

THE CONCEPT OF DETERRENCE IN CURRENT RELATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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ABSTRACT

Deterrence has long been present in international politics, but it became particularly significant during the Cold War due to its role in great power relations. In contemporary relations, it is necessary to adapt old narratives to reflect new and complex realities, as the challenges posed by the modern world complicate the formulation of deterrence strategies. Nevertheless, the goal of deterrence remains to convince the opponent, through various means and methods, that the costs of taking action far outweigh the potential benefits it could achieve. The authors analyse the concept of deterrence using multiple theories in the domain of theoretical considerations, among other things, and its application in the current relations in the Middle East. After discussing the general theoretical viewpoints, the concept of deterrence is analysed further through the case of Israel and Iran and the relationship between the United States and the Houthis, a non-state actor, to elucidate its specifics. Besides historical circumstances, the analysis also examines current events to understand how the most significant actors have applied the concept of deterrence. Recent events between Iran and Israel, particularly in the political and military context, confirm the relevance of the deterrence concept in international relations.

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Introduction

The concept of deterrence is most commonly used to gain a better understanding of the nuclear arms race and crises in international relations. However, the concept is significantly broader since deterrence involves the use of threats by one party in an attempt to convince another party to refrain from certain actions. Typically, deterrence is the practice of discouraging or restraining a single state from undertaking undesirable actions, such as armed aggression. That includes efforts to stop or prevent actions, in contrast to the closely related but distinct concept of “coercion”, which attempts to force participants to take specific actions. Deterrent threats have a dual intent: immediate deterrence is directed against a direct attack on the defender, while extended deterrence aims to prevent attacks on allies (Mazarr 2018, 2). Although immediate and extended deterrence are usually considered separately, these concepts are interconnected. There are two main types of deterrence: general and immediate. Immediate deterrence pertains to the relations between opposing states, where one side is seriously contemplating an attack while the other threatens retaliation to prevent that attack from occurring (Morgan 1977, 28). Immediate deterrence relates to crises and the attempts of political leaders to avert further escalation of the crisis and its eventual transition into armed conflict. Additionally, general deterrence refers to adversaries maintaining armed forces to regulate their relations, even when neither side is close to launching an attack (Morgan 2003, 86). Despite various theoretical considerations and viewpoints, “deterrence in its broadest sense signifies convincing an opponent not to initiate a specific action because the perceived benefits do not justify the assessed costs and risks” (Mearsheimer 1983, 14).

In general terms, successful deterrence implies that the challenger backs down after the defender threatens retaliation, while failure of immediate deterrence leads to the challenger attacking despite the defender’s threats. Nevertheless, deterrence through the use of threats (explicit or implicit) by one side to convince the other to maintain the status quo is a general phenomenon not confined to any specific time or place. According to classical deterrence theory, there is a challenger (seeking to change the status quo) and a defender aiming to deter the challenge. In this context, the challenger decides whether to pursue cooperation (maintaining the status quo) or to launch an attack. The defender also has two options: acceptance (of the status quo) or rejection, leading to conflict. In a typical deterrence model, mutual confrontation or reconciliation often rests on “shaky ground” (Quackenbush 2011, 741-746).

The decision to initiate armed conflict is not based solely on military factors and the assessment of a military’s ability to achieve its objectives; non-military aspects also play a role in deterrence, which must be considered. If a successful

military action can result in considerable political gains, then a number of specific factors impacting decisions need to be examined. Decision-makers or political leaders must consider risks and costs that are not associated with the military dimension. That includes an objective assessment of potential reactions from allies and adversaries, consideration of various aspects of international law, possible responses in international organisations like the UN, and an evaluation of the impact on the national economy (Morgan 2003, 44).

Although deterrence has been a foreign policy tool since ancient times, it remains subject to numerous limitations. By its nature, it requires a common foundation for particular actions and the continuous examination of circumstances, which change constantly through effective communication channels. This emphasises how important it is for a state to find a balance between employing adaptive deterrence and maintaining its political identity. For deterrence to succeed, policymakers must consider the need for qualified and tailored approaches with the internal and external behaviour models specific to particular participants (Filippidou 2020, 16).

In this context, the theory of perfect deterrence is particularly compelling because it posits that the credibility of a state's threat depends on its preference between withdrawal and conflict, explaining the dynamics of deterrence in an extended concept (massive retaliation and flexible response). This theory is based on the assumption that states have different inclinations; some are more prone to withdraw rather than fight, while others prefer to engage and thus possess credible threats. It highlights two dimensions of capability as essential conditions for deterring threats. The physical aspect relates to the ability to carry out a threat. Notably, threats that can be neutralised by a preemptive strike from the other side lack deterrent capability, indicating a low probability of successful deterrence if the challenger has first-strike capability. The second dimension, the psychological aspect of capability, pertains to the cost assessment by a potential attacker. If the challenger perceives that the burdens of conflict are less daunting than the costs of inaction, deterrence fails. An example cited is US deterrence regarding North Vietnam, where the issue was not disbelief in the threats but rather that the North was more inclined to accept punishment than to cease support for the war in the South (Zagare and Kilgour 2004, xx, 290-291).

