**The Turkish Navy**

The Turkish Navy is ranked 11th in the world in the 2022 Global Naval Powers Ranking, which reflects its ambitious naval force buildup plan and other components included in the index.

The Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israel 2020–2021 featured a comprehensive article on the strengthening of the Turkish Navy.[[1]](#footnote-1) Therefore, the current review will only address developments and changes that have taken place in the past year in relation to what was noted in the aforementioned article, particularly those related to Turkey’s role in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, with an emphasis on the maritime arena.

***The Impact of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on Turkish Policy***

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has made Turkey a central player in the conflict, despite its lack of direct involvement. During the early days of the war, Turkey was praised by both Ukraine and its Western allies for supporting Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. Turkey provided armed drones to Ukraine and closed the Bosporus and Dardanelles Straits to the passage of warships from the warring parties. By the end of July 2022, its diplomatic efforts to ease the grain blockade from the Black Sea ports were welcomed, and an agreement was reached under the auspices of the UN with the consent of the parties involved.

Turkey closed the Black Sea to Ukrainian and Russian warships by invoking the 1936 Montreux Convention, which grants Turkey the right to prevent warships belonging to warring parties (except those returning to their home ports) from using the Dardanelles and Bosporus Straits located within its territory. As a result, after Ukrainian forces sank the Russian Black Sea Fleet’s flagship, the Moskva, in mid-April, Russia was not able to send reinforcements from its other fleets to the Black Sea to bolster its forces (in retrospect, not carrying out the operation might have saved the Russian fleet from losing additional vessels). In addition to blocking the straits, Turkey also advised its NATO allies not to enter the Black Sea during the war in Ukraine to prevent the conflict from escalating. Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar stated that this would maintain the status quo in the Black Sea and mitigate the possibility of any potential rivalry.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The agreement for renewing grain exports from Ukraine through the Black Sea, in which Turkey played a significant role during the ongoing war, was described by UN Secretary-General António Guterres at the signing ceremony in Istanbul on July 27th, 2022, as a “beacon of hope” in a world desperately in need of it. The UN plan, which also paves the way for Russian food and fertilizer to reach global markets, will help stabilize food prices that are rising worldwide and avert a famine affecting millions. The initiative specifically allows for significant volumes of commercial food exports from three key Ukrainian ports in the Black Sea: Odessa, Chernomorsk and Yuzhny. At the agreement signing ceremony, the UN Secretary-General also announced the establishment of a joint coordination center (JCC) in Istanbul, which will monitor the implementation of the agreement and include representatives from Ukraine, Russia, and Turkey. The JCC will track the movement of commercial vessels to ensure compliance with the agreement, focusing exclusively on the export of commercial grains in bulk and related food products. In addition, the JCC will ensure on-site control and monitoring of cargoes from Ukrainian ports and report on shipments made under the initiative. It was agreed that Ukrainian vessels would lead the cargo ships into the international waters of the Black Sea while avoiding mined areas, and the cargo ships would then proceed toward the Bosporus Strait along a corridor agreed upon by the parties. Ships sailing to and from Ukrainian ports will be inspected by organized JCC teams.[[3]](#footnote-3)

***The Discovery of Gas Reserves in the Black Sea***

In mid-June 2022, Turkey began laying the first pipes for the subsea pipeline network that will transport natural gas from the Sakarya gas field, which is located 93 miles off the Turkish coast in the Black Sea, to the port of Filyos, about 400 km (250 miles) east of Istanbul. It is estimated that by mid-2023, Turkey will be able to start flowing gas, enabling it to reduce its dependence on energy imports. In 2021, 45% of the gas used in Turkey came from Russia, and the rest from Iran and Azerbaijan. Turkey currently has three drilling ships, the Fatih, Kanuni, and Yavuz, which operate in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Figure 25:** Turkey’s economic waters in the Black Sea and the Sakarya gas field[[5]](#footnote-5)

As time goes by, it seems that Turkey’s activity in the eastern Mediterranean Sea is increasingly drawing from an ambitious legal and geopolitical doctrine, based on a claim of sovereignty over a vast maritime area, referred to as the “Blue Homeland,” or Mavi Vatan in Turkish. The strategy was developed by several admirals who were aware of the strategic importance of the maritime domain and gained traction among Turkey’s military officials, political and economic establishment, and intellectual elites. The strategy was adopted by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, allowing him to establish his alliance with nationalist movements while providing a legal framework for his activity in Libya. The adoption of the strategy has led, among other things, to the growing importance of the Turkish Naval Forces (Türk Deniz Kuvvetleri), which have become increasingly involved in implementing this policy and its derivatives, including through their involvement in conflicts in the eastern Mediterranean Sea.

