policy. The study aims to highlight this phenomenon, addressing the intersection between the military, society, and regional and international interests.

Keywords: Egypt, Air force, National interests, Foreign policy, Diplomacy

Introduction

During the period from 2011 to 2013, following the Arab Spring, Egypt experienced a series of internal crises. These crises manifested in frequent changes of government and culminated in the military taking control of the state led by then-Minister of Defense Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who has served as president since July 2014. Throughout this period, due to Egypt's deteriorating domestic and international situation, the country was compelled to redefine parts of its national interests and pursue their advancement (Selim, 2022, p. 7).

One of the methods to trace changes in a state's interests on the international stage is through examining the roles fulfilled by its military (Arnold, 1994, pp. 4-6). This is particularly relevant in a country like Egypt, where the military also reflects the national priorities in the civil and social dimensions (Abul-Magd, 2013, pp. 1-6; Harb, 2003, pp. 284-290; Ottaway, 2022, pp. 4-5). This article examines this claim with a focus on the Egyptian Air Force, which, as argued here, constitutes a unique window into the security apparatus due to its status within Egypt's security and social system. Through the Air Force, it is possible to discern shifts in Egypt's national interests over the past decade.

To address the question of how Egypt's new interests are reflected in its Air Force, the literature on air power employed for purposes beyond warfare was reviewed. This review served as the basis for identifying the additional roles played by an aerial military force throughout history and into the twenty-first century. Simultaneously, changes in Egypt's objectives and interests following the upheavals that occurred in the country were examined, along with the military's use in managing these transformations during the subsequent decade (2014–2024). In addition to academic articles, statements from Egyptian senior officials and Air Force commanders over the past decade were analyzed, alongside declarations by national leaders, and reports in both Egyptian and international media and policy briefs. These sources facilitated the evaluation of Egypt's interests and its patterns of activity on internal, regional, and international levels, thereby

enabling an understanding of how the Air Force has been leveraged to address these evolving challenges.

The primary conclusion is that Egypt has two central interests: shaping and preserving regime stability, alongside rebuilding its regional and international standing. As a consequence, the tasks assigned to the Air Force have evolved. While maintaining its traditional missions, the Air Force concurrently engages in roles for which it was never originally intended, such as counterterrorism, policing, and fostering the country's foreign relations.

"Years of Turmoil" 2011-2013: Egypt Amidst the Upheaval

From the 1952 Officers' Revolution until 2011, Egypt was exclusively governed by a leadership closely connected to the military. Despite the dramatic changes the country underwent during this period—including the abrupt exit of a national leader, wars, and peace agreements—its policy remained largely consistent. This policy aimed mainly to preserve Egypt's leading position in the Arab world and the Middle East (Selim, 2022, pp. 9-10).

The events of the Arab Spring in 2011 represented a rupture in Egypt and throughout vast parts of the Arab world. As a result, Egypt descended into two years of political instability, which culminated in a military coup in July 2013 that placed Abdel Fattah el-Sisi at the head of the state (Ardıç, 2012, p. 9; Selim, 2022, p. 7).

The years of upheaval compelled Egypt to contend with new challenges, including managing opposition groups, both Islamic and otherwise, as well as ethnic minorities that had been repressed by the regime and exploited the internal instability to act against the state. At the same time, the Egyptian military was deployed to maintain public order and played an active and central role in suppressing protests and civil unrest (Frisch, 2013, pp. 192-195; Roll, 2016, p. 24). Concurrently, the disintegration of other states following the Arab Spring heightened the external threat to Egypt, necessitating the deployment of military force beyond its borders for the first time since 1977 (Selim, 2022, p. 20).

The Arab Spring events also led to a significant deterioration in Egypt's relations with the United States, which had previously been its main ally. Amid this, the United States curtailed Egypt's capacity to use force against its own population, recognized the elected government of the Muslim Brotherhood, and following the 2013 coup, suspended collaborations, arms supply agreements, and joint projects. Consequently, after approximately 45 years, Egypt found itself without a strategic ally and was compelled to seek alternatives. In the third decade of the twenty-first century, relations between the Americans and Egyptians improved; however, mutual suspicion persisted (Selim, 2022, pp. 17-19). The

Egyptian economy suffered from reduced growth, increased unemployment and inflation, and growing dependency on external actors. This crisis extended beyond the turbulent years and remains evident today (Kahn, 2014, pp. 3-7). The main outcome was a decline in Egypt's regional and international standing—from a leading nation to one grappling with instability and a severe economic crisis. This compelled the state to reformulate its national objectives—a process that has intensified since 2014.

Egypt's Interests between 2014 and 2024

The reality that emerged in Egypt following the turbulent years prompted an adjustment of its interests to align with its new circumstances. These revised interests are designed to address current challenges while simultaneously enabling Egypt to restore its status as a leading regional power. Four primary interests of this kind are identified.

Preservation of Regime Rule: The regime's fundamental interest is to maintain its hold on power amid internal challenges and struggles for international legitimacy. At the same time, it seeks to preserve Egypt's nature as an Arab-Muslim state governed by a non-Islamist regime. Consequently, the regime allocates substantial resources to consolidate and strengthen its grip on the country, primarily by suppressing dissent, particularly targeting the Muslim Brotherhood movement (Ottaway, 2022, p. 4).

Addressing the Threat to Internal Security: Since the fall of the previous regime, and especially following El-Sisi's rise to power, terrorist organizations have exploited the internal situation in Egypt and the armed forces' focus on regime protection to intensify their activities and undermine domestic security. These groups have included global jihad cells that emerged in Sinai and within Egypt itself, incursions by Islamic State (ISIS) operatives from Libya, and local factions of the Muslim Brotherhood turning to terrorism after their leadership was neutralized and activities suppressed. These factors posed unprecedented challenges to the Egyptian regime, forcing it to prioritize their containment (Ottaway, 2022, pp. 4–5; Selim, 2022, p. 20).

Strengthening Regional and International Standing: Since coming to power, the new regime has been focused on restoring Egypt's international status, which had declined to a secondary role compared to the Gulf States, led by Saudi Arabia. On the international stage, Egypt also lost its unique standing with the United States in favor of other regional actors. Additionally, Egypt's dependence on economic aid from global states has increased, without which it could not survive and would have devolved into an underdeveloped country (Stanicek, 2021, p. 2).

Preventing External Threats to Egypt: Throughout the years of turmoil, Egypt did not face new state-based threats, except for the civil war in Libya, which threatened to spill into Egypt—a topic discussed in this article. Conversely, several regional issues that have the potential to pose a threat to Egypt have not undergone any significant changes and therefore are not examined in depth in this study.

Israel continued to be regarded as the primary military reference threat to Egypt even after the years of turmoil, and Egypt still views it as the main potential threat. The exception to this was the collaboration in addressing the terrorism threat in Sinai (Neriah, 2015). Iran remains, from the Egyptian perspective, a competitor for regional hegemony (Ottaway, 2022, p. 3). Two additional cases impacting Egypt's national security underwent changes in 2024 that may influence future Egyptian foreign policy. Regarding the Renaissance Dam issue with Ethiopia, Egypt mainly persisted in diplomatic efforts alongside the continued threat of military force, as it had done prior to the government change in Ethiopia. In recent months, there may have been a shift in this policy: Egypt has begun forming a regional-African coalition aimed at increasing military pressure on Ethiopia to secure progress in the dam dispute (Qadri Ahmed, 2024). Regarding the civil war in Sudan, Egypt recently maintained a neutral stance, monitoring the developments in its southern neighbor amid concerns over possible spillover of the conflict into its territory. By late 2024, a policy change seems to have occurred wherein Egypt openly shifted its support to the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), currently without deploying military forces (Maher & Farid, 2025).

The Role of the Armed Forces and the Air Force in Advancing Political Interests

The primary traditional role of the armed forces in a modern state is to serve as an instrument for projecting power externally. Military forces exist to defend the state against potential enemies and adversaries, as well as serve as a coercive tool intended to advance the state's interests (Edmunds, 2006, p. 1060). At the same time, militaries undertake additional roles aligned with the state's interests and objectives in both domestic and international arenas, such as disaster response, counterterrorism, and policing (Flores-Macias & Zarkin, 2021, pp. 519–520). Armed forces also function as instruments of diplomacy and for developing relations among various actors on the international stage (Horsh-Segal, 2020, pp. 127–129; Drab, 2018, pp. 57–59). In some cases, militaries contribute to shaping societal identity (Whitt & Perazzo, 2018) and even serve as a major employer within the economies of certain countries (Daye, 2016).

Within the armed forces, air forces constitute a central component of military power and capability, derived from their perception as a significant deterrent force, technologically advanced, and possessing broad operational capacity against a wide range of challenges. The U.S. Air Force's definition of air power encapsulates this perspective: "the ability to project military power or influence through control and exploitation of the air domain." Accordingly, at least in Western states, air power is typically the first to be deployed against various actors, including in non-primarily military missions, due to its high availability, precise targeting capability, and operational versatility (Cohen, 1994, pp. 101–109; Kainikara, 2009; Pape, 2004, pp. 121–123). For great powers, air power serves as the cornerstone of power projection in the 21st century, while for other states it represents a key means to consolidate and strengthen the image of national power (Hunter, 2019, pp. 19–22; Shuad & Lowther, 2011; Suit, 1991, pp. 9–13).

