Michael Eisenstadt

DETERRENCE AND ESCALATION DYNAMICS WITH IRAN

Insights from Four Decades of Conflict and a Twelve-Day War

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Cover image (top to bottom): Israeli F-15I fighters, a U.S. B-2 bomber, and an Iranian Shahab-3-type missile: all three weapon systems have been used in Iran's recent conflicts with the United States and Israel.

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Abbreviations

C-RAM	counter–rocket, artillery, and mortar
E3	France, Germany, and the United Kingdom
HEU	high-enriched uranium
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IAF	Israeli Air Force
IDF	Israel Defense Forces
IED	improvised explosive device
IMSC	International Maritime Security Construct
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRGC-QF	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Qods Force
IRI	Islamic Republic of Iran
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
KH	Kataib Hezbollah
MEAD	Middle East Air Defense initiative
NPT	Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty
SAM	surface-to-air missile

Executive Summary

For decades, Washington struggled to counter Tehran's asymmetric way of war. Its failure to understand the Islamic Republic's military modus operandi and its fears of becoming mired in another Middle East "forever war" often hindered an effective response. The June 2025 war, however, confounded predictions that a U.S. attack on Iran would prompt massive retaliation, lead to hundreds—if not thousands—of U.S. casualties, and spark an "all-out" war. It laid bare longstanding misconceptions regarding the ability of the United States and Israel to manage escalation with Iran. Drawing the right lessons from this experience will be critical to future efforts to deter and counter Iran, and may provide insights that can help manage tensions with Russia, China, and North Korea.

Gray zone strategies are designed to defeat adversary deterrence efforts while managing risk. Since its inception, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) has understood that its anti–status quo agenda would lead to conflict with the United States and its regional allies. Accordingly, Iran developed a gray zone strategy, as have other anti–status quo actors like Russia and China, to circumvent or defeat its adversaries' deterrence efforts. This has enabled it to challenge its foes and advance its interests while managing risk, preventing escalation, and avoiding war.

Risk management is central to the IRI's gray zone strategy, due largely to the enduring trauma of its bloody eight-year war with Iraq (1980–88). For Iran, avoiding another major conventional war is an all-consuming preoccupation, contrary to the image the Islamic Republic seeks to project: that of a tenacious, martyrdom-seeking nation which should not be trifled with.

As part of its gray zone strategy, Iran has developed a range of tools and repertoires to manage risk, prevent escalation, and avoid war. Thus, Iran will test and probe to see what it can get away with. It generally relies on proxies to preserve deniability, provide standoff, and avoid becoming decisively engaged with adversaries—though it will act unilaterally if necessary. Iran relies on incremental action to create ambiguity regarding its intentions and to make its enemies uncertain about how to respond. And it paces its activities and disperses them geographically so that adversary decisionmakers do not feel pressured to act. In gray zone conflicts, moreover, there is no well-defined brink that marks the transition from "peace" to "war." Rather, these conflicts are generally murky, ambiguous, slow-motion affairs characterized by occasional escalatory peaks and frequent de-escalatory troughs.

While Tehran's actions have become more overt, direct, and intense, the principles guiding its approach have thus far remained unchanged. Even as Iran's actions have become less gray and increasingly overt, direct, and intense—as when it launched massive missile and drone strikes on Israel in April and October 2024 in response to Israeli attacks in Syria and Lebanon—the principles guiding its approach remained unchanged. These were one-off actions that relied on standoff firepower, thereby ensuring that Iran would not become decisively engaged and that the conflict would remain limited. And they were carried out in the context of a broader strategy that still relied on incremental action, proxy activities, and the calibrated use of force to avoid escalation and war. Moreover, after launching direct attacks on its enemies, Iran has generally stood down, at least temporarily—or continued to push back in other geographic arenas (the Levant, Iraq, Yemen, or the Persian Gulf) or operational domains (land, air, sea, or cyber) by less escalatory means—reverting to its traditional gray zone approach.

For the United States, then, what are the main takeaways from more than four decades of conflict and a war involving Iran and its proxies?

Dictate the terms of engagement. For decades, the United States and Israel played by Tehran's rules, responding to proxy attacks by attacking its

proxies. This left the Islamic Republic unscathed and undeterred—thereby enabling its long game. Experience in recent years has shown, however, that (1) the best way to derail Iran's long game is by preempting it; (2) the best way to counter Tehran's proxy strategy is by taking the fight to Iran itself; and (3) the most effective way to deter Tehran is to impose costs—leaving the IRI and its proxies worse off (more vulnerable, less capable, and more unstable) than before.