***Turkey-Israel Relations***

The Mavi Marmara incident in 2010 and the subsequent deterioration of diplomatic relations between the two countries also affected the relationship between the Turkish Navy and the Israeli Navy. Following efforts to restore relations to their previous state, the relationship between the two navies has also improved, although it has not returned (and is unlikely to return) to the way it was in the mid-1990s.

In mid-August 2022, Turkey and Israel announced the normalization of relations and the return of their ambassadors. Israel’s Prime Minister at the time, Yair Lapid, stated that renewing relations with Turkey was an important asset for regional stability and an important economic development for Israeli citizens. The announcement was preceded by a conversation between Director-General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, Alon Ushpiz, and Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister, Sedat Onal, in which they agreed on the restoration of full diplomatic relations between Israel and Turkey and the return of both nations’ ambassadors and consuls-general. In early September 2022, the Turkish frigate TCG Kemalreis entered the port of Haifa with a crew of 203. The frigate arrived together with US destroyer USS Forrest Sherman (DDG-98) on a NATO patrol mission and stayed at the port of Haifa for two days. During the visit, an incident occurred in which the soldiers and officers of the Turkish frigate were not allowed to go ashore because the Turkish embassy did not inform the Israeli Foreign Ministry about the arrival ahead of time and the crew did not have the required permits. This was undoubtedly an exceptional visit, as nothing of the kind had taken place in the past 12 years. However, in order to lower expectations, the IDF spokesperson said that the warship was making a stopover as part of “NATO activity.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

The prevailing assessment is that the warming of relations between Israel and Turkey is driven by Turkish President Erdogan’s desire to emerge from the economic crisis before the presidential elections scheduled to take place in less than a year. Evidence of this can be found in Erdogan’s attempts to improve relations with other regional rivals. One of his successes was the reconciliation with the wealthy Gulf States, with whom he had conflicts in the past due to his support for Qatar. In November 2021, the ruler of the United Arab Emirates, Mohammed bin Zayed, visited Ankara after years of cold relations with Turkey. The result of the visit was the announcement of the establishment of an Emirati investment fund in Turkey worth $10 billion, among other things for investment in Turkish infrastructure companies and the energy sector. In April 2022, Erdogan visited Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, despite tensions between the two countries over the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, which took place on Turkish soil. Erdogan hopes that as a result of the visit, the Saudis will also open their wallets and direct massive investment funds toward Turkey.[[7]](#footnote-7)

On October 27th, 2022, then Defense Minister Benny Gantz met in Ankara with Turkish President Erdogan and Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar. In a joint statement, Akar and Gantz announced that they had agreed to renew security ties. It should be noted that in recent years, as relations between Turkey and Israel deteriorated, official security ties between the countries were almost completely severed and conducted primarily in secret and between relatively low-ranking officials. Lately, secret meetings have been taking place between Israeli and Turkish security officials aimed at renewing relations, the maturation of which led to Gantz’s visit to Ankara.[[8]](#footnote-8)

***Turkey-Libya Relations***

In recent years, Turkey, alongside Qatar, opened a military front supporting Fayez Sarraj’s recognized Libyan government against renegade leader Khalifa Haftar, who is backed by Russia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and France. This ambitious front put Turkey on a potential collision course with Russia and could have also led to a confrontation with NATO, of which Turkey is a member. A possible shift in Turkey’s position towards the regime in Libya can be seen in the visit of Aquila Saleh, head of the House of Representatives in eastern Libya, in the summer of 2022. The visit signaled a clear change in policy toward the civil conflict in Libya two years after Ankara provided military support to the government it had established in Tripoli against eastern forces led by Khalifa Hiftar. Aquila Saleh, who heads the eastern-based House of Representatives and is considered an ally of Hifter despite discord between the two, met with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and parliament speaker Mustafa Sentop during a visit to Ankara on August 1st-2nd. Abdullah al-Lafi, vice chair of Libya’s Presidential Council, accompanied him on the trip. Saleh has been known for his rejection of two crucial agreements that the Government of National Accord signed with Turkey in 2019. The first allowed for the deployment of Turkish troops to train and support Libyan forces, while the second delineated maritime borders between the two countries, effectively allowing Turkey to declare Turkish economic waters between Crete and Cyprus as it conducts gas exploration in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. The invitation of Saleh to Turkey and his visit to Ankara stemmed from the changing dynamics in Libya, forcing the sides to adjust their positions. However, Turkey’s reconciliation with the eastern part of Libya does not mean it has withdrawn its support for the existing government in Tripoli and it retains the option of influencing the entity elected in Libya’s free elections (date currently undetermined) which the United States is pushing to hold. In this context, after a meeting with Libya’s foreign minister in early August 2022, US Ambassador to Tripoli Richard Norland said that the US position is that “free and fair elections are the only means to establishing a national government with legitimacy.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