Over the years, numerous examples have accumulated demonstrating the use of air power as a means to achieve states' strategic objectives, employing a wide range of tools and capabilities. For instance, the U.S. "airlift" to Berlin at the end of the 1940s was intended not only to break the Soviet blockade of the city but also to signal the West's willingness to resist unilateral Soviet actions at the onset of the Cold War (Office of the Historian, n.d.). Another example includes show-of-force patrols involving fighter jets and bombers designed not only to showcase military capability but also to deter potential adversaries. Illustratively, the joint patrols and training exercises conducted by the Israeli and Taiwanese air forces alongside the U.S. Air Force aim to deter Iran and China, respectively (Chang & Regan, 2024; Nissenbaum, 2023). Air forces also serve as instruments to advance diplomatic relations between states through operational cooperation and exercises with allies while maintaining deterrence against adversaries, all the while avoiding the actual use of force (Lowther, 2010). For example, the rapprochement between Israel and the Gulf states has been manifested in joint trainings and exercises, as well as discussions on advancing coordinated training programs. These efforts were not solely intended to enhance operational capability but also to strengthen Israel's political interests through its air force.

These examples illustrate that the use of air forces enables states in general, and great powers in particular, to advance their political interests vis-à-vis other actors without resorting to direct and large-scale military confrontation with those actors.

The Use of the Armed Forces and the Air Force to Achieve Egypt's Domestic and Foreign Objectives

Egypt's military is the largest among the Arab armies and constitutes a central pillar in Egypt's self-perception as a regional and international power (Kuimova, 2020, p. 2). Beyond its traditional role in defending against external enemies, the Egyptian military plays a key role in strengthening and projecting Egypt's status domestically and internationally. This is reflected in its cooperation with other armed forces, its acquisitions, training, and joint power deployments. The Egyptian armed forces also bear responsibility for regime preservation, civilian assistance, maintaining internal morale, and promoting the local economy through factories and companies they own, which supply numerous jobs (Sayigh, 2019, pp. 3-7). These factors confer a unique status to the military within both the ruling elite and the general Egyptian public, enabling it to intervene in domestic politics and in the daily management of the state (Harb, 2003, p. 270; Sayigh, 2019, pp. 80-81). Following years of upheaval, this involvement has intensified, with the military transforming from a supportive actor into the leading force directing the Egyptian economy through large-scale infrastructure projects and the strengthening of military industries. Nevertheless, these activities have had limited impact on defense procurement processes, which still rely heavily on foreign financial and technological aid (Joya, 2018, pp. 681-682; Ottaway, 2022; Sayigh, 2019, pp. 238–239).

Within the security forces, the Egyptian Air Force occupies a special place, as emphasized by the current commander of the Egyptian Air Force, Abd al-Gawwad, in October 2022. This perception stems from public esteem rooted in a historical legacy, the advanced and high-quality weaponry the Air Force operates, and its role as a central instrument in stabilizing Egypt's regional position vis-à-vis both adversaries and allies (Al-Ahram, 2022). Since 2014, the Egyptians have assigned additional tasks to their Air Force, reflecting an update of the country's interests (Al-Hayat Al-Youm, 2014; Youm Al-Sabah, 2019). While these missions were initially considered secondary, over time they became a more integral component of the Air Force's role (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2019).

Advancing Egyptian Interests through the Air Force: The New Core Layers

The shift in how the Egyptian leadership views contemporary and future challenges, along with Egypt's near-term aspirations, is reflected in three main spheres of Egyptian Air Force activity—each aimed at advancing national interests: participation in regional coalitions, counterterrorism operations, and the development of air power.

Participation in Regional Coalitions – Strengthening Egypt's International Standing and Regional Role through the Air Force

Since 2014, the declared aim of Egyptian foreign policy has been the restoration of its status as a leading and influential actor in the Arab world, the Middle East, and North Africa. To this end, Egypt identified the necessity of establishing relevance within coalitions formed to address terrorism threats in the Middle East (Halawa, 2021, pp. 2-3, 6-7, 15-17).

For decades, until the rise of al-Sisi to power, Egypt almost entirely refrained from deploying its military and participating in military coalitions, opting instead to act through other diplomatic channels (Neriah, 2015). Egypt deliberately avoided the use of military force even in cases that posed threats to its national security, such as the rise to power of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in 1989, whose Islamist government threatened stability in southern Egypt. At that time, President Mubarak chose diplomatic processes. Egypt also refrained from participating in the U.S.-led coalition against Iraq in 2003. The only Egyptian military participation in a regional coalition in recent decades was during Operation Desert Storm in 1991, which came under intense American pressure and as part of a debt relief agreement (Associated Press, 2020; Neriah, 2015).

In contrast, over the last decade Egypt has participated in regional international coalitions. This involvement stemmed from a strategy to restore its regional and international standing and to reciprocate the support provided by Gulf states in the turbulent years (State Information Service, 2022; Trager, 2015). Al-Sisi addressed this issue in 2014, shortly after assuming office, stating that "Egypt views security in the Persian Gulf as an integral part of Egypt's own security." On multiple occasions, he emphasized the need for cooperation and the building of coalitions with these countries (el-Hamalawy, 2023).

Egypt's participation focused on two main arenas: the ongoing civil war in Libya and the coalition against the Houthis. The primary instrument through which Egypt engaged in these coalitions was the Air Force. This allowed Egypt to play an influential role without committing ground forces, which were required for other missions (el-Hamalawy, 2023).

The War in Libya

Between 2014 and 2020, Libya was engulfed in its second civil war, marked by a struggle between two main factions: the House of Representatives, supported in part by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, and the Government of National Accord, backed mainly by Turkey. Libya also became an active theater of terrorism against Egypt, serving as a base from which Islamic State operatives carried out attacks inside Egyptian territory; the most notable incident being the 2016

killing of Coptic Christians (Pedde, 2017, pp. 93-95). Egypt's involvement in the conflict was driven by several interests: preventing the spillover of Islamist terrorism into its borders, enhancing its regional standing through influence in Libyan affairs, curbing Turkish influence within Libya, increasing control over natural resources along the Egypt-Libya border, and weakening the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya (Polat, n.d., p. 3; Selim, 2022, pp. 20-21).

The Egyptian Air Force was the primary force involved in the conflict, launching strikes against Islamic State targets in eastern Libya. From the Egyptian perspective, these airstrikes were part of their broader counterterrorism campaign and efforts to secure the nation's borders (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2022). Additionally, the Egyptian Air Force supported the military forces aligned with Libya's House of Representatives faction by transferring dozens of outdated fighter jets and transport helicopters to Libyan forces between 2014 and 2022, while also aiding in their training and capacity-building (Lake, n.d.). Beyond military aid, Egypt provided economic and political support as part of backing Libya's recognized government. This represents a significant shift for Egypt, which had previously adhered almost entirely to refraining from direct military assistance to other states (Arafa & Boduszyński, 2017).

Furthermore, and in contrast with its traditional approach, Egypt permitted the United Arab Emirates Air Force to utilize its bases in the western region of the country to launch operational activities in Libya. Moreover, the Egyptian and Emirati air forces collaborated on several occasions, conducting joint operations within the framework of the conflict (BBC News, 2020; Kingsley et al., 2014). The use of Egyptian airspace and infrastructure to conduct missions in another state, alongside joint air operations, underscores Egypt's efforts to enhance its regional relevance and strategic value to its partners.

The War in Yemen

In 2015, Saudi Arabia, alongside Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and other Arab states, established a coalition against the Houthis, who with Iranian support had seized control over northwestern Yemen (Robinson, 2023). Egypt joined the coalition at its inception, deploying units from its Air Force, Navy, and Special Forces to Saudi Arabia. Official statements from the Egyptian president indicated that the state acted primarily from a sense of regional commitment, emphasizing Egypt's self-perception as a leading actor in the area.

Throughout the war in Yemen, the Egyptian Air Force operated six F-16 fighter jets along with their air and ground crews (Al Masry Al Youm, 2022; Delalande, 2017; Reuters, 2015; Vredesactie, n.d.). Referring to the role of the Air Force, Al-Sisi stated: "Units of the Air Force operate to support the

regional coalition aimed at restoring stability to Yemen […] [Egypt acts] out of its foundation of responsibility for collective Arab security in the Gulf and the Red Sea, making it essential for Egypt to bear this responsibility" (Ahram Online, 2015).

The deployment of Egyptian forces to Saudi Arabia, though limited in scope, stemmed from Egypt's understanding that reclaiming a leadership role in the region requires dispatching military forces to conflicts and areas that do not pose a direct threat to Egypt. This outlook was expressed, for example, by the commander of the Egyptian Air Force in an October 2022 interview with Al-Ahram newspaper, where he emphasized Egypt's commitment to combating terrorism both domestically and abroad, "as it did when participating in the coalition in Yemen" (Al-Ahram, 2022).

In contrast, Egypt, like other Arab states previously involved in fighting the Houthis, refrained from deploying its air force due to the closure of the Bab al-Mandab strait during the Iron Swords War (Gaza War) (Junyent, 2024). This non-engagement can be attributed to three main factors. First, Egypt had to balance conflicting interests: on one hand, the need to find a solution to the economic challenge posed by the Houthis' impact on passage through the Suez Canal; on the other hand, Egyptians did not want to appear as direct supporters of Israel while it was engaged in an intense war against multiple Arab and Muslim states and organizations. Second, Egypt sought to avoid retaliatory Houthi attacks on its territory in response to Egyptian strikes. Third, other Arab countries—chief among them Saudi Arabia—strongly opposed an Arab attack against the Houthis in the context of the ongoing war with Israel (Maher & Farid, 2024, pp. 1-5; Schaer, 2023).

Egypt's participation in military coalitions represents a fundamental shift from its policy prior to 2014, when it preferred to avoid deploying the military for purposes unrelated to the defense of the state or regime. The choice to utilize the Air Force, which is regarded as a strategic component of the state's arsenal, offers insight into the change in Egypt's foreign policy. This shift aims both to project power and to establish relationships with other regional actors, with the broader goal of strengthening and enhancing Egypt's standing vis-à-vis neighboring states while projecting stability.