For successful deterrence, the credibility of the threat is particularly significant and linked to reciprocity in the relations between two states. States tend to exchange friendship for friendship and vice versa (as in "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth"). From the perspective of this theory, establishing reciprocity is equated with strengthening credibility, which increases the likelihood of cooperation. Generally, the success of deterrence depends on actors' assessments of the current situation, their capabilities, threats, and the

interaction of their credentials. Deterrence will not always succeed if the necessary capabilities are lacking. Higher chances of success exist when the current situation is highly valued, when threats are credible, or when the challenger lacks credibility. In cases of direct deterrence, where the challenger and defender are identified, the success of deterrence is nearly assured, provided that the defender's retaliatory threat is very convincing (Zagare & Kilgour 2004, 296-297, 301).

On the other hand, theoretical considerations take into account the possibility that deterrence may not work in all circumstances. Specifically, with some adversaries, it is unlikely that the means available to a state will deter them. When such an adversary arises, only containment or eradication may be viable options. In this context, understanding the culture, interests, and goals of the opposing side has the potential to reduce the number of adversaries that cannot be deterred (Lowther 2012, 3).

Deterrence has become increasingly complex, partly due to the presence of multiple actors, including non-state actors, which reflects the need to strengthen the communication aspect of deterrence. Given the more intricate deterrence environment, there is a risk of failure when a participant does not understand the opposing side. This lack of understanding can be linked to cultural, religious, political, or historical differences between actors. It may also occur if an actor is not fully aware of the opponent's capabilities or approaches. In any case, the likelihood of deterrence failure is heightened (Prior 2018, 66).

When deterrence can be applied, policymakers must determine the appropriate instruments to secure effective communication of the desired state of affairs (*status quo*) and ensure it is accepted by the target audience. Additionally, the success of deterrence depends on the ability to understand the opponents' behaviour and their possible counteractions. Without such an adequate assessment, deterrence will remain at the theoretical level without a specific connection to real conditions. Furthermore, while it may not be possible to deter all non-state actors, it may be feasible to deter many. Only by understanding non-state actors can the US and its allies target what they most desire. Although it is often emphasised that the Islamic fundamentalists are fearless, they strive to achieve tangible worldly goals (Robinson, Crenshaw, and Jenkins 2006, 2010-2018).

Possessing a value system that differs from Western norms does not render an opponent irrational. That requires increased knowledge and understanding of the context by the United States and its allies if deterrence is to be successful. A desirable approach is to shape the situation on the ground without resorting to the threats characteristic of deterrence interactions. In this sense, states should develop coherent and comprehensive approaches applicable to the

global security environment, strategically utilising all instruments of power to achieve desired objectives. In such a context, states would focus on and adapt their strategies according to the characteristics of the threat (Lowther 2012, 4).

That represents an opportunity to develop an effective set of deterrence policies encompassing all aspects of diplomacy, armed forces, and the economy. To the extent that rebels, terrorists, and other groups pose challenges to national and international security, they operate outside the accepted laws of conflict; however, widespread claims that non-state actors are irrational by nature are entirely misguided (Dutter and Seliktar 2007, 430-438).

Changing Israel-Iran Relations and Concepts of Deterrence

Since its inception, Israeli foreign policy has consistently sought to break the wall of political isolation in the region, pursuing recognition from regional actors. Such efforts led to Turkey's recognition of Israel and the establishment of diplomatic relations at the end of 1949. In the early 1950s, Iran also recognised Israel. However, relations between the two countries became more complex, particularly after Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh accused Israel of colluding with the US and Britain in their involvement in the 1953 coup against the Iranian government. During this period, the authority of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was particularly pronounced, as he maintained close ties with Israel and a pro-Western foreign policy. The two countries maintained strategic relations, with Israel interested in establishing ties with Iran and other nations as part of its strategy to counter the Arab enemy. Conversely, Iran shared a common interest with Israel in resisting the spread of pan-Arabism and harbouring resentment towards Arab states over nationalist ambitions, manifested in the Arab struggle to change the name of the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Gulf (Rezaei and Cohen 2014, 443-445).

For Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, relations with Israel were indispensable and served as a basis for US support. However, after the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, there was a transformation in Iranian foreign policy. That marked the beginning of a new rivalry in the region and a new phase in Israel-Iran relations. Additionally, domestically, the Iranian Revolution signified the start of a dramatic phase in the relationship between politics and Islam, as it overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty, rejected the monarchy as un-Islamic, and established the Islamic Republic, which continues to this day (Brown 2000, 161).

Khomeini's revolution was based on the following main principles: spreading the Islamic revolution against "deviants" in the region and intensifying the civilisational conflict with the "infidel" West; opposing hegemonic control over the Islamic and Arab world, especially in the oil-rich Persian Gulf; and committing to the destruction of Israel (Shapira & Diker, 2007: 33-34). After the Islamic

Revolution, the strategic interests of the two states intersected during the 1980s. For example, the Iran-Iraq War, in which Iran engaged in open conflict with Iraq, provided Israel with an opportunity to arm Islamic Iran against Iraq. Between 1981 and 1983, Israel sold Iran weapons worth \$500 million, the majority of which were paid for by oil (The Israel-Iran Connection 1987, 210-212).

From these dealings, which marked a new phase of support for Iraq, Israel aimed to improve its relationship with that country, assessing that Iraq was a significant military power and a greater threat while anticipating that the new regime in Iran would reconsider its relationship with Israel and recognise the benefits of common interest. During the Cold War, Iran, a major oil supplier and a key player in controlling access to the Persian Gulf, was an important ally of the US. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the defeat of Saddam Hussein in 1991 eliminated two common threats that had sustained strong mutual strategic interests for over three decades (Parsi 2005, 247).

Starting in the 1990s, Iran's perception of threat increasingly focused on the US and Israel, clearly indicating the end of another phase in the strategic relations between the two states. Initiated by the Oslo Accords and the rapprochement between Israel and Arab states, the development of the Arab-Israeli conflict also influenced the interstate relations between Israel and Iran. Iran has long viewed the Palestinian issue as primarily concerning the Palestinians and Arab countries, so the Iranian regime has never adopted hostile rhetoric towards Israel or engaged in a direct confrontation. Conversely, due to various events in the regional and international spheres, then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin concluded that a peace formula with Arab states would better serve Israel's long-term security than the rising Islamic fundamentalism in Iran. Israel's response is often explained by the concept of threat balance (Maher 2020, 229). With Iraq defeated and Arab countries pursuing diplomacy, Iran emerged as the only remaining state in the region with offensive capabilities that could threaten Israel. Consequently, this perspective of Iran as an undeniable threat, given its growing offensive capabilities, became a common rhetoric among all Israeli governments formed after Rabin (Parsi 2005, 249).

Iran lacks a fully developed doctrine of conventional deterrence (Grinberg 2013, 1). However, two events were particularly significant in shaping its approach to deterrence. The Islamic Revolution not only resulted in a fundamental regime change but also redefined its enemies, namely the US and Israel. The second event was the Iran-Iraq War, which highlighted Iran's failure to deter Iraq and underscored the need to create various tools and mechanisms for deterring new enemies (Kam 2021, 22).

Learning from the lessons of the aforementioned conflict, Iran began developing missile systems that now include a variety of ranges, which it aims

to expand. Iran was astonished by Iraq's missile capabilities to strike civilian targets, which had a devastating effect on Iranian morale. Simultaneously, the Iranian air force, with its outdated aircraft, struggled to contend with the air forces of the US and Israel (Kittrie, Bowman, and Taleblu 2024, 21). Consequently, the Iranian missile system became the primary means of deterrence against major adversaries, including the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and terrorist organisations operating against Iran. In addition to ballistic missiles, Iran enhanced its arsenal with various types of missiles, including cruise missiles and anti-ship missiles. Along with continuous attempts to increase missile accuracy for strikes on strategic and military targets, this enhanced Iran's ability to attack drones used in September 2019 attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure and boats in the Gulf. Iran's missile arsenal also includes the missile stockpiles of Hezbollah, the rocket arsenals of Iraqi Shiite militias, and the arsenal of the Houthi rebels in Yemen (Kam 2021, 22-23).

However, Iran is aware that the US possesses significant military, technological, and economic superiority and that it lacks sufficient capacity to deter American power. Therefore, it seeks to build military capabilities that will deter and convince the US that, despite its military superiority, the cost of any potential attack will be high. To this end, Iran employs several deterrence tools against the US and its allies in the Middle East, contributing to a form of mutual deterrence between the two states. For instance, during the attacks on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019, Iran showcased its proxy network as part of its military power and deterrence strategy, indicating the potential for military intervention in other countries, as seen in Syria, and influencing regimes in states with Shiite populations (Safi and Wearden 2019).