In late September 2022, Turkey’s naval forces conducted a joint military exercise with their Libyan counterparts off the coast of the North African country in the central Mediterranean Sea. According to the Turkish news agency, Anadolu, the Turkish missile frigate TCG Gaziantep and the Libyan amphibious landing ship Ibn Ouf-132 participated in the maneuvers under the command of Turkish naval forces. This highlights the importance Turkey attaches to security cooperation with Libya.[[10]](#footnote-10)

***Defense Expenditure and Enhancement of the Turkish Navy***

Turkey’s defense expenditure is planned to grow between 2019 and 2025, reflecting the priority the Turkish government is giving to its defense industry, and particularly its maritime defense industry. Turkey’s defense spending reached a peak in the 2020 fiscal year, amounting to $14.8 billion - a 6.5% increase from the previous year. This trend is expected to continue and reach $17.5 billion on defense spending by 2025.

Following the sanctions imposed by the United States on Turkey due to its purchase of the S-400 air defense system from Russia, local solutions were prioritized in the Turkish Navy’s force buildup plan. As part of this, priority was also given to the Turkish defense industry to support the navy and upgrade its vessels and weapon systems. The reliance on the development of the Turkish industry is intended to turn the Turkish Navy into a maritime power comparable in size to those of Britain and France. This is reflected in the construction of the amphibious assault ship and helicopter carrier Anadolu (TCG Anadolu), which began in 2016. The Andalou underwent sea trials in 2021 and is expected to enter service in 2022.[[11]](#footnote-11) It is a multipurpose amphibious assault ship that can to some extent be defined as a light aircraft carrier, and is designed to head a Turkish task force in the Aegean Sea, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea, as well as in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. The ship can carry drones and will also serve as a command center, protected by autonomous USVs. It is estimated that the Anadolu will be able to carry up to 50 Baykar TB-3 and MIUS drones. The Turkish Navy’s ability to rely on command and control capabilities (including satellite links, communication via drones, and fixed and mobile command centers) allows it to use vessels such as the Anadolu as a command and control center.[[12]](#footnote-12) It should be noted that the Turkish Navy has been the main victim of the sanctions imposed by the United States following Turkey’s acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense systems. The navy plans to operate F-35B aircraft (with vertical takeoff and landing capabilities) from the Anadolu, effectively turning it into a light aircraft carrier. During the negotiations for Sweden and Finland’s admission to NATO, Turkey unsuccessfully attempted to condition its agreement on approval of the deal.

The Turkish Navy is expected to acquire two large landing ships (LSTs) in the next two years, which will actually be the largest vessels of this type in the world. In the next decade, I-class frigates, Ada-class corvettes, and TF-2000-class destroyers are expected to be built and delivered to the Turkish Navy for operation. The construction plan for the Istanbul-class frigates includes constructing four frigates to replace the older Yavuz-class frigates. The first ship was delivered to the Turkish Navy in early 2021 and the remaining three ships will be supplied by the mid-2020s. The Golcuk naval shipyard is also expected to complete the construction of six 214-series submarines (Piri Reis-class) by the middle of the current decade. Mid-life refurbishment plans for the Barbaros-class frigates and the 209-series submarines built in German shipyards (Preveze-class Submarines) are expected to enable them to remain in service until the mid-2030s. The Turkish Navy’s development plan also includes a prototype of a domestically manufactured unmanned surface vessel (ULAQ AUSV).