Counterterrorism in Sinai: Strengthening Internal Security and Demonstrating Commitment to the International Community through Air Operations

The Sinai Peninsula received very limited attention from the central Egyptian government and became a fertile ground for global jihadist organizations that

established themselves within the local Bedouin population. These groups were initially linked to al-Qaida and later shifted their allegiance to the ISIS organization, under which they were recognized as the "Sinai Province" (Kirkpatrick, 2014). This province's activities focused on northern Sinai, primarily in the area between al-Arish and the border with the Gaza Strip. Until 2013, their operations centered on sabotaging gas pipelines between Egypt and Israel and attacking Egyptian border guard forces in Sinai (The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2022, pp. 1-2).

Since 2013, terrorist activities intensified due to the weakened control of the Egyptian authorities during the final phase of the Morsi government, coupled with terror organizations' concerns about an increased military campaign against them following the July 2013 military coup. Key attacks during this period included, among others, the bombing of a Russian passenger plane, assaults on border guard units, the kidnapping of Egyptian security personnel, and the takeover of the city of Sheikh Zuweid. These successes, combined with fears of terrorism spilling from the Sinai Peninsula into mainland Egypt, alongside Israeli pressure to prevent Sinai-based terrorist organizations from becoming a threat to Israel, compelled the Egyptians to undertake an extensive and intensive campaign against them (Melman, 2018; Willson Center, 2019).

Alongside the escalation of terrorism in Sinai, an international coalition formed to combat ISIS and its affiliates. This culminated in Operation Inherent Resolve which commenced in 2014 in Syria and Iraq. The international community called on Egypt to intensify its efforts against terrorist groups in Sinai as part of this broader struggle. This was emphasized by then-U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry during a meeting with the Egyptian president: "Egypt is at the forefront globally in the fight against terrorism, especially regarding efforts to combat extremist groups in Sinai" (BBC, 2014a).

The recognition that terrorist organizations in Sinai posed a direct threat to Egypt itself, together with international and regional pressure to confront these groups, led the Egyptian authorities to declare a special "state of emergency" in Sinai in October 2014. Following this declaration, a series of military operations were continuously launched in North Sinai against the Sinai province organization (BBC, 2014b; McManus, 2020).

The Egyptian Air Force played a central role in these operations, with its involvement increasing as the campaigns expanded. In terms of military hardware, the Egyptians deployed all their operational capabilities designed for comprehensive combat in Sinai. At the same time, recognizing the need to adapt for counterterrorism warfare, they were equipped—with the assistance of the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and China—with dedicated aerial assets

suited for this type of conflict. Within a relatively short period, the Air Force had become a key force operator, while attempting, with only partial success, to adopt the operational patterns of Western air forces in combating terrorism.

The deployment of the Air Force in the counterterrorism campaign was intended to serve both Egypt's internal and external needs. Operationally, the Air Force was perceived as an effective instrument against terrorist organizations and as a deterrent element against actions within Egypt itself. Simultaneously, the state's promotion of its role in these operations was used to bolster public support for the government and to demonstrate its determination to ensure the security of Egyptian citizens, as emphasized by the Egyptian Air Force commander, Al-Gwwad, in an interview on the subject (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2022). On the international stage, the Air Force's activity functioned as a token of Egypt's serious commitment to combating Islamic terrorism in the region.

Rearmament: Restoring power projection alongside rapprochement with various international and regional actors.

For many years, even before the turbulent era, the Egyptians declared a policy of diversifying their sources of weaponry. However, during Mubarak's rule, the vast majority of military procurement was from the United States. The Egyptian land forces are primarily based on American tanks and armored vehicles; similarly, the navy and most air force systems are predominantly American. Nevertheless, to meet specific needs, they acquired systems not produced by the Americans when required. For example, to address air defense needs for ground forces, the Egyptians procured mobile air defense systems from the Russians, who specialize in this category of armaments (Kuimova, 2020, p. 13).

Following the military coup in July 2013, the United States imposed an arms embargo on transfers to Egypt. This led to a halt in the supply of key systems, including F-16 fighter jets and Apache helicopters. Consequently, Egypt was forced to urgently seek alternatives. This necessity evolved into a procurement doctrine under which Egypt is to acquire advanced weaponry from diverse suppliers. The goal is to avoid reliance on a single provider and to be regarded as a potential client by global powers and regional actors interested in investing in Egypt. For instance, in an interview conducted in October 2022, the commander of the Egyptian Air Force stated: "As part of the strategy to diversify sources of armaments, Egypt has acquired Rafale and MiG-29 aircraft, considered to be among the most advanced fourth-generation fighters" (Al-Ahram, 2022). By inviting these actors to supply its military hardware and invest in infrastructure, Egypt positions itself as a regional military power operating advanced armaments, and as a country that is attractive for long-term investment (Al-Hayat Al-Youm,

2014; Kuimova, 2020, pp. 13-15; Ottaway, 2022, pp. 5-6). The procurement financing did not rely on local Egyptian budget sources but was instead secured through loans and foreign aid, as was also the case during the period of American assistance to Egypt (Al-Anani, 2022; Butter, 2020, pp. 16-17).

Egypt's air procurements are categorized into strategic acquisitions and "operational-tactical" acquisitions. The strategic procurements are intended not only to meet military demands but also to serve the country's strategic needs and objectives. These include projecting power both externally and internally, maintaining Egypt's regional and international standing, and protecting vital national interests. Typically, the procured weaponry is state-of-the-art and advanced, possessing unique capabilities that serve both offensive and defensive requirements. Such transactions usually receive extensive media coverage and enhance the country's stature. These procurement processes have also been acknowledged by Egyptian Air Force commanders in interviews conducted over the past decade, where they highlight the unprecedented force-building efforts of the Air Force in recent years (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2022; Egypt Defense Portal, 2017).

An example of this category is the Rafale fighter jets, purchased for the first time in 2015 from France (France 24, 2015). These advanced combat aircraft represent cutting-edge global technology and have provided the Egyptian Air Force with capabilities it previously lacked. These include advanced air-to-air missiles, precision munitions, and long-range cruise missiles. The deal received wide coverage in Egyptian, French, and international media, which frequently portrayed Egypt as one of the leading countries operating advanced air weaponry, further enhancing the interests outlined earlier (Kuimova, 2020, p. 13). This was supported by the 2015 statement of the French Foreign Minister: "[The supply of the aircraft] is intended to strengthen Egypt, a central actor in maintaining stability in the region amid instability in Libya and the ISIS terrorist threat in the east" (France 24, 2015). A follow-up deal signed in 2021 also includes the assembly and production of these aircraft within Egypt, providing the country with advanced knowledge and technology (Defense Arabic, 2023). Additional examples include the acquisition of Russian MiG-29 fighter jets and Italian and American proposals to supply Egypt with Eurofighter Typhoon and F-15S aircraft, respectively (Kuimova, 2020, p. 13; O'Brien, 2022).

The second type of procurement is primarily aimed at the operational and tactical needs of the Egyptian Air Force, chiefly the fight against terrorism and the maintenance of Egypt's internal stability. Simultaneously, it enables the Air Force to play an active and significant role in regional coalitions. This aligns with Egypt's strategy over the past decade, which views collaborative

partnerships as a means to strengthen and restore Egypt's standing. Examples include purchasing Chinese WingLoong II attack drones and light attack aircraft such as the AT-208 and AC-208, which have been deployed in operations in Sinai and Libya (Defense Mirror, 2018; Egypt Papers, 2021; Lionel, 2018). These systems have proven to be crucial in the fight against terrorism and border security, as noted by Air Force Commander Younes in 2017 (Egypt Defense Portal, 2017). These acquisitions generally have not received broad media attention, primarily because they serve a specific and internal operational requirement.

The procurement process enables Egypt, at the strategic level, to renew its projection of power toward potential adversaries—both domestic and foreign—and to deter them from challenging the state. It also allows Egypt to broaden its circle of alliances on the one hand, while reducing its dependence on the United States on the other. Simultaneously, it permits Egypt to play an active role in regional military coalitions and serve as a significant actor within them. Tactical acquisitions allow the Air Force to make the necessary adjustments in response to specific quasi-military threats, thereby strengthening deterrence against these challenges.

Conclusions and Summary

The years of upheaval transformed Egypt from a leading Arab power into a fragmented state suffering from internal instability and a diminished regional and international standing. Frequent changes in government deepened economic and social disparities and caused a profound rupture in relations with the United States. Since July 2014, under the leadership of al-Sisi, Egypt has been attempting to stabilize its internal situation, rehabilitate its economy, and confront terrorist threats along its borders and within its territory.

One of the Egyptian regime's key instruments is the armed forces, which hold a special status and exert influence across multiple sectors of Egyptian society. Beyond their role as a fighting force, the Egyptian military operates military and civilian production facilities, manages national projects, and employs a significant number of citizens both directly and indirectly. The strength of the Egyptian armed forces, along with their centrality in daily life and their perception by the public as a national symbol, makes them a principal pillar of the Egyptian regime and a central means for advancing both domestic and foreign policy.

The Air Force is perceived as the most prestigious and highest quality branch, and thus has been assigned a special role in Egypt's rehabilitation processes. This article identifies three new roles that have been added to the Air Force, all designed to serve Egypt's contemporary national interests. First, it has taken a central role in counterterrorism operations in Sinai and in reducing

terrorism within Egypt itself—a task previously designated exclusively to internal security forces. The use of the Air Force's extensive capabilities, alongside intensified public operations, has helped reinforce the perception that the Egyptian regime is dedicating significant resources to tackling this issue. Second, through operational cooperations, the Air Force serves as a tool for advancing closer relations with other regional and international actors. Egypt's participation in regional and international counterterrorism coalitions has aided in improving its ties with Gulf countries and rebuilding its relationship with the United States, enabling Egypt's return to the forefront of regional affairs. Third, the policy of diversifying weapons procurement sources and turning to additional suppliers has allowed Egypt to reduce its dependency on the United States and expand as well as deepen its circle of allies and supporters. Some of these countries also transfer knowledge for producing and assembling weaponry locally in Egypt, which creates employment opportunities and exposes Egypt to advanced technologies.