Thus, Tehran must understand that efforts to revive its nuclear program and restore military capabilities destroyed during the June 2025 war will be thwarted, that significant costs will be imposed each time the United States or Israel strikes, and that future attacks may target critical infrastructure—further destabilizing the regime. The regime must also understand that the renewed use of lethal force against Iranian protesters could trigger destabilizing strikes against its internal security forces.

Complicate Tehran's risk calculus. Despite the intimidating image that the regime seeks to project, risk management and avoidance are central to its modus operandi, so actions that increase uncertainty and risk for Iran may bolster deterrence. The United States, therefore, should be unpredictable (i.e., emphasizing asymmetric rather than tit-for-tat responses) and provide a taste of worse to come if Iran does not alter its course. A more risk-acceptant leadership, however, might loosen limits on the use of force, and should it conclude that it faces an imminent threat to its survival, it might lash out in an unrestrained fashion. Moreover, the IRI's impending post-Khamenei leadership transition may herald a change in the regime's approach to risk, with implications for deterrence, escalation management, and strategy.

Deterrence effects are often short-lived. In protracted conflicts, deterrence is not a default state that can be "restored" once challenged; rather, it is a dynamic, open-ended process. This is because Iran and its proxies are determined adversaries that incessantly test and probe to see what they can get away with. When thwarted in one arena or domain, they will often push back in another, so successful deterrence in one area is often a harbinger of challenges elsewhere. Thus, deterrence effects should not be assessed in binary terms (success/failure) but in terms of whether the adversary is forced to act less often, using less-effective means, against less-consequential targets.

Discard flawed notions regarding deterrence, escalation, and "all-out" war. Thought precedes action, and many of the terms, metaphors, and mental models that U.S. policymakers and analysts apply to conventional deterrence and escalation processes are flawed, often leading them to overstate the potential for inadvertent war with Iran. They therefore need to refine or replace them with concepts that better reflect the complex dynamic at work with Iran and its proxies, and abandon ill-suited concepts like "all-out" war.

Outside-in and inside-out. There are several ways to respond to attacks by Iran or its proxies. Targeting its proxies (an outside-in approach) can limit Tehran's ability to act via indirect means (e.g., proxy attacks). Targeting Iran itself (an inside-out approach) can limit its ability to engage in direct action (e.g., drone or missiles strikes) and alter its risk calculus. Each approach addresses only part of the problem, however, while a combined approach—as events since October 7, 2023, have shown—can limit Tehran's options for both indirect and direct action, while altering its risk calculus.

Covert and overt. There is no single "right" approach for dealing with Iran and its proxies. If domestic and regional considerations constrain U.S. policy, gray zone activities—which often occur below the radar and are therefore less politically contentious—may be the best way to advance American interests. If U.S. policy is not constrained by such considerations, a combination of gray zone activities and overt military action that exploits U.S. military-technological overmatch and escalation dominance may ensure more enduring deterrence effects. Experience shows, however, that covert action and gray zone activities alone are often insufficient to deter or disrupt the activities of Iran and its proxies, and that overt military action may be necessary to achieve more consequential policy outcomes.

A holistic approach. Deterrence is not just a military mission; effective deterrence requires the use of all instruments of national power—diplomatic, informational, military, economic, and cyber—to alter the adversary's cost-benefit calculus. Events in Israel since the October 7 attack, moreover, have shown that domestic tensions can undermine a country's deterrent posture. The United States should bear this in mind when considering how its own polarized politics and culture wars might affect its ability to deter foreign adversaries.

Manage tensions between deterrence, compellence, and disruption. U.S. efforts to compel Tehran through sanctions have sometimes caused it to lash out militarily, undermining deterrence. This means that maximum pressure requires maximum deterrence.

But deterrence is not the be-all and end-all of policy, and the benefits of some actions—for instance, the killing of IRGC Qods Force Commander Qasem Soleimani—have sometimes outweighed any adverse short-term impacts on deterrence.