In April 2022, Turkey held one of the largest naval exercises in its modern history. During the Blue Homeland 2022 exercise, more than 122 warships, fighter jets, aerial refueling aircraft, reconnaissance aircraft, ATAK helicopters, drones, naval commando units, and teams specializing in chemical, biological, radioactive, and nuclear warfare were deployed. The exercise took place in the Aegean Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Black Sea simultaneously, and in the final stage of the exercise, from April 18th to the 21st, 72 ships visited ports surrounding Turkey. Unlike in previous Blue Homeland exercises, warships in the eastern Mediterranean Sea conducted firing drills and regular exercises in maritime areas that would not lead to confrontations with Greece, instead of carrying out military operations based on the Blue Homeland doctrine, which, in a maximalist approach, defines Turkey’s maritime jurisdiction borders in the Aegean Sea and the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Some interpret this as Turkey having abandoned its foreign policy of exercising military power in the eastern Mediterranean based on the Blue Homeland doctrine and that it has put the doctrine on hold for now in the eastern Mediterranean.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Turkey, which until the late 1990s was an importer of military vessels and submarines from foreign shipyards and whose surface fleet relied on US Hazard Perry-class frigates, is becoming an exporter of vessels and combat systems, which is helping it advance its international political standing. Recently, the Istanbul shipyard has completed the construction of the first of two MILGEM-class corvettes. In the handover ceremony held in mid-August 2021 at the Istanbul shipyard, which was attended by Turkish President Erdogan and Pakistani President Dr. Arif Alvi, the two leaders noted that these ships “would significantly add to the lethality of Pakistan Navy’s capabilities and contribute in maintaining peace, security and balance of power in the Indian Ocean Region.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The Turkish shipyard is assisting Pakistani shipyards in Karachi to establish a production line where four additional corvettes of this model will be built for the Pakistani Navy. This aspect of cooperation should be seen in the broader context of the deepening relationship between Turkey and Pakistan, which includes addressing the challenges both countries are expected to face following the completion of the US and NATO’s withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The Turkish Navy’s participation in the multinational force operations in the Gulf of Aden and the Persian Gulf: On February 2nd, 2022, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey extended the presence of the Turkish Navy in the Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea, and adjacent seas for one more year. Since 2009, the Turkish Navy has commanded the multinational counter-piracy task force CTF-151 six times and carried out at least 21 deployments in the area to combat piracy. Its ships conduct patrols, intercept ships suspected of piracy/armed robbery, escort and protect merchant ships sailing in the area and assist them in case of pirate/maritime robber attacks, intervene, stop, neutralize, and confiscate any vessels used by pirates/sea robbers using proper force if necessary, and arrest and detain pirates/sea robbers and armed persons in these vessels. The Turkish Navy ships also participate in executing various policing duties, including interrogation and collecting evidence against suspicious vessels.[[15]](#footnote-15)

***Conclusion***

Russia’s campaign in Ukraine may have a geopolitical impact on Turkey’s position in the international system. While dissatisfaction with the West and anti-Western sentiment have facilitated warm relations and cooperation between Russia and Turkey, Russian geopolitical revisionism has almost always pushed Turkey closer to the West, as it poses a direct security threat to Turkey. Historically, the focal point of the Turkish-Russian rivalry was the Black Sea. From the Turkish perspective, Russia’s actions – from the war in Georgia, through the annexation of Crimea, to the invasion of Ukraine – all tilt the balance of power in this region decisively in favor of Russia. While the details and nuances of Russia’s policies in each of these cases may vary, together they point to an unmistakable outcome: Russian revisionism in the post-Soviet space and an aspiration to turn the region into a sphere of Russian domination, which, according to experts, could aggravate Turkey’s threat perception vis-à-vis Moscow.[[16]](#footnote-16) The recent crises expand the common ground between Turkey and the West, although the West’s “geopolitical resurgence” will not change Turkey’s perception of a multipolar world as better serving its interests. Therefore, it is unlikely that Turkey will give up its quest for autonomy in its foreign policy.

Turkish authorities consider the Turkish Navy to be a central tool in the geopolitical game. In recent years it has increased the number of its vessels and enhanced its capabilities and the government infrastructure that allows it to upgrade its capabilities and autonomy in developing advanced domestic-made weaponry. The navy will continue to be part of NATO forces, but will also operate independently in the eastern Mediterranean and Black Seas to protect Turkey’s maritime interests.

**The Egyptian Navy**

According to the 2022 Global Naval Powers Ranking, the Egyptian navy is ranked as the 13th most powerful navy in the world. This reflects Egypt’s desire to become the strongest maritime power in the eastern Mediterranean and Red Seas. In my opinion, the ranking is based on the types and quantity of vessels, neglecting additional factors such as the quality of combat systems, the level of operation, and more. However, it does indicate a clear and undeniable trend, which is that Egypt has been investing significant resources in its navy in recent years, particularly based on an understanding of the important role its navy plays in facing the geopolitical and strategic challenges emerging in the Middle East.

In July 2022, Egypt’s revenues from passage through the Suez Canal for the 2021-2022 fiscal year amounted to $7 billion, compared to $5.8 billion in 2020–2021, representing a 20.7% increase.[[17]](#footnote-17) Alongside the rise in revenues (which were the highest relative contribution to Egypt’s economy), the risk level for navigation, especially in the southern Red Sea near the Bab al-Mandab Strait, has increased due to the actions of the Houthis, the Iranian proxies, emphasizing the importance of the Egyptian navy’s role in this arena. The Mediterranean Sea Fleet (the Northern Fleet) is dedicated to dealing with the growing geopolitical conflicts in the eastern Mediterranean region over maritime zones and hydro-energy resources. Its main mission is to protect Egypt’s economic interests, especially the new gas fields that have been discovered and developed. In addition, the Northern Fleet is trained and equipped to participate in handling the flow of refugees from North Africa to Europe.