In conclusion, this article has presented the central role of the Egyptian Air Force in advancing Egypt's contemporary national interests. Cases like Egypt's occasionally occur on the international stage. State interests are redefined following significant changes triggered by political and social upheavals. Upheavals that caused damage to the country's internal stability and international status. In response to these adverse conditions, Egypt needed to fundamentally alter the way it addresses its strategic challenges. The article demonstrates that the Egyptian regime chose the Air Force as the primary instrument to confront these challenges, granting it a central role in the country's rehabilitation efforts, both internally and externally. The Egyptian Air Force serves as a critical case study for understanding the measures the Egyptian regime takes to realize its national interests and to evaluate the success of these endeavors. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of Egypt's processes is incomplete without understanding the underlying transformations within the military as a whole, and the Air Force in particular.

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Ad Hoc or Enduring? A Dynamic Taxonomy of Strategic Partnerships in the Middle East and North Africa

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Abstract

This article advances a dynamic taxonomy for analyzing Strategic Partnerships (SPs) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), challenging the prevailing tendency to treat them as a generic category. It distinguishes between two intermediary forms of alignment—*hyper-transactionalism* and *semi-alliance*—and classifies SPs along two analytical dimensions: the presence or absence of strategic intent and their primary functional orientation, whether economic or security-related. A central finding of the study is the increasing prominence of air and space cooperation within MENA-based SPs. These domains function as key vectors through which global powers project asymmetric influence while enabling regional states to bypass technological constraints and expedite access to advanced capabilities such as UAVs, satellite systems, and precision-guided technologies. Drawing on case studies of Russian and Chinese SPs in the region, the article demonstrates that air and space collaboration acts as a strategic force multiplier. The proposed taxonomy provides scholars and policymakers with

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a more nuanced analytical framework for assessing the depth, durability, and transformative potential of emerging alignments within MENA's swiftly evolving security architecture.

Keywords: Strategic Partnership, Alliance, Transactionalism, Middle East, Africa, MENA, Russia, China, Aerospace Power, Strategic Intent

Introduction

Strategic partnerships (SPs) have become a defining instrument of post-Cold War diplomacy, yet their meaning and strategic significance remain poorly understood. More than 200 SPs exist globally, based on formal agreements, official declarations, or scholarly assessments (Pan & Michalski, 2019; Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019). These arrangements vary widely in structure, depth, and intent. Nowhere is this ambiguity more pronounced than in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), where at least 40 SP frameworks were signed between global powers and regional states between 2000 and 2025—a sharp increase over previous decades with a marked acceleration beginning in the early 2010s (Fulton, 2019; Guzansky, 2022; Conley et al., 2023; Heimann et al., 2024).

Air and space cooperation has emerged as a critical dimension of many of these partnerships. This includes the transfer and co-production of combat and surveillance platforms, joint research and development, technology transfers, basing rights, overflight arrangements, and military exercises. In the space sector, SPs have enabled satellite launches, the development of domestic manufacturing capacity, and advances in communications, remote sensing, and missile guidance systems. For example, these dynamics are particularly visible in the Russia-Iran strategic partnership, especially since the summer of 2022, which has enabled Iran to expand its capabilities in air, space, and electronic warfare thanks to Russian support, including satellite launches and assistance with GPS jamming. However, while this cooperation bolstered Iran's technical capabilities, it ultimately proved insufficient to shield Iran from the coordinated strikes by Israel and the United States in June 2025, highlighting the limitations of such support in delivering effective deterrence or defense. Similarly, China's partnership with Egypt blends economic ties with strategic technology transfers, as demonstrated by the 2023 MisrSat-2 launch and the delivery of Wing Loong Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs).

Despite their growing importance, SPs are often treated as a generic category, blurring important differences in design, depth, and purpose. Some are formalized and institutionalized, functioning as structured platforms for sustained cooperation. Others remain largely declarative, signaling intent

without operational mechanisms. In some cases, the "strategic partnership" label is applied rhetorically, with no formal basis. Internal hierarchies—such as "basic," "comprehensive," or "in-depth" partnerships—further complicate the landscape, while interpretation often hinges on how the parties frame the relationship. Functional orientation adds another layer of complexity: some SPs prioritize defense and security cooperation, while others focus on economic and technological exchange. These variations are rarely analyzed systematically, contributing to analytical ambiguity.

This conceptual imprecision reflects a larger theoretical gap. SPs occupy an intermediate space between formal alliances and short-term transactional arrangements. They usually lack binding defense commitments but are more durable and multidimensional than ad hoc deals. Yet this "middle ground" of interstate alignments remains under-theorized. While International Relations (IR) scholarship has extensively explored alliances and transactional alignments, it has yet to offer a coherent framework for understanding the increasing number of partnerships that fall between these two poles.

This article addresses these gaps by introducing a dynamic taxonomy of SPs. It argues that SPs can be more accurately understood along two key dimensions: the *strategic intent* (mainly presence or absence of) underpinning the relationship and the SP's primary functional orientation—whether economic or security-based. *Strategic intent* is defined here as the sustained mutual commitment of both parties to deepen and institutionalize their cooperation over time. Although underdeveloped in existing IR frameworks, strategic intent provides a meaningful criterion for distinguishing between temporary alignments and more enduring, quasi-allied relationships.

This article proposes a taxonomy that distinguishes between two main forms of SPs: *hyper-transactional relationships* and *semi-alliances. Hyper-transactional* refers to partnerships rooted in pragmatic quid pro quo exchanges across multiple domains (e.g., defense, technology, energy), often stable over time but lacking formal commitments or normative alignment. These relationships are not narrow or fleeting; rather, they are expansive in scope yet limited in institutional depth and strategic intent. In contrast, *semi-alliances* involve deeper coordination and a shared intent to formalize ties.[2] By differentiating these often-conflated forms of SPs, the proposed framework clarifies levels of strategic commitment and helps assess partnership trajectories. It also accounts for functional orientation—

2 The term *hyper-transactional* may suggest, at first glance, a weaker or more narrowly defined relationship. However, as used here, it designates a broad and often enduring form of transactionalism, involving multifaceted cooperation that remains fundamentally interest-based and non-institutionalized. Unlike fleeting tactical alignments, hyper-transactional partnerships are stable but deliberately avoid deeper alignment or normative convergence.

security versus economic-technological—each with distinct implications. This approach contributes to IR debates on strategic alignment and responds to recent scholarly calls for more flexible, phase-based models of interstate cooperation (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019; Pesu & Iso-Markku, 2024).

Empirically, the article focuses on Russia's and China's SPs in the MENA region since the early 2010s, with particular attention to developments in the air and space sectors. Our findings show that these domains have emerged as key vectors of strategic engagement in MENA, enabling rapid technological diffusion and capability enhancement—even in the absence of formal defense obligations.

This article thus pursues two core objectives. First, it introduces a new taxonomy designed to capture the variation in commitment and strategic depth that characterizes contemporary SPs. Second, it analyzes the role of air and space cooperation as a catalytic domain within these evolving relationships. By situating SPs along a continuum from hyper-transactionalism to semi-alliance—determined by the presence or absence of strategic intent—and by emphasizing the growing relevance of the air and space domains, the article suggests an analytical framework for understanding the nature, evolution, and strategic impact of SPs in the MENA region and beyond.

Theoretical Basis and Analytical Framework

The post–Cold War era has seen the emergence of a growing number of interstate relationships that fall between traditional alliances and ad hoc transactional engagements. This "middle space" of strategic alignment has expanded in tandem with two global trends: the erosion of Cold-War-era alliance structures, often described as a "post-alliance era," and the increasing prevalence of transactionalism in statecraft.

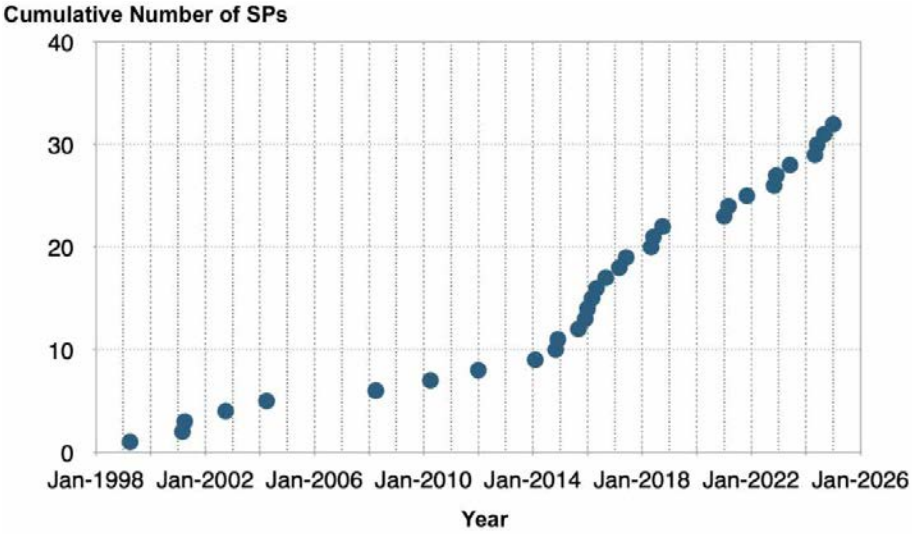
Since the late 1990s, alternative diplomatic frameworks have gained prominence. These arrangements often fall short of formal alliances but entail more structured cooperation than one-off deals or narrowly issue-based exchanges do. They may involve recurring defense coordination, joint political dialogue, institutional frameworks, or expectations of support in times of crisis, whether formal or informal (Saxi, 2019). Contemporary security cooperation thus reflects a more flexible and layered spectrum of relationships, which includes these intermediary forms alongside enduring alliances and temporary alignments (Kinne, 2018).