Iran's deterrence space includes the Persian Gulf and Iraq, where the US forces are heavily present. Therefore, its strategic goal is to reduce this presence and deter the US. Given the strategic advantage of the US, Iran is particularly cautious regarding American red lines, avoiding actions that could lead to escalation and large-scale conflict. Among the limited steps Iran has taken or could take against the US, a few are noteworthy. Iran has interfered with the free passage of oil tankers and vessels from certain countries, including the United States. However, Iran has never closed the Persian Gulf (Nilufer 2012).

In these situations, Iran had to be cautious and moderate, fearing a US response. In this context, continuous low-level provocations may significantly contribute to the escalation of conflicts. In other words, managing risks and ongoing calculations at the operational level are crucial for achieving strategic goals. Additionally, Iran's rhetoric directed at its adversaries emphasises that its extensive missile system has a range of 2,000 kilometres, covering the entire Middle East, including all US military targets in the region. Iran has continuously threatened to attack American ships because they jeopardise its security in the

Gulf. Moreover, Iran has highlighted that it possesses sea-to-sea missiles with a range of 700 kilometres and, in the event of armed conflict, it could sink US aircraft carriers (Shabad 2014).

Generally, Iran aims to achieve deterrence in two primary ways: by establishing an adequate nuclear arsenal and using proxies to enhance its strategic interests across the region. Possessing nuclear weapons is an attractive option, as it is a more certain means of deterrence (Bracken 2013, 142-148). Iran's use of proxies throughout the region fosters instability and grants Iran influence over the internal affairs of its neighbours. Driven by its isolation and the perception of being surrounded by threats, Iran's proxy strategy serves multiple purposes. Without significant direct influence, these proxies can impact regional states, leading to instability and an increased number of refugees. Importantly, this approach gives Iran allies throughout the region, many of whom possess significant political or military influence (Badran and Schanzer 2019).

In Israel's defence doctrine, deterrence occupies a key position in the triad (deterrence, early warning, decision) formulated by former Prime Minister Ben Gurion. The primary consideration is Israel's inability to bear the high economic and military costs of maintaining a constant state of hostilities, attrition wars, or a permanent state of high readiness. Effective deterrence aims to relieve Israel of the need to maintain a continuous high level of readiness and military deployment that could exhaust its economy. Additionally, Israel has established a low threshold regarding enemy behaviour that will be deemed provocative enough to warrant an Israeli response, ensuring that the enemy is aware of this threshold and believes in its credibility (Meridor and Eldadi 2019, 11-12).

Israeli deterrence should be tailored to the enemy and based on continuous analyses of opponents' characteristics, capabilities, decision-making processes, and more. For each enemy, deterrence must be contextual and cumulative over time, aiming to preserve the current situation and define the "rules of the game" favourable to Israel. During a crisis, deterrence must be specific and directed at compelling the enemy to act or to refrain from action to prevent further escalation. Effective deterrence requires credible threats, which include the grouping of the Israeli forces demonstrating their capabilities and readiness, psychological operations unequivocally indicating Israel's willingness to take risks, and limited offensive actions signalling readiness to engage and demonstrating to the enemy that they are in a hopeless position. To achieve adequate results, Israel must establish a low threshold regarding enemy behaviour that will be deemed provocative enough to elicit an Israeli response, ensuring that the enemy is aware of this threshold and believes in its credibility. A significant aspect of Israel's deterrence concept is the strategic partnership with the United States, as it provides a broader political and military manoeuvring space in response to aggression, enhances Israel's operational capabilities to inflict damage on its

enemies, and presents the threat of American intervention on Israel's behalf. However, this strategic partnership with the US can also have negative connotations. An example of this is the US intention to engage Iran in the fight against ISIS, which met with disapproval from the Israeli side because it represented a potential strengthening of a regional adversary. This means that any attempt by the US to support the establishment of a regional defence system could undermine Israel's qualitative military advantage and the established deterrence concept (Golov 2016, 91-94).

The Israeli concept of total defence is particularly characterised by the "campaign between wars", based on the understanding that the period of "deterrence renewal" is time-limited, with the possibility of extension if Israel conducts precise and limited operations against strategically valuable targets. This serves to remind the enemy of the extent of potential damage they can expect from escalating the situation and the negative cost-benefit balance of their activities. The "campaign between wars" encompasses routine security operations against Hezbollah, Iran, and its proxies in Syria, as well as Palestinian terrorism, but also addresses threats from countries with which Israel does not share borders (Bar 2020, 332-333).