***The Egyptian Navy’s Force Buildup***

In the 1980s and 1990s, Egypt began acquiring American weapon systems (and in the case of the Egyptian Navy, Oliver Hazard Perry-class frigates) to replace its primarily Soviet-based arsenal. Now, for political reasons, it has changed direction and begun to diversify its defense procurement, including for the Egyptian Navy, as will be described below. The Egyptian Navy’s ranking as the 13th most powerful in the world in 2022 reflects the impressive force buildup plan it has implemented in recent years and the diverse range of vessels it operates.

Egypt has become one of only five countries in the world to possess Mistral-class amphibious assault ships, which were built for it in France: the Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Anwar Sadat. Ships of this type allow Egypt to carry out amphibious operations far from its territory in the Red Sea (primarily) and in the Mediterranean Sea.

The Egyptian Navy is equipped with Gowind 2500-class frigates, known in Egypt as El-Fateh frigates, which are manufactured by the French shipyard Naval Group Lorient and assembled at the Alexandria shipyard in Egypt. The Alexandria shipyard has begun conducting sea trials for the Gowind-class corvette intended for the Egyptian Navy. The ENS Luxor corvette is the last of the four Gowind-class ships ordered by the Egyptian Navy. It is also the third ship that was built domestically in Egypt, as the ENS El Fateh-class flagship was constructed in France by the Naval Group defense company.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In early August 2021, the fourth Type 209/1400 submarine was delivered to the Egyptian Navy. In early September 2022, the press reported that Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi wanted to purchase up to six Barracuda-class submarines from the French Naval Group, in which the French government holds a 62% stake. These are nuclear-powered submarines and the cost of acquiring six of them is expected to exceed €5 billion. The French government seems to be dragging its feet in responding to Egypt on this matter.[[19]](#footnote-19) Alongside the news about Egypt’s desire to purchase submarines from France, there were reports that the Egyptian Ministry of Military Production (MoMP) is expected to hold talks with ThyssenKrupp, which built the four Type 209 submarines for Egypt, regarding technology transfer and a production agreement for submarines, including the establishment of production lines at one of Egypt’s ports.[[20]](#footnote-20) Regardless of whether the reports are accurate, this demonstrates Egypt’s determination to continue advancing the buildup of its naval forces in general and its submarine fleet in particular, including by establishing production infrastructure in Egypt itself.

Mohammed al-Kenany, head of the Military Studies Unit at the Cairo-based Arab Forum for Analyzing Iranian Policies, explained that Egypt is seeking to expand and develop its submarine fleet in order to maintain its position in the naval balance of power in the region. He added that this was not the final step in arming process, and that since many countries in the region are increasing their underwater capabilities, Egypt will not be satisfied with just four submarines from Germany. According to al-Kenany, this is because Egypt operates two fleets - the Northern Fleet in the Mediterranean Sea and the Southern Fleet in the Red Sea – and due to the increasing challenges and threats to freedom of navigation posed by terrorism and arms smuggling, among other things. In this context, it should be noted that the current contract between Egypt and the German shipyards includes an option to order two additional submarines.

***The Egyptian Navy’s Organization for Its Mission***

In January 2017, Egypt decided to divide its navy into two fleets: the Northern Fleet and the Southern Fleet. The Northern Fleet’s area of operation covers the Mediterranean Sea and its mission is to secure Egypt’s northern and western strategic fronts. The Southern Fleet covers the Suez Canal and the Red Sea area and is charged with securing the eastern and southern fronts. This division has improved the performance and flexibility of several naval commands and provided a new approach to Egypt’s naval force buildup, based on the nature of the operations assigned to each fleet and defined by the geopolitical context of the operational area.[[21]](#footnote-21)

As aforementioned, the Northern Fleet is dedicated to dealing with the growing geopolitical conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean over maritime zones and to protect the energy resources extracted from the sea. Its main mission is to defend Egypt’s economic interests, especially the newly developed gas fields. The Northern Fleet is also in charge of controlling the flow of illegal immigration from North Africa to Europe.

The Southern Fleet deals mostly with deterring the security threats arising from the political instability in Yemen and the Horn of Africa, where Iranian-backed terrorist organizations and militias are continually harassing ships and blocking vital maritime chokepoints. In this sense, the Southern Fleet plays a crucial role in securing international shipping and trade between Asia, Africa and Europe via the Red Sea and the Suez Canal.