Efforts to conceptualize this intermediary space began in the 1990s as scholars sought to define "security alignments" that entailed more structured collaboration than ad hoc transactional relationships, though fell short of formal alliances.

This emerging literature challenged the rigid dichotomy between alliances and transactional relations, instead framing them as different "stages" or "tiers" within a broader, multi-phase spectrum of security alignments (Snyder, 1997, p. 123; Adler & Barnett, 1998). Expanding on this multi-tiered framework, Wilkins (2012) defined alignment as a "state of shared agreement or accord on one or more significant issues" (p. 56), with formal alliances positioned at the far end of the spectrum as its most binding and institutionalized form.

Strategic partnerships, as a distinctive category within this spectrum, have proliferated in recent decades in the MENA region (Figure 1). Since the 1993 China-Brazil and the 1994 U.S.-Russia partnerships (often cited as the first formal SPs) this model has expanded globally. However, SPs remain conceptually ambiguous. They vary greatly in scope and form: some are highly institutionalized, others entirely declarative; some involve defense cooperation, while others are limited to economic or technological coordination. What unites them is their positioning between one-off transactions and treaty-bound alliances, and their potential to evolve in either direction (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019; Lanoszka, 2022).

Figure 1: Growth of Russia's and China's SPs in MENA



The motivations behind SPs are similarly diverse. Middle powers often use them to boost regional or global status, enhance bargaining power, or hedge against uncertainty. Major powers, including both revisionist and status quo actors, leverage SPs to shape the international order, counterbalance rivals, increase strategic flexibility, or pursue tactical objectives (Brzezinski, 1997;

Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019, pp. 10–13; Kireeva, 2022). For example, Russia's SPs often privilege military cooperation and arms transfers, whereas China's typically emphasize economic infrastructure and long-term investment (J. Fulton, personal communication, January 12, 2025). Extensive work on China's partnerships with states across the world underscores how Beijing uses SPs to structure layered economic dependencies without necessarily seeking security alignments (Zhongping & Jing, 2014; Mardell, 2024; Seiwert & Soong, 2024).

Another defining feature of SPs is their malleability. Scholars have described this as "constructive ambiguity," which allows states to cooperate without locking themselves into a shared strategic vision (Hoffmann, 1995; Jegen & Mérand, 2014; Haukkala, 2021). Some SPs, such as the 2024 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Russia and North Korea, even include mutual defense clauses. However, those commitments might serve more as signaling tools than as binding security guarantees, especially given the ambiguous dynamics of Moscow-Pyongyang relations (Naumenko & Saltanov, 2024, pp. 113-115).

Furthermore, not all SPs carry equal strategic weight. Some remain purely symbolic, functioning as diplomatic tools to boost regional or global status (Pan & Michalski, 2019; Haukkala, 2021) or as a trust-building measure to boost bilateral ties despite lingering tensions. Nevertheless, many provide a platform for sustained interaction, enabling cooperation across different domains, either formally or informally (Snyder, 1997; Wilkins, 2012). In the defense and security domains specifically, SPs facilitate recurring defense coordination, intelligence sharing, arms transfers, joint exercises, and military-to-military engagements.

In addition, from an international law perspective, the legal enforceability of SPs remains ambiguous, as it is not clear to what extent they represent legally binding agreements akin to treaties or simply ad hoc non-binding agreements akin to Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs). It places them in a legally ambiguous territory, existing somewhere between strictly legally binding agreements and non legally-binding agreements (Posner & Goldsmith, 2003).

This article contributes to the growing literature on SPs by addressing their inner ambiguity and conceptual fluidity. It introduces a dynamic taxonomy designed to capture the evolving nature of SPs and to distinguish between their forms and trajectories. This taxonomic approach aligns with recent scholarly calls to move beyond binary distinctions and toward more flexible, phase-based typologies of international partnerships (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019; Pesu & Iso-Markku, 2024).

Hyper-Transactionalism, Semi-Alliance and Strategic Intent

What ultimately characterizes SPs, despite their versatility, is their positioning along a continuum between one-off transactions and treaty-bound alliances, as well as their potential to evolve in either direction (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019; Lanoszka, 2022; Omidi, 2025).

Transactional relationships are characterized by short-term, issue-based, and compartmentalized cooperation, meaning collaboration in one area does not necessarily translate into broader alignment (Stokes, 2018; Bashirov & Yilmaz, 2020). On the opposite end, alliances-in-the-making involve deepening security cooperation and institutionalization, even if they do not yet constitute full alliances.

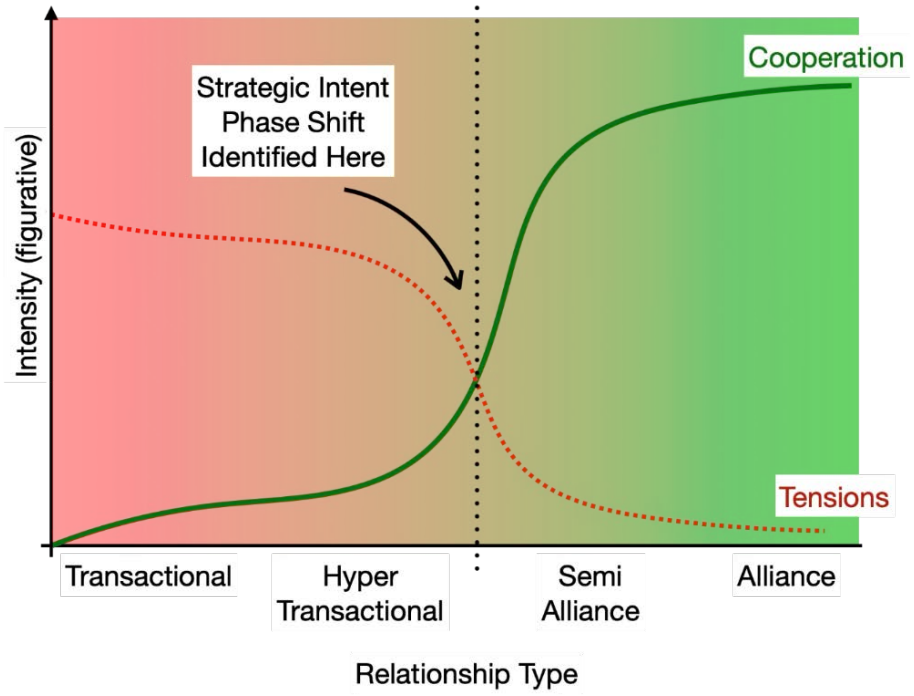
Between these two extremes, we identify two intermediary stages. The first is "hyper-transactionalism," an advanced form of transactionalism in which states engage in broad, multi-domain cooperation while actively minimizing policy divergences to sustain the relationship over time. The second is "semi-alliance," which—though similarly based on extensive cooperation— also introduces a mutually shared intent to institutionalize and formalize the partnership. While the term strategic partnership is often treated as a generic category, it in fact encompasses these two distinct forms of alignment. Hyper-transactionalism reflects the pragmatic, instrumental dimension of SPs: cooperation is wide-ranging but remains non-binding and opportunistic. Semi-alliance, in contrast, represents the aspirational and structured dimension of SPs: although not yet alliances, these partnerships express a shared commitment to deepening, formalizing, and potentially codifying long-term strategic alignment.

Although these two forms of strategic partnership—hyper-transactionalism and semi-alliance—may appear closely related, they are in fact qualitatively distinct in both nature and purpose. We identify *strategic intent* as the critical inflection point that separates them. Defined here as the mutual commitment to deepen, formalize, and institutionalize cooperation over time, strategic intent captures the transition from flexible, pragmatic arrangements to more structured and enduring alignments—potentially codifying a long-term strategic relationship. It thus functions as a conceptual "cliff," marking a discontinuity in the trajectory of the partnership and distinguishing between ad hoc coordination and a semi-alliance that approximates an alliance-in-the-making (Figure 2). Strategic intent is not always explicit or symmetrical. It may be inferred from patterns of behavior such as repeated upgrades, expanded institutional mechanisms, or long-term risk-sharing, and its expression can vary significantly between partners. Identifying intent in real time is particularly challenging. It often becomes fully visible only in retrospect, once a partnership has either solidified

or broken down. To address this difficulty, we propose treating *strategic intent* not as a static declaration, but as a *phase shift*—an observable change in behavior that signals a move toward long-term alignment. These changes may include sustained friction reduction, cost-sharing under domestic and/or international pressure, or the creation of irreversible dependencies. By identifying these inflection points, our framework offers a practical way to assess strategic intent as it emerges, rather than only after the fact.

While difficult to measure directly, the presence—or absence—of strategic intent remains a key indicator of a partnership's trajectory. Hyper-transactional relationships, even when broad in scope, tend to remain flexible and opportunistic, avoiding commitments that bind futures together. Semi-alliances, by contrast, reflect a deliberate effort to align long-term interests and institutionalize shared strategic purpose (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Strategic Intent as a Change of Phase



Economic vs. Security Orientation

A complementary differentiation is the partnership's primary functional domain — whether economic or security-oriented. This dimension serves as an important additional criterion for characterizing, analyzing, and comparing strategic

partnerships. Economically oriented partnerships emphasize trade, investment, infrastructure development, and energy cooperation (Pan & Michalski, 2019; Fulton, 2019). By contrast, security-oriented partnerships focus on defense collaboration, arms transfers, and operational coordination (Notte & Lamson, 2024; Waller et al., 2025). Russia's partnerships with Iran illustrate this security-driven orientation, characterized by joint military operations, arms sales, and growing strategic coordination.