Israel-Iran Deterrence in Practice

Current events between Israel and Iran are surprising because they diverge completely from the usual direct attacks on each other's territory, and notably, both sides have avoided further escalation. That clearly indicates that the form of their mutual deterrence has been altered, though not entirely transformed. In this particular case, Iran and Israel reached a critical point but have almost certainly realised that catastrophic escalation is not the most likely outcome of inevitable conflicts. For decades, both states have been burdened by a shadow conflict involving assassinations, bombings, cyberattacks, proxy clashes, and more, which can be disputed by its nature (Katz and Hendel 2012, 134-137).

Until April 2024, this conflict encompassed airstrikes, drones, proxy militias, assassinations, and similar tactics. There are many drivers behind this shadowy conflict. However, in recent years, it has evolved into a relationship where Iran and Israel seek to shape each other's behaviour. For Iran, this entails attempting to deter the technologically and militarily superior Israeli armed forces from attacking Iran or effectively neutralising Iranian proxies like Hezbollah in Lebanon. For Israel, before October 7, 2023, this meant a gradual secret escalation designed to diminish Iran's ability to use Israel's deterrence network and convince it of the futility of fighting a state possessing nuclear weapons. However, the dynamics of covert escalation changed after Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023. The ensuing tension escalated, contributing to Israel's decision to carry out an airstrike

on the Iranian consulate in Damascus on April 1, 2024, where two Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps generals were also present.

For Israel, this was an opportunity to destabilise further the leadership of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and simultaneously send a direct message to Iran that such proximity to the Israeli border poses a risk, especially as Israel has continued its comprehensive war in Gaza against Hamas, in which the Iranian side has partially engaged in solidarity. Israel assessed that the military strike, although escalatory, would fit within the framework of its shadow war with Iran and that any potential Iranian retaliation would likely be covert and possibly directed against Israeli diplomatic representations elsewhere (Stratfor 2024a).

On the other hand, Iran did not perceive the Israeli strike in the same way because the consulate is Iranian territory. Moreover, the killing of General Mohammad Reza Zahedi (responsible for coordinating Iran with the Syrian government and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah) represented a political red line. That required preparing a new response against Israel to establish a new and clearer red line. In order to demonstrate to Israel that its military technology can penetrate the ostensibly invincible Israeli air defences and seriously harm military objectives, Iran launched an attack on April 13, 2024, employing a large-scale deployment of drones and ballistic missiles. Implicitly, the attack showed that Iran could expand strikes to Israeli civilian targets with further escalation (McKernan et al. 2024).

Additionally, the action showed that Iran has the political will to dismiss US warnings about regional escalation. Unquestionably, this attack will be remembered since it was the first time Iran has specifically and directly targeted Israeli soil. Following this, on April 19, the Israeli Air Force conducted airstrikes on a radar site associated with an S-300 air defence battery in the vicinity of nuclear facilities in central Iran (Koettl and Triebert 2024).

However, even without diplomatic efforts, shuttle diplomacy, or the adoption of a UN resolution calling for a ceasefire between the conflicting parties, the escalation ended. That was absolutely unexpected. This unequivocally indicates that there was a mutual, silent understanding that any continuation of escalation would mean open war, for which neither side had plans. Iran considered the Israeli attack ineffective, while Israel affirmed that deterrence was restored by its airstrike near Isfahan. From a political perspective, both sides possess narratives for establishing open and more intense conflict but also reasons for finally achieving effective de-escalation and deterrence. By establishing effective deterrence, Israel remained focused on the war in Gaza, which is its national security imperative. It continued its fight against the Palestinian militant group Hamas, as well as preparing for a potential

ground war in Lebanon. However, in a major conflict with Iran, the likelihood of Israel achieving victory is low. Specifically, Israel lacks a land corridor to deploy its ground forces for operations. Although its air forces are advanced, they cannot execute the actions against Iran necessary to eliminate the threat of recurring ballistic missile strikes and drone attacks. On the other hand, Iran can threaten Israel only with missiles, drones, and proxies. An unlimited war with Israel would, among other things, have consequences for military and civilian infrastructure, which Tehran, burdened by sanctions, cannot afford. Any eventual expansion of the conflict could also finally draw the US to Israel's side. These limitations have always represented an upper boundary for escalation, but there has always been concern that either Israel or Iran could cross these thresholds. However, recent events have shown that after successful deterrence, there is less cause for concern, as both sides have demonstrated the ability to control the escalation of conflict (Crisis Group 2024).