The July 3rd Naval Base is expected to play a crucial role in increasing Egypt’s political and military cooperation with Libya, thereby putting an end to Turkish and Russian military interventions there. The participation of Libya’s interim president, al-Menfi, in the opening ceremony of the new base in Gargoub only reinforces this assumption. As far as the senior Egyptian administration is concerned, Libya represents the strategic security depth on Egypt’s western border and the stationing of Turkish soldiers and foreign mercenaries under the separate command of Turkey and Russia on Libyan soil are a source of concern.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The Egyptian Navy utilizes the diplomatic dimension of the naval strategy and conducts joint exercises with various navies without aligning itself with any one of the blocs. In August 2022, NATO’s USS Forrest Sherman, which was the flagship of Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2) at the time, and Spanish Navy ship ESPS Almirante Juan de Borbón visited the port of Alexandria and conducted a passing exercise with the Egyptian Navy ship ENS El Fateh. During the visit, senior commanders from the task force lectured and trained students from the Egyptian Naval War College, presenting various NATO operational concepts, including task group command and control, rules of engagement, mine countermeasure operations, and maritime interdiction.[[23]](#footnote-23)

In the Red Sea arena, the Egyptian Navy took command of Combined Task Force 153 (CTF-153) from the US Navy on December 12th, 2022, during a ceremony in Bahrain, where the multinational task force’s headquarters are located. Capt. Robert Francis of the US Navy, who had led CTF-153 since April 2022, transferred command to Egyptian Navy Rear Adm. Mahmoud Abdelsattar. This marked the first time that Egypt has assumed command of the multinational naval force, in which 34 countries participate and which Egypt joined in 2021. CTF-153 was established by the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet in April to combat smuggling and other illegal activities in the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandab, and Yemeni waters.[[24]](#footnote-24) This is the fourth such grouping under the US-led Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), a multinational maritime security cooperative first established by the United States to patrol Middle Eastern waters in the aftermath of the attacks on September 11th, 2001.

**The Iranian Navy**

The Iranian Navy ranks 18th in the 2022 Global Naval Powers Ranking. Last year, a special chapter written by Shlomo Guetta and Motti Elharar was published in the Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israel examining Iran’s naval force buildup.[[25]](#footnote-25) Additional publications also addressed the activities of the Iranian Navy and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Navy. Therefore, this year we chose not to present an extensive review of this navy, but only to mention notable events that occurred in regard to force buildup and naval activity.

The patrol vessel Shahid Soleimani, which is built with stealth technology, equipped with a vertical missile launch system, and allows for a maritime helicopter to be operated from it, was delivered to the Iranian Navy in the summer of 2022 in a ceremony held in the southern city of Bandar Abbas. The ship is named after the commander of the IRGC’s Quds Force, who was killed in a US drone strike in Baghdad in January 2020. In addition, two Shahid Rouhi missile boats entered active service in the IRGC Navy.

A number of extensively refurbished vessels joined the Iranian Navy’s Southern Fleet in a ceremony held on September 4th. These include two missile-launching boats, a logistics ship, and a light Ghadir-class submarine, which were “restored and refurbished” in Iran. It is important to note that although Iran sometimes exaggerates its maritime achievements and its ability to operate far from Iranian shores, the considerable investments it has made in this sector have yielded significant progress in terms of its regional naval standing and power.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Iranian maritime activity in the Red Sea has continued during the past year. The IRGC’s naval force continued to provide assistance to the Houthi military forces in Yemen, usually by smuggling weapons and components for producing weapons. Some of these shipments were intercepted by coalition forces led by the US Fifth Fleet. At this stage, no activity by IRGC vessels has been detected in the Red Sea, however this is expected to change in the near future with the introduction of the new Qasem Soleimani-class missile corvette into operational service. It is possible that an IRGC naval task force that includes the new corvette and is escorted by one of the mother ships previously converted for use by the IRGC Navy will carry out this mission.

In the past year, the Iranian navy has continued its activities in the Red Sea with task forces that typically included a frigate and an accompanying support/mother ship. Some of these activities involved escorting tankers sailing to the Suez Canal to transport fuel to Syria.

On August 30th, US CENTCOM announced that on August 29th, US Fifth Fleet forces prevented an IRGC support vessel in the Persian Gulf from towing an American USV engaged in a patrol and imagery collection mission. Iran released the ship hours later, after explaining the principles of “navigation safety and security” to US forces in the area. In early September, just days after the IRGC attempted to seize American USVs in the Persian Gulf belonging to the Fifth Fleet, the Iranian navy tried to repeat the action and seize two more American USVs operating in the southern Red Sea. Two destroyers belonging to the Fifth Fleet, the USS Nitze and USS Delbert D. Black, deployed MH-60 Sea Hawk helicopters that hovered near the Iranian towing vessel until the Iranians released the USVs.[[27]](#footnote-27)