While some partnerships remain predominantly economic or security-focused, this functional orientation is not static. In many cases, it evolves over time—especially as relationships deepen. Partnerships that advance toward semi-alliance or alliance often display increasing integration across both economic and security domains (Table 1). China's evolving relationships with Iran and Egypt exemplify this trajectory, where economic investments initially dominate but gradually lay the groundwork for broader defense cooperation (Table 3, p. 80). In this sense, balanced or dual-track partnerships become more common as strategic intent strengthens, making functional orientation a dynamic indicator rather than a fixed trait.

Table 1: Differentiating Interstate Alignments by Strategic Intent and Functional Orientation

	Transactional Relationship	**Hyper-Transactional Relationship**	**Semi-Alliance**	**Alliance**
Strategic Intent	No	No	Yes Towards formalized commitment	Yes Established, deep commitment
Functional Orientation	Domain specific, ad hoc	Multiple domains, with a dominant driver	*Dual-domain integration (security and economic)*	*Dual-domain integration (security and economic)*

Russia's strategic partnerships in MENA

Russia's strategic partnerships in MENA largely fall within the hyper-transactional and security-oriented quadrant of our framework, reflecting a preference for security cooperation and flexible relationships over alliance commitment. The Kremlin explicitly distinguishes between strategic partnerships (*strategicheskoe partniorstvo*) and alliance-level relations (*soyuznicheskie otnoshenia*), viewing SPs as intermediate forms of alignment (Mikhaylenko, 2023). Notably, Russia has formalized only a limited number of official SPs across MENA: much of its

discourse on SPs remains rhetorical, with few partnerships exhibiting meaningful institutionalization and structured collaboration (Table 2).[3]

Table 2 :Russia's SPs in MENA[4]

Country	Level	Year Signed	Air and Space Cooperation
Algeria	Enhanced Strategic Partnership	2001- Strategic Partnership Agreement 2023- upgraded to an Enhanced Strategic Partnership.	2002 – 2014- Procured, S-300PMU-2, Buk-M2, Tor-M2, and Pantsir-S1, as well as upgraded SA-2, SA-3, SA-6, SA-8, and S-125 Pechora. 2020 – Procured 3 Russian MiG-29Ms. 2021 – Procured 2 Russian MiG-29M2s. 2023- Procured 2 Russian Be-200ES amphibious aircraft. 2025 – Satellite footage reveals Su-35 presence at Oum Bouaghi airbase. – Confirms acquisition of Su-57 fighters (deliveries are scheduled to begin in late 2025).
Egypt	Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Cooperation Agreement	2018 – entered into force in 2021	2014 – Launch of EgyptSat-2 satellite with Russian assistance. 2015 – Signed a contract for 46 Ka-52K helicopters. 2017-2019 – Deliveries of the Ka-52Ks. 2017 – Deliver of MiG-29M2s, Ka-52s, and S-300VMs to Egypt. 2025 – Cancels Su-35 deal with Russia (announced the cancellation in 2022). Acquired in unspecified years: 2 Mi-24s, 24 Mi-17V-5s, and 44 Mi-8Ts, ZSU-23-4s, Tor-M1Es, Buk-M2Es, and S-300VMs air defense systems.

3 Informal cooperation with the UAE and Oman (via a 2018 declaration and the GCC-Russia dialogue, respectively) has not culminated in official SP agreements (World Trade Center Moscow, 2024; Galeev, 2025). Saudi Arabia exemplifies a pragmatic alignment with Russia through the OPEC+ mechanism, without formalizing a strategic partnership.

4 Most data are extracted from Jane's open-source defense intelligence 2001 – 2024 and are listed as references for Table 2, p. 88

Country	Level	Year Signed	Air and Space Cooperation
Iran	Strategic Partnership – Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2001- "Treaty on the Basic Elements of Relations and the Principles of Cooperation" 2025- "Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Russia and Iran"	***Russia to Iran:*** Unspecified years: Deliver of IL-76 aircraft (total delivered 15, in service 5 according to Janes, last updated in July 2024). – 2005 – Launch of Sina-1 satellite with Russian assistance. – Since 2022-2023 – Russia has shared with Iran captured Western technologies with Iran, as well as electronic warfare and space capabilities, based on cumulative Syria and Ukraine experience. – 2022 – Launch of Khayyam satellite with Russian assistance. – 2023 – Procurement of 2 Yak-130 jet trainers – 2024 – Launch of Pars-1, Kowsar, and Hodhod satellites from Russian air space. – 2025- Launch of Nahid-2 with Russian assistance. Iranian sources report the purchase of Su-35 fighter jets. ***Iran to Russia:*** Since 2022 – Supply of Mohajer-6, Shahed-129/191, Shahed-131/136 (Geran-1/2), Shahed-238, and Shahed-107 UAVs. Ongoing negotiations for full supply of Iranian ballistic missiles: Ababil CRBMs, Fateh-110 (300-km range) SRBMs, and Zolfaghar (700-km range) SRBMs.

Country	Level	Year Signed	Air and Space Cooperation
Morocco	Strategic Partnership	2002 – Signature of a Strategic Partnership. Upgraded in 2016 to a "Declaration for the Deepening of the Strategic Partnership".	Mostly declarative in nature. Limited air or space cooperation to date; civilian engagement primarily in energy, fisheries, and medical sectors.
UAE	Strategic Partnership	2018	2017 – Attempts to procure Russian Su-35s. 2019 – Signed a contract with Russia to upgrade Pantsir S-1s procured in 2000. According to the 2018 declaration the strategic partnership concentrates mainly on economic and trade cooperation with a focus on bilateral energy interactions

Russia – Iran

Among these partnerships, the Russia-Iran strategic partnership most clearly exemplifies structured "hyper-transactionalism" particularly through intensified cooperation in the air and space domains, through still devoid (at the time of writing) of any conspicuous strategic intent to evolve into a durable alliance.

Originally formalized in 2001 and officially upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) in 2025, the Russia-Iran strategic partnership has enabled expanding defense cooperation, with particularly consequential mutual assistance in the air domain and Russia's support to Iran's space capability development. This encompasses arms transfers, satellite launches, coordinated operations in Syria (until 2024), joint electronic warfare development as well as joint development and production of UAVs (Table 2; Feldman & Rakov, 2021; Waller et al., 2025; Notte & Lamson, 2024). For Russia this represents an unprecedented development, whereby it has for the first time relied on a foreign supplier to compensate for conventional capability shortfalls during wartime.

Yet the deepening of the Russia-Iran relationship has not been driven by the formal SP framework. Rather it is rooted in mutual geopolitical isolation from the West—reflected in their status as the two most heavily sanctioned states—

and from Russia's acute operational needs in Ukraine following the collapse of its initial offensive in summer 2022 and a severe shortage of ammunition. What began in the 1990s as a patron-client relationship has matured into a more pragmatic and integrated partnership, driven by parallel geopolitical marginalization and a shared need to counter Western pressure (Grajewski, 2024). In this context, the 2025 CSP did not mark a substantive "upgrade" of the relationship but rather served to formalize existing cooperation and to signal the seriousness of the Russia-Iran rapprochement (Smagin, 2025). The timing of the upgrade—just days before President Trump's second inauguration in January 2025—further underscores its function as a diplomatic signal of both parties' intent to deepen their alignment (Rakov, 2025).

Despite its expansion in both quantity and quality, the Russia–Iran relationship continues to exhibit the features of a "hyper-transactional" partnership, rather than those of a semi-alliance. While the two countries have broadened their cooperation—including in the energy and infrastructure sectors, such as nuclear power stations and plans for the North–South transport corridor—the relationship remains largely conditional, ad hoc, and constrained by each side's broader strategic calculations and external commitments. The 2025 comprehensive strategic agreement provides a framework for deepening bilateral ties, particularly in the economic sphere, but it does not include mutual defense clauses or any binding security commitments. Article 3, for instance, contains only a pledge not to assist the other party's adversaries in the event of conflict—falling short of an obligation to provide support.[5] Furthermore, Russia's continued reluctance to deliver advanced air defense systems (such as the S-400) or fighter jets (such as the Su-35) to Iran, even after the April and October 2024 Israeli strikes and the June 2025 IAF Operation "Rising Lion", signals a deliberate Russian effort to avoid crossing thresholds that might compromise Moscow's ties with third parties or escalate regional instability.

In fact, the Kremlin's caution in the Iranian case contrasts with its deeper, albeit less militarized, engagements with Gulf states such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia—where strategic alignment, especially in the economic and energy spheres, may be equally or more consequential in practice. This restraint—alongside moments of tension and mutual recrimination, notably after the failure to preserve the Assad regime in late 2024—underscores the structural limitations

5 "In the event that either Contracting Party is subject to aggression, the other Contracting Party shall not provide any military or other assistance to the aggressor which would contribute to the continued aggression, and shall help to ensure that the differences that have arisen are settled on the basis of the United Nations Charter and other applicable rules of international law." In Treaty on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation, January 17, 2025.

of the Russia-Iran partnership. Thus, the current configuration still lacks the strategic intent and binding commitments characteristic of a semi-alliance.[6] .

Russia – Egypt

Russia's 2018 comprehensive strategic partnership (CSP) with Egypt offers another prominent example of hyper-transactionalism. This partnership, underpinned by Cairo's goal of external diversification and Moscow's need to maintain its regional Middle Eastern engagement after Crimea's annexation in 2014, reflects a long-standing historical trajectory of military and economic collaboration. Egypt's procurement of S-300V4 air defense systems, MiG-29M fighters, and Ka-52 helicopters tailored for Mistral-class ships reflects the expansion of security cooperation in the air domain (Table 2). Space collaboration has also advanced through satellite projects and launch agreements (Berman & Albo, 2020; Hamzawy & Ji, 2024).