The conflicting parties have dismissed the stereotype that they can carry out military strikes without provoking a general war. Considering the analysed event, it is evident that strikes on military targets without casualties or significant damage are tolerable for their governments. Furthermore, it can be concluded that Iran possesses the resources to counter direct strikes on Israel but that its allies, particularly the US and Gulf Arab states, are so determined to avoid regional escalation that they will play only a defensive role during such confrontations. It is also evident that Iranian technology can overcome some advanced Israeli air defence systems, which is a reality that will shape the debate in Israel about how far the Israeli government can go in escalating against Iran. Finally, this has allowed the Iranians to gain valuable combat information about the effectiveness of their barrage tactics and drone and missile technology against advanced forces. Little in these lessons suggests that Tehran wants this episode to be repeated. With diminished options, Iran seems prepared for another Israeli provocation rather than attempting to create one itself. Despite having threatened to advance the nuclear programme towards armament, Iran, at least for this round, has been waiting for the next Israeli action instead of taking preemptive steps in terms of reassessing its foreign and nuclear doctrine. In other words, Iran may now assume it can retaliate against Israel without provoking a war or direct conflict with the US. However, its strategic doctrine seems to favour waiting for sufficient Israeli action to justify such a move (Nadimi 2024).

Iran has shown a willingness to attack Israel directly. However, this threat is counterbalanced by the intention of Israel's allies to avoid regional confrontation to the point where they acted as a shield against the Iranian attack on April 13. Meanwhile, although some Iranian missiles struck Israeli territory, the vast majority were intercepted by Israel's advanced air defence systems, such as the

Strela and David's Sling. This indicates that the threat of ballistic missiles from Iran may not carry the same risks as previously feared. The episode also shows that Israel can directly strike territory near sensitive Iranian nuclear sites, and Tehran's overall desire to avoid war is significant enough that such attacks may go unanswered. Nevertheless, Israel's favourite and frequently applied strategy against Iran remains covert escalation, continuing to degrade Iranian allies and reshaping its environment to prevent events like those of October 7 from recurring. However, the extent to which Israel is willing to take risks in pursuing this strategy has certainly changed after the events of April 2024, which have contributed to the ongoing question of how far the state will go to secure its immediate environment from ideological adversaries (Stratfor 2024b).

In future events, either Israel or Iran could carry out strikes that they believe fall within a changed strategic paradigm. However, this could lead them down a path of escalation. The eventual repetition of April's events is entirely possible, with Israel continuing to maintain a shadow conflict in Syria, where Iranian forces are also present. Both Iran and Israel might decide that they need greater force to demonstrate a desire to return to deterrence. However, such circumstances do not rule out the possibility of miscalculation by either side. Their escalation could also take another path, such as in southern Lebanon, where Israel has signalled it could execute an invasion once its campaign in Gaza is free of significant fighting. Israel might want to signal to Iran the dangers of direct intervention in another war between Israel and Hezbollah and conduct an escalated covert campaign to reduce Iran's supply and logistical support while eroding Iran's political will to intervene potentially in such a conflict. In the event of another Lebanese war, Israel could target the Iranian embassy in Beirut or other locations sensitive to Iran that are significant for Hezbollah's campaign against Israel. Such strikes could bring Iran back into direct confrontation with Israel, with the possibility of repeating the April escalation to persuade Israel to reduce its anti-Iranian war influence in Lebanon.

The Houthis as Maritime Terrorists and the Failed US Deterrence

The Red Sea exits to the Mediterranean Sea to the north via the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Aden to the south through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, thus connecting Europe and Asia. Both exits, Bab el-Mandeb and the Suez Canal, form the basis for two other strategic points: the Strait of Malacca (the main shipping route between East Asia and Europe) and the Strait of Hormuz (through which Gulf oil flows westward). Compared to other maritime routes, the Red Sea represents the shortest route linking the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, making it the main shipping lane for transporting oil to Europe. In addition to its economic significance, the Red

Sea is the shortest communication line for navies between the East and the West, which is particularly crucial for maritime strategic and operational aspects (Al-Anazi 2001, 1-2). Bab el-Mandeb is a narrow southern entrance to the Red Sea, less than 30 kilometres wide and divided into two channels by the island of Perim. For centuries, it has been a trade route where goods from the East were transported through the Red Sea to Egypt and then loaded onto caravans before being shipped to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea (Al-Yadomi 1991, 6-8). The Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb gained significant strategic importance with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1896. In modern times, Bab el-Mandeb's strategic importance lies in its location between two vital maritime routes—the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean—and the region's resources, particularly the oil reserves in the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf. Approximately 20 thousand ships pass through the strait annually, carrying an average of 3.4 million barrels of oil per day (Anderson 2013, 25-26).

Yemen shares the strait with Eritrea and Djibouti, and, as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1987, it has a 12 nautical mile territorial waters zone in Bab el-Mandeb. However, the weakness of Yemen's central government has allowed non-state actors to exploit the country's strategic location in the Red Sea for illegal activities, including human trafficking, arms smuggling, and terrorist attacks. In 2014, supported by Iran, the Houthis seized the capital city and launched a military campaign, capturing major ports and cities along Yemen's western coast. With Iranian militia commanding the Red Sea, the civil war in Yemen quickly escalated into a regional conflict in March 2015, with direct military intervention led by Saudi Arabia (Hokayem and Roberts 2016, 158-181).