On November 15th, 2022, the Pacific Zircon oil tanker, which was sailing under the Liberian flag, operated by a Singaporean company, and partially owned by Israeli businessman Idan Ofer, was attacked by an armed Iranian drone about 240 km off the coast of Oman. According to a statement from the US Central Command in the Middle East, the drone was identified as a version of the Iranian-made Shahed. Iran denied involvement in the attack.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Between December 21st and 27th, 2022, the Iranian, Russian, and Chinese Navies conducted the joint military exercise Sea-2022 in waters east of the sea area from Zhoushan to Taizhou, in East China’s Zhejiang Province. This is a normal arrangement based on the annual military cooperation plan between the Chinese and Russian militaries. However, on the background of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the fact that the military exercise area is the closest it has been to Taiwan in the past decade, the misunderstandings and misinterpretations arising from this joint military exercise were greater than in previous years and have increased the risk of a flare-up.[[29]](#footnote-29)

**The Royal Saudi Navy**

The Royal Saudi Navy was founded in 1960 and began to grow significantly with the assistance of the United States, alongside the Imperial Iranian Navy. Following the Iranian Revolution, Saudi Arabia launched an additional expansion plan for its navy, which was carried out with French support. Additional vessels were acquired from the United Kingdom and France during the 1980s and 1990s. In 1980, the Royal Saudi Navy’s main command, control, and communication centers were built by an American contractor. The Royal Saudi Navy ranks 30th in the world in the Global Naval Powers Ranking for 2022. Based on the ambitious force buildup plan it is leading and the resources invested in it, it will probably rank higher by the end of the decade.

The Royal Saudi Navy operates from several bases along 2,500 kilometers (1,600 miles) of the Saudi coastline, in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, and has two fleets. The Eastern Fleet operates in the Persian Gulf from the King Abdulaziz Naval Base in Jubail, and the Western Fleet operates in the Red Sea from the King Faisal Naval Base in Jeddah (Al-Qadima military port). Each fleet has full military capabilities, including warships, support vessels, administrative and technical support, a naval air fleet, marines, and special security units.

Amid regional tensions, Saudi Arabia is vigorously advancing a multi-billion-dollar modernization process for its navy, which includes five new Avante 2200 corvettes being built in the Bay of Cadiz, Spain. These vessels are part of a multi-year expansion plan. The 104-meter-long corvettes are equipped with air defense systems, anti-submarine warfare, and surface combat capabilities. The first corvette in the series was delivered to the Royal Saudi Navy at the end of March 2022, in a ceremony held at the La Carraca Naval Base facilities in San Fernando, Cadiz.[[30]](#footnote-30) While the new warships are primarily intended for surveillance and control operations, Saudi Arabia sees their arrival as an opportunity for technology transfer that may contribute to the Vision 2030 initiative. As part of the technology transfer, the country has developed its first naval combat system, the Hazem. The system is already integrated into the first corvette, the Al Jubail, which includes a combat management system, integrated communication, combat system integration, integrated platform management, a fire control system, and a training system.[[31]](#footnote-31)

In mid-September 2022, the ship arrived at its home port in Jeddah, located on the Red Sea. The new warships are expected to join the Kingdom’s Western Fleet to guard approximately 1,800 kilometers (1,118 miles) of its coastline in the Red Sea and secure freedom of navigation in the Gulf of Aden. The Gulf of Aden is strategically important to Saudi Arabia, as it borders Yemen, where Iran-backed Houthis are based and have recently launched ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) against strategic sites in Saudi Arabia, causing damage to important infrastructure. The Saudis aim to address both the direct attacks carried out by the Houthis on commercial and civilian support ships and the activities of Somali organizations involved in piracy, human trafficking, and weapons and drugs smuggling. These Somali vessels have previously collaborated with the Houthis in transporting African fighters to join them in Yemen. The Houthi rebels have previously launched repeated attacks using boats laden with explosives in the southern Red Sea, including an attack against an oil tanker at the Jeddah port in December 2020. Arms smuggling to Yemen is another threat to Saudi security, and some of it is carried out through routes in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Saudi Arabia currently operates three multi-purpose anti-air warfare Al Riyadh F3000S-class frigates, which were built by the French shipyard DCN for the Royal Saudi Navy and ordered in 2002. These frigates are capable of operating in open seas and played a key role during the anti-Houthi effort in 2015, known as Operation Decisive Storm. From May 29th to June 4th, 2022, a joint naval exercise, RED WAVE-5, implemented and led by the Royal Saudi Naval Forces with the participation of the Red Sea coastal countries of Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen in addition to the Royal Saudi Land Forces, Royal Saudi Air Forces and Saudi Border Guard. The commander of the Saudi Western Fleet, Adm. Yahya bin Mohammed Asiri, who led the exercise, said it was aimed at “enhancing military cooperation, unifying of concepts, raising the combat readiness and exchange of experience that would contribute to upgrading the capabilities to protect the seas and regional and international water passages and guarantee maritime navigation in the Red Sea.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