In addition to security objectives, the partnership has also served Russia's interest in projecting power across the Eastern Mediterranean, securing access to critical infrastructure in the Suez Canal zone, and expanding its economic footprint through cooperation on nuclear energy, grain exports, and the development of a joint free trade zone in Port Sudan. Despite the expanding agenda, the relationship has not resulted in joint institutional mechanisms or a formalized strategic vision, thereby reinforcing its categorization as hyper-transactional. The lack of deep commitment in this partnership is illustrated by the following example. In January 2022, Egypt declared its cancellation of its planned purchase of Russian Su-35 fighter jets—originally agreed in 2018 and officially enacted in 2025—due to concerns over the aircraft's radar and electronic warfare systems, and fears of U.S. sanctions under the CAATSA framework (Malyasov, 2022).

Russia – Syria

The case of Russia's relationship with Syria offers a useful comparative lens. On the one hand, Moscow demonstrated strategic commitment to the Assad regime by launching and managing an extensive air campaign beginning in 2015. On the other, the gradual erosion of that commitment in the years preceding the regime's collapse in December 2024 illustrates how Russia's partnerships—even when operationally robust—can remain conditional, reversible, and shaped by shifting geopolitical trade-offs. This precedent is instructive not only for

6 The reality is nuanced and multilayered, though. Although the Russia-Iran CSP does not include a mutual defense clause—primarily due to Iranian reluctance to become entangled in a protracted, Russia-led war—Russia has covertly continued to provide Iran with air defense systems, intelligence sharing, and technical assistance, particularly in response to the Israeli strikes on Iran in October 2024 (Grajewski, 2025).

assessing the limits of the Russia–Iran relationship, but also for understanding a broader structural feature of Russia's regional engagement: even increased military cooperation does not necessarily signal durable commitment.

Russia's SPs in MENA – Summary

Taken together, Russia's SPs in MENA reveal a consistent pattern: structured yet non-committal cooperation, all of which spans across multiple sectors but with a salient defense cooperation component in the air and space domains (Table 2). While the security dimension seems the most salient, these partnerships are also shaped by economic considerations. Arms sales, nuclear energy exports, energy agreements contribute to the transactional calculus and has offered Russia important revenue streams. In parallel, these SPs support Moscow's broader geopolitical strategy of projecting influence and contesting Western dominance by cultivating pressure leverages in the Eastern Mediterranean. Accordingly, Russia's engagement in MENA remains firmly within the hyper-transactional, security-oriented quadrant of our framework and does not demonstrate strategic intent toward alliance-level commitment.

China's strategic partnerships in MENA

China's SPs in MENA reflect a markedly different mode of engagement from that of Russia. Characterized by an emphasis on economic infrastructure and long-term investment (J. Fulton, personal communication, January 12, 2025), China's SPs exhibit a clear economic orientation. Extensive research on China's global partnerships highlights how Beijing leverages SPs to create layered economic dependencies without necessarily pursuing formal security alignments (Zhongping & Jing, 2014; Mardell, 2024; Seiwert & Soong, 2024).

Unlike Russia's more selective SP engagements, China has pursued a region-wide strategic outreach, establishing formal partnerships with nearly every MENA country except Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen (Table 3).

Table 3: China's SPs with MENA Countries[7]

Country	Level	Year Signed	Air and Space Cooperation
Algeria	Strategic Cooperation Agreement	2022	2017- Alcomsat-1 launched with Chinese assistance. 2023 – Procured 2 Chinese Wing Loong UAVs and 5 CH-5 UAVs.
Bahrain	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2024	Global MoU with China National Space Administration (CNSA).
Cyprus	Strategic Partnership	2021	Cooperation mainly through BRI: economy, trade, transport, and exchanges.
Egypt	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2014	2023 – MisrSat-2 launch. 2025 – "Eagles of Civilization" air exercise with China. Procurement of Wing Loong Is (unspecified year).
Iran	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2016 – Declared 2021- Signed (25-year period)	Procured in an undisclosed year 22 Chinese FT-7Ns. Alleged missile and space tech support. 2015 – Agreement between SaIran and Chinese aerospace firms granted Iran access to BeiDou-2 Navigation Satellite System. 2021: Iran became one of only two foreign states with full BeiDou-2 access (alongside Pakistan); integrated into missiles, UAVs, and military platforms, enhancing precision-strike capabilities.
Iraq	Strategic Partnership	2015	BRI-related cooperation in energy, infrastructure, and reconstruction.
Israel	Innovative Comprehensive Partnership	2017	Mainly civilian BRI projects. Post-October 7 tension has slowed momentum.
Jordan	Strategic Partnership	2015	Mainly civilian BRI projects, in particular trade, bilateral visits, cooperations, and infrastructure. Purchased Chinese UAVs (2015), resold (2019) due to quality concerns.
Kuwait	Strategic Partnership	2018	BRI-related cooperation in infrastructure, economy, and law enforcement.

7 Most data are extracted from Jane's open-source defense intelligence from 2001 to 2024 and are listed as references for Table 3, p. 89.

Country	Level	Year Signed	Air and Space Cooperation
Libya	Strategic Partnership	2024	2024 – Wing Loong UAV shipment intercepted in Italy, reportedly bound for the LNA.
Morocco	Strategic Partnership	2016	2020- Procured 4 Wing Loong Is. 2023- Procured 3 Wing Loong IIs.
Oman	Strategic Partnership	2018	2024- First satellite launched with Chinese assistance.
Qatar	Strategic Partnership	2014	Focused on BRI trade, energy, tourism, and international cooperation.
Saudi Arabia	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2022	Procured CH-4Bs and Wing Loong Is (undisclosed date). 2017- Procured 15 Wing Loong IIs. Space and BeiDou cooperation underway.
Tunisia	Strategic Partnership	2024	2018 – BeiDou satellite navigation office opened.
Turkey	Strategic Cooperation	2010	2012 – Gokturk-2 satellite launched with Chinese support.
United Arab Emirates	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2018	2011 – Procured 18 Wing Loong Is. 2017 – Procured10 Wing Loong IIs. 2023 & 2024 – Joint military exercises in Xinjiang.

As shown in Table 3, China employs a three-tiered classification (general partnership, strategic partnership, and comprehensive strategic partnership) to signal differentiated levels of engagement. Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, and the UAE hold CSP status, typically reflecting broad, multidimensional cooperation. Other states, including Israel, Jordan, and Morocco, maintain mid-level SPs, while general partnerships remain low-commitment and symbolic.

Another distinguishing feature of China's SP diplomacy is its asymmetrical pace. While the China–Iran CSP was announced in early 2016, its operationalization proceeded slowly—likely due to Beijing's cautious stance following the inauguration of U.S. President Donald Trump. In contrast, China moved swiftly to sign and implement SPs with Saudi Arabia (2016) and the United Arab Emirates (2018), institutionalizing these ties through bilateral steering committees (Fulton, 2022).

What characterizes Beijing's SP diplomacy in MENA is its highly declarative and deliberately opaque character. In contrast to other regional SPs—most notably the Russian-Iranian CSP, whose full text was made public and contains 47 detailed articles—China and its MENA partners have released only vague statements regarding the establishment of their partnerships. These declarations typically emphasize general rapprochement in the economic domain, particularly in infrastructure and trade.

Beijing's approach thus prioritizes trade, infrastructure, energy, and technological cooperation—advancing economic entanglement while avoiding security entrapment (Seiwert & Soong, 2024; Mardell, 2024). The UAE is illustrative: under a CSP, it has become a central hub in China's Belt and Road Initiative and a key collaborator in space technology, yet it has refrained from entering a defense alignment. Similarly, Egypt's CSP, signed in 2014, has yielded major infrastructure projects and the 2023 launch of MisrSat-2 without evolving into a partnership in the security realm (Fainberg, Fadlon, & Schwarz, 2023). While China has conducted limited arms transfers and engaged in dual-use technology cooperation with Iran, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia, these activities remain secondary to its broader economic objectives. Even the 2021 CSP with Iran—though politically consequential—has not translated into a formal security alignment (Fulton, 2019; Fulton, 2022).

Nevertheless, China's expansive and malleable SP diplomacy has served as a vehicle—albeit cautiously—for limited and covert defense cooperation. This cooperation has often occurred through dual-use technological transfers and discreet security assistance that carries strategic implications for regional power balances. China's pattern of dual-use technology transfers enables partner countries to develop military capabilities—particularly in UAVs, space and cyber—that are critical to future battlefields (Table 2). For example, China has capitalized on the niche unmanned systems market, where it has held a comparative advantage over the United States and Russia (Seiwert & Soong, 2024), with Chinese drones and anti-drone systems exported to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan.[8]

8 Chinese UAV platforms have been especially valued in the Gulf for their compatibility with existing Western systems, avoiding interoperability challenges. For example, Saudi and Emirati air forces have used Chinese drones primarily for surveillance and reconnaissance without disrupting operations alongside U.S. technologies.

Discussion

Russia's vs. China's SP Diplomacy in MENA

Our findings indicate that Russia's and China's respective SP approaches in the MENA region display significant contrasts.