While the better-equipped coalition adopted conventional tactics involving around 170 combat aircraft, the inferior Houthis favoured an indirect and guerrilla approach heavily reliant on Yemen's geographical factors. It was only a matter of time before the conflict spread to the waters, as the Houthis began operations against coalition ships in the Red Sea. The maritime insurgency took the form of sporadic attacks, using unconventional tactics such as guided boats, speedboats, drones, cruise missiles, mines, and more (Knights and Almeida 2015).

The Houthis, taking advantage of the lack of maritime width, successfully launched rockets from the coast, targeting military and oil vessels. The first attack occurred in October 2016 against the Emirati ship HSV-2 Swift, using a Chinese anti-ship missile, the C-802, which caused significant damage. A similar attack was carried out against a US destroyer, but the missile was intercepted before it could reach its target. In addition to targeting military ships, the Houthis also aimed at commercial assets using cruise missiles, particularly targeting Saudi oil shipments, which forced Saudi Arabia to suspend oil exports through the strait (Williams and Shaikh 2020, 3-6).

Although oil shipments resumed, the Houthis effectively demonstrated their capabilities to the coalition. Furthermore, the Houthi militias used unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to attack ships and maritime infrastructure. In June 2016, a UAV-laden explosive boat was used in an unsuccessful attack on a Saudi loading facility in Jizan, southern Saudi Arabia. However, in July 2017, the Houthis successfully struck the port of Mokha in Yemen, and a ship from the United Arab Emirates docked there. Despite causing minor damages, the Saudi-led coalition downplayed the incident. Additionally, reports indicated that the Houthis laid mines in the Red Sea, floating for tens of kilometres around Bab el-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden. Four detonation incidents happened, and 44 mines were discovered in the region in 2017, according to the United Nations Expert Panel's annual Yemen report for 2018 (Knights and Nadimi 2018).

Since 2015, strategic maritime trade routes near Yemen have been increasingly threatened, with vessels near the Yemeni coast coming under attack by the Houthi militants. Several countries have identified the Houthi militias as a threat to navigation in Bab el-Mandeb following attacks on numerous commercial ships. Supported by Iran, the Houthi militias have once again threatened to target international shipping routes and oil tankers in the Red Sea (Shay 2017, 1). The Houthi leader Saleh al-Samad threatened on January 8, 2018, to block international navigation through the Red Sea as a strategic option if coalition forces continued advancing westward in Yemen. This threat arose amid offensives by the Yemeni military and losses suffered by the Houthis on multiple fronts in Yemen (Morton and Cassidy 2018).

The United States led several series of retaliatory strikes against certain armed groups in the Middle East at the beginning of 2024. In January, they began conducting strikes against the Houthis in response to their attacks on ships in the Red Sea. In February, they carried out airstrikes on groups in Syria and Iraq accused of killing American soldiers at a base in Jordan. The US response in both cases revealed the difficulties and controversial results of using conventional deterrence against armed groups. The clearest indicator of successful deterrence is the obvious reduction of the opponent's threat. A less clear indicator is the extent to which the opponent abandons their long-term hostile intentions. According to the first indicator, the American strikes on the Houthi bases were initially successful, as attacks on ships in the Red Sea decreased. However, subsequent attacks in Iraq, Syria, and the Red Sea unequivocally demonstrated that the strategic will of these groups had not changed, as the Houthis continued with attacks sufficient to deter international ships. That indicates, among other things, that armed groups possess certain advantages that compensate for their military inferiority. In this regard, the most important is the strategic resilience, coming from popular support, which brings them new recruits, freedom of manoeuvre, and the ability to evade. Over the

past 20 years since the first uprising in 2004, the Houthis have shown remarkable resilience. On the other hand, efforts to combat armed groups include an additional problem, considering that although such groups may be deterred from stronger operations, they often continue to exist as alternative bases of state power, using increasingly sophisticated and numerous weapon systems. Iran has played a variable but crucial role in improving the capabilities of the Houthis, accompanied by the group's additional efforts to build their own capacities and enhance military efficiency. The Houthis, like many other armed groups (Hamas, Hezbollah, and others), have not been deterred or led to change their strategic stance. On the contrary, these armed groups have maintained a steady growth of strategic capabilities. The large-scale attacks Hamas executed on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the arsenal available to the Houthis in the Red Sea in recent months have shown the level of development of their capabilities. The fear that Hezbollah's capabilities in Lebanon might have grown at a similar pace has significantly influenced Israeli policy in southern Lebanon (Raine 2024).