In late September 2022, the Saudi Western Fleet began operating for the first time with the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) in the Red Sea. This activity signifies an expanded partnership between the multinational coalition and the Royal Saudi Navy. The Western Fleet, which is concentrated in the Red Sea, now contributes to the IMSC missions in the Bab al-Mandeb Strait area, and the HMS Al Jubail corvette conducts patrols as part of this framework. The Saudi Eastern Fleet has been operating with the IMSC since 2019, when Saudi Arabia joined the nine-member coalition.[[33]](#footnote-33)

***The Establishment of a Maritime Technological Infrastructure in Saudi Arabia***

Part of the joint technology transfer between Saudi Arabia and Spain led to the production of Saudi Arabia’s first maritime combat system, the Hazem, which is now integrated in the first corvette, the Al Jubail. As mentioned, it includes a combat management system, integrated communication, combat system integration, integrated platform management, a fire control system, and a training system. The Saudis believe local production can help develop the Saudi manufacturing sector and create employment for Saudi citizens, which are two central goals of the Saudi Vision 2030 policy.

In 2018, Saudi Arabia signed a contract with the American company Lockheed Martin for four multi-mission surface combatants (MMSC) based on the US Navy’s Freedom-class littoral combat ship, which encountered complex problems when it was entered into operational service in the US Navy. The first steel-cutting ceremony for the MMSC 1 ship was held on October 24th, 2019, and the ceremony for the second ship, the MMSC 2, was held on January 28th, 2021. These vessels are expected to serve in the Saudi Eastern Fleet.

**Conclusion**

The year 2022 brought with it surprises and changes regarding global developments in general and maritime aspects in particular. The world, which had begun to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, found itself tangled in a web of international crises and challenges that affect its ability to recover from the pandemic. These include the competition between the United States and China, which has intensified, Russia’s unexpected invasion of Ukraine and its impact on European countries, and the unfolding climate crisis, which demands attention and the formation of an international plan to address it.

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been ongoing since February 2022, although its intensity has decreased with the arrival of winter. However, its consequences are more far-reaching than they may appear on the surface and include, among other things, Russia’s attempt to position itself against NATO countries using new rules of engagement, including the implied threat of using nuclear weapons under certain circumstances.

Global trade, which has been steadily growing in recent years, is expected to lose momentum in the second half of 2022 and remain without significant growth in 2023, as numerous shocks are weighing down the global economy. Economists from the World Trade Organization (WTO) noted that global trade volumes in goods would increase in 2022, but that the growth would be very moderate in 2023 compared to 2022.

In the maritime domain, the United States is continuing to focus its efforts on creating a coalition of countries against China, as it has done through the trilateral alliance with the United Kingdom and Australia (AUKUS) and the establishment of regional mechanisms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between Australia, India, and Japan (the Quad). The United States is conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea aimed against China’s exaggerated maritime claims regarding its territorial waters in the region.

In the eastern Mediterranean Sea, the search for additional gas fields will continue, facilitated by the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), which aims to contribute to the stability and prosperity of the region’s population by coordinating policies among exporting, consuming, and transit countries. However, conflicts over maritime border demarcation among the region’s countries, and primarily between Turkey on one side, and Greece and Cyprus on the other, could lead to a deterioration of relations between the rivals and potentially escalate to a military conflict.

The Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Persian Gulf will continue to be a focal point of conflict between Iran and its proxies and the moderate countries in the region, particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia. In the ongoing shadow war between Iran and Israel, Iran will continue to use the tactic of targeting merchant ships that have any affiliation to Israel sailing in the area whenever it feels the need to respond to Israeli actions against it and its proxies in other areas, such as Syria and Lebanon.

Climate change and global warming are clearly evident in the Middle East, which is currently considered one of the most significant global warming hotspots. These changes will become more frequent and intense and will be accompanied by events such as droughts, storms, heatwaves, and rising sea levels. As climate change intensifies, dangerous weather events are becoming more frequent or severe. The maritime domain’s sensitivity to these changes is significant, requiring countries to develop plans to cope with these challenges, including placing responsibility for implementing them on the naval forces and coastal guards of the various countries.

Given that this situation evaluation pertains to Israel’s maritime domain, its final chapter will present the gathered insights regarding all the aspects covered in this report, examine their implications for Israel, and translate them into recommendations for the Israeli government and various governmental entities responsible for addressing these areas.

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