Russia faces significant resource limitations compared to China, as it possesses a narrower array of goods and services to offer MENA countries. Its offerings are largely confined to military equipment transfers, energy and nuclear cooperation, and select infrastructure projects. These constraints have become more acute since the onset of the war in Ukraine, potentially intensifying Moscow's reliance on defense and security cooperation. Such partnerships are seen by regional actors as a means of gaining a technological or strategic edge, while for Russia, they represent a cost-effective way to maximize influence through limited investment. Russia's strategic engagements in MENA remain highly transactional and non-committal. While Moscow participates in broader multilateral frameworks such as OPEC+, which it helped establish in 2016 alongside Saudi Arabia, this cooperation is primarily aimed at managing global energy markets rather than building durable regional alignments. Russia's partnerships in MENA are few in number and largely bilateral, focused on short- to mid-term but geopolitically vital objectives: maintaining oil revenues, securing military footholds, sustaining arms exports, and circumventing Western sanctions. These objectives are pursued without a clear intent to formalize or institutionalize the partnerships, reflecting Moscow's reluctance to overextend and its aim to preserve a flexible and minimally encumbered regional presence.

By contrast, China's SPs in MENA currently follow an economy-driven model designed for sustained and multi-layered engagement over time and across the region (involving almost all the regional actors), prioritizing trade, infrastructure, and technological cooperation while avoiding security commitments. This approach is facilitated by several key factors: the region's interest in economic diversification, China's sustained demand for energy resources, and its willingness to engage in partnerships at favorable terms in exchange for deepening economic interdependence or fostering long-term local dependencies. At the bilateral level, China's SPs remain highly transactional, economic-oriented, and structured for the long term, reinforcing economic entanglement without formal security alignments.

At the multilateral level, China's engagements are forming a broader web of interdependent relationships that may, over time, consolidate into a larger, multi-layered strategic foothold. This emerging configuration is underpinned by a dual strategic intent. From a top-down perspective, it aligns with China's global strategy: expanding international influence, advancing the "national rejuvenation"

agenda, and promoting the Belt and Road Initiative—an expansive economic program that functions as a form of "globalised capital accumulation abroad" (Hairong & Sautman, 2023). Simultaneously, a bottom-up dynamic emerges through China's cumulative and adaptive engagement, whereby incremental economic footholds and diffuse political influence coalesce into a durable long-term regional presence. Although not necessarily aimed at immediate alliance formation, this dual-pronged strategy reflects a flexible yet resilient architecture of SPs capable of evolving into deeper political and security commitments.

Space Domain

The space domain occupies a central role in both Russia's and China's strategic partnership diplomacy in MENA. For both powers, collaboration in space technology serves as a means of cultivating asymmetry in their relationships with regional partners. Given the limited number of global actors possessing advanced and autonomous space capabilities, Russia and China can leverage their scientific expertise and technological assets to maintain a hierarchical dynamic.

For MENA states, engaging in space cooperation with these powers is seen as a strategic opportunity: a gateway to acquiring technological and strategic advantage and, ultimately, regional empowerment. The ability to launch satellites, develop space-based surveillance, or participate in dual-use technology programs is not merely a matter of national prestige but is increasingly perceived as a tangible instrument for enhancing strategic standing in the region.

The growing prominence of space cooperation within SPs reveals multifaceted implications. Space-focused SPs in the MENA region contribute to the strengthening and acceleration of three interrelated trends: democratization, commercialization, and miniaturization of the space domain in the region. The democratization of space is evident in the growing number of small and middle powers in the region launching their first satellites with Russian or Chinese assistance (Tables 1 and 2).

The proliferation of SPs in space is also accelerating the commercialization of space in the MENA region, largely driven by the involvement of private Chinese firms operating under Beijing's Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) approach. Although these firms present themselves as commercial entities, they are closely aligned with the Chinese Communist Party's national defense objectives and operate within a grey regulatory zone. Their expertise in launch systems, surveillance satellites, and communication platforms enables them to support both the civilian and military needs of regional partners, raising concerns about the growing militarization of space programs under the guise of civilian cooperation.

It is important to emphasize that while defense-related cooperation in outer space is tightly regulated under the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, civilian cooperation remains loosely (if at all) regulated. This regulatory gap allows for the proliferation of dual-use capabilities and the development of ostensibly civilian technologies with direct military applications.

In addition, a particularly consequential development concerns the trend toward miniaturization (Altaf, 2025). This trend facilitates the transfer of advanced technologies from the space sector into adjacent military domains. The miniaturization of components originally developed for satellites has direct applications for missile systems, drones, high-precision weapons and loitering munitions. Advances in propulsion, guidance, autonomy through software and AI, and communication (initially conceived for large space platforms) are increasingly being integrated into air and missile systems. High-efficiency propulsion used in space launch vehicles can enhance the range and maneuverability of ballistic missiles and drones; moreover, compact navigation and targeting systems developed for micro-satellites can improve the precision and lethality of air-delivered munitions. In this context, space cooperation in the framework of SPs or CSPs not only strengthens national space capabilities in MENA but also serves as a driver of innovation, knowledge diffusion, and operational upgrade in the air and missile realms.

Air Domain

The enhancement of air power is increasingly viewed as a strategic imperative—critical for achieving deterrence, shaping adversary calculus, and enabling the integration of multi-domain military capabilities, especially in the wake of the war in Ukraine. In an era when high-intensity warfare has returned to the global stage, and air superiority is once again seen as decisive for operational success, the ability or failure to supply advanced air capabilities serves as a revealing indicator of the strength of a strategic partnership. Where SPs provide significant aerial capabilities, they become not just symbolic gestures but functional enablers of deterrence and power projection.

Russia's cooperation in the air domain builds on previous military-technical collaboration with the Soviet Union. Algeria, Egypt, and Iran have pursued strategic partnerships with Russia in the air domain to diversify and modernize their capabilities in manned aircraft, integrated air defense systems, high-end aerial warfare platforms, and key denial and jamming technologies (Table 2). By contrast, Russia's reluctance to provide Iran with Su-35 or S-400 systems—even after repeated Israeli and U.S. strikes in 2024–2025—exposed the limits of the Russia-Iran SP and signaled a failure, in Iranian eyes, of mutual commitment.

Similarly, MENA actors have pursued cooperation with China in the air domain, focused on UAV technology and the integration of precision-strike technologies. Over the past decade, China has supplied a wide range of drones—including Wing Loong I/II, CH-4B, and CH-5 models—to Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Morocco. Iran's access to the BeiDou-2 satellite navigation system—granted in 2021—has further enhanced its precision-strike capabilities across missiles and UAVs, deepening the integration of space-derived targeting into its air doctrine.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that SPs centered on air and space are becoming a critical vector for the development and proliferation of advanced space and air capabilities in MENA. They contribute to a broader transformation of the regional security landscape by reducing technological barriers, enabling and accelerating indigenous capability development, and fostering the integration of dual-use technologies across domains.

Hyper-Transactionalism Matters

The proposed taxonomy provides a differentiation model that helps avoid two key analytical pitfalls: first, the dismissal of SPs as merely hyper-transactional relationships without significant strategic and operational consequences (the "transactional bias") and, second, its opposite bias, attributing to SPs a level of strategic robustness they do not possess (the "alliance bias"). Both biases can lead to miscalculations in strategic assessments and policy planning.

Overestimating adversarial partnerships is a common analytical pitfall in Western strategic circles, particularly among conservative circles which often frame anti-Western alignments (Russia-Iran, Russia-China, or Russia-North Korea) as components of a unified "anti-Western axis." This Western "mirror-imaging" perspective risks overlooking critical tensions and contradictions within these relationships. Understanding the conditions under which a hyper-transactional relationship may transition into an alliance, or revert to a looser arrangement, enables a more precise evaluation of its durability and strategic impact.

Conversely, underestimating SPs due to their hyper-transactional nature can also be misleading. Even lacking the strategic intent to form enduring bonds, hyper-transactional relationships may have the same strategic and operational effects an alliance would and can consequentially alter regional balances of power at both the strategic and operational levels. They may facilitate military-technical collaboration, supply critical capabilities, or disrupt adversary planning despite their lack of long-term institutionalization or mutual commitment in the defense and security realms.

Conclusion

Strategic partnerships in MENA are no longer peripheral or symbolic diplomatic constructs—they are emerging as pivotal vectors through which great powers exert influence, while regional actors pursue strategic hedging. The proposed dynamic taxonomy moves beyond the generic use of the term "strategic partnership," offering a two-dimensional framework that distinguishes SPs by their strategic intent (distinguishes between hyper-transactionalism to semi-alliance) and their functional orientation (economic vs. security). By applying this taxonomy to Russian and Chinese engagements in the region—particularly in the air and space domains—we demonstrate that SPs have become powerful accelerators of technological and military capability diffusion.

The growing salience of air and space cooperation within SPs reflects both structural and strategic shifts. For great powers, these domains provide asymmetric leverage in contested environments; for MENA states, they offer unprecedented access to advanced capabilities that would otherwise take years to develop indigenously. While hyper-transactional partnerships may lack long-term institutionalization or mutual defense commitments, they can produce operational outcomes that rival those of formal alliances. Conversely, the emergence of semi-alliances—though rarer—signals an intent to translate functional cooperation into enduring security bonds.

Policymakers and analysts must therefore resist both the tendency to dismiss SPs as hollow diplomatic gestures and the impulse to equate them with alliances. Instead, they should evaluate each partnership on its own terms, using strategic intent and domain-specific cooperation as key indicators of depth, durability, and potential disruption. As the geopolitical contest for MENA intensifies and the boundaries between civilian and military technologies continue to blur, air and space cooperation within SPs will likely shape the region's security architecture in increasingly consequential ways.

The article's framework may also serve as a foundation for future research on U.S. strategic partnerships in the MENA region—such as those with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or the UAE—which, despite their longevity and air cooperation depth, often fall outside formal alliance structures. Applying the proposed taxonomy to these cases could yield valuable comparative insights and further clarify the spectrum between transactionalism, partnership, and alliance in the evolving global order.

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