Multinational initiatives to safeguard vessels in the Red Sea from the Iran-supported Houthis in Yemen have heightened pressure on the US to address the escalating conflicts they seek to avoid. This was one of the factors leading to the creation of Operation Prosperity Guardian, designed to protect commercial ships from increased attacks by the Houthi militant group. The operation involves collaboration among several nations, including the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, and Spain. In response, the Houthis declared their intention to target all commercial vessels bound for Israel via the Red Sea. This action also serves as a protest against Israel's military operations in Gaza. It is clear that the Houthis have not been dissuaded by repeated warnings from the US regarding the repercussions of their continued assaults, which jeopardise global trade and other essential American interests (Stratfor 2023).

The continued air and naval strikes on the Houthi targets in Yemen present the same problem as the retaliatory US airstrikes in Syria and Iraq against the Shia militias. This is reflected in the fact that the US cannot reliably re-establish deterrence against a non-state actor driven by complex strategic motives. Specifically, US attacks in Yemen have already resulted in the Houthi reprisals targeting US Navy ships and commercial vessels. As a result, Washington has been responding with more severe attacks, which could lead to a Middle East conflict that the Biden administration says it wants to prevent. Even after multiple repeated US strikes in Yemen, a "return to deterrence" remains a distant outcome (Rothman 2023).

Conclusion

The relationship between Israel and Iran illustrates current dynamics in the Middle East, as well as the complexity of deterrence, marked by shifting alliances, historical contradictions, and regional power. Israel views Iran's nuclear ambitions and support for militant groups (Hamas, Houthis) as existential threats, prompting a complex deterrence strategy. Conversely, Iran relies on proxy forces like Hezbollah and various Shiite militias in the region. This intricate interaction and differing perceptions complicate effective communication and increase the risk of miscalculations, clearly highlighting the need for nuanced approaches in deterrence strategies.

Moreover, the importance of extended deterrence is underscored by Iran's missile attacks on Israel. At the same time, Hezbollah seeks to prevent Israeli strikes on its forces and locations, which can provoke a potential Israeli response to Iran. However, Israel's retaliation against Hezbollah attacks suggests that counterstrikes are unlikely to deter this group. As a result, cross-border exchanges are likely to continue, bringing Israel and Hezbollah closer to a broader conflict, especially if either side misjudges the scale or impact of an attack.

On the other hand, there is also a noticeable weakening of the concept of extended deterrence. Despite the support it received, Israel faced difficulties in achieving its goals of neutralising Hamas and securing the release of hostages from Gaza. As a result, the opposing side was encouraged to escalate the conflict further. This suggests that we may be at the beginning of new rules of engagement between Israel and Iran, where neither side will have clear dominance or the ability to establish effective deterrence on its own. Instead, the intervention of a major international power, such as the US, may be necessary to manage the situation and deter the conflicting parties from continuing reckless attacks that could have potentially catastrophic consequences (Gomaa and Mohsen Al Kindi 2024).

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KONCEPT ODVRAĆANJA U AKTUELNIM ODNOSIMA NA BLISKOM ISTOKU

Apstrakt: Odvraćanje je dugo prisutno u međunarodnoj politici, ali je postalo posebno značajno tokom Hladnog rata zbog svoje uloge u odnosima velikih sila. U savremenim odnosima, potrebno je prilagoditi stare narative kako bi odražavali nove i složene realnosti jer izazovi savremenog sveta komplikuju formulisanje strategija odvraćanja. Ipak, cilj odvraćanja ostaje isti – ubediti protivnika, kroz različita sredstva i metode, da su troškovi preduzimanja akcije daleko veći od potencijalnih koristi koje bi mogao postići. Autori analiziraju koncept odvraćanja koristeći više teorija u okviru teorijskih razmatranja i, između ostalog, njegovu primenu u trenutnim odnosima na Bliskom Istoku. Nakon rasprave o opštim teorijskim gledištima, koncept odvraćanja se dalje analizira kroz slučaj Izraela i Irana i odnos između Sjedinjenih Američkih Država i Huta, jednog nedržavnog aktera, kako bi se objasnile njegove specifičnosti. Pored istorijskih okolnosti, analiza ispituje i aktuelne događaje kako bi se shvatilo kako najznačajniji akteri primenjuju koncept odvraćanja. Nedavni događaji između Irana i Izraela, posebno u političkom i vojnom kontekstu, potvrđuju relevantnost koncepta odvraćanja u međunarodnim odnosima.

Gljučne reči: odvraćanje; Bliski Istok; Huti; spoljna politika; međunarodni odnosi.