Denial and punishment. While deterrence by denial (e.g., relying on robust missile and drone defenses to thwart attacks) may seem to be less destabilizing than deterrence by punishment, it is often less effective since it enables Tehran to better calibrate risk and wager only those assets it considers expendable. By comparison, deterrence by punishment (e.g., strikes against high-value assets such as missile bases and production facilities) increases uncertainty and potential costs for Tehran. Experience has shown that an approach combining denial and punishment, bolstered by forceful messaging, is more likely to yield enduring deterrence effects.

Capability and credibility. While military planners often focus on capabilities needed to deter, credibility is perhaps an even more important consideration; for while forces can be rapidly surged from elsewhere, credibility cannot be. And while credibility is hard-earned, it can be squandered in an instant by a misstep or failure of resolve. This underscores the importance of responding firmly and consistently to challenges to U.S. interests.

Credible messaging. Mixed messages, ill-conceived red lines, and well-intentioned efforts to reassure an American public wary of foreign military entanglements have often undermined the credibility of U.S. deterrence messaging and encouraged Iran to test limits. This underscores the need to focus more high-level attention on the crafting of deterrent messages and on ensuring message discipline.

Deterrence by disclosure has its limits. Iran can sometimes be deterred by publicly exposing its military preparations when detected, if doing so affects its prospects for success. But Iran may sometimes act even when its preparations are exposed, for reasons of honor (to save face) or interest (because it fears inaction could embolden its enemies).

Diverse tools and repertoires. The U.S. military tends to fixate on lethality, but sometimes "less is more" because nonlethal tools can impose costs while reducing risks for escalation. Likewise, developing diverse repertoires pertaining to the use of force, as well as the ability to act in multiple arenas and domains, may bolster deterrence and create options beyond vertical escalation.

Past lessons, future challenges—in the Middle East and beyond. Events since October 7, 2023, have shown the benefits of U.S.-Israel cooperation to counter Iran's "axis of resistance," and demonstrated that military conflicts can be kept limited in scope, intensity, and duration. By continuing to work together, the United States and Israel may thwart Iran's efforts to rebuild its proxy network, its military capabilities, and its nuclear program. And by becoming more proficient in the core national security competencies of conventional deterrence and escalation management, U.S. policymakers and warfighters will be better positioned to deal with the national security challenges posed by Russia, China, and North Korea in the months and years to come.

1

Introduction

During the June 2025 twelve-day war, Israel inflicted significant damage on Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs, aided by a U.S. bomber and cruise missile strike on three nuclear sites toward the war's end. While the long-term implications of the conflict are unclear, it confounded predictions that a U.S. or Israeli attack would prompt massive retaliation, lead to hundreds—if not thousands—of American casualties, and spark an "all-out" regional war that would destabilize the Middle East and roil the world economy. It laid bare longstanding misconceptions regarding deterrence and escalation management vis-à-vis Iran and its proxies.[1]

If the United States is to deal effectively with future challenges by Iran, it must learn the lessons of this war. Tehran emerged from the conflict bruised but defiant—claiming that Israel failed to topple the regime, that it needed American help to take on Iran, and that the United States was eager to end the war quickly after intervening.[2] Iran's postwar activities, moreover—rearming proxies, reconstituting air defenses, and rebuilding its ballistic missile force—indicate that it is preparing for another round of fighting.[3] Israel, for its part, will almost certainly try to prevent Iran from rebuilding through covert action—and military strikes, if necessary.[4] And U.S. President Donald Trump warned Iran in late December 2025 that if Iran tries to rebuild capabilities destroyed during the war, "we're going to have to knock them down…We'll knock the hell out of them."[5]

Following the eruption of nationwide protests in Iran, President Trump stated in early January 2026 that the United States would "rescue" the protesters if the regime "violently kills" them, musing several weeks later that "it's time to look for new leadership in Iran."[6] Responding to these statements and the deployment of U.S. military forces to the region to back up the president's threat, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi warned that Iran will be "firing back with everything we have if we come under renewed attack," and that such a war will "drag on far, far longer" than its enemies anticipate.[7] With tensions growing, deterring and managing escalation with Iran and its proxies will remain a core U.S. policy concern in the months and possibly years to come.

Yet for decades, U.S. policymakers have often struggled to counter the Islamic Republic's asymmetric way of war, frequently overestimating its military capabilities and its appetite for risk while underestimating the degree to which America's military capabilities inspired fear in Tehran. Many, moreover, carried traumatic memories of past U.S. military misfortunes in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and were often self-deterred in their dealings with Iran, fearing that a local clash could lead to an "all-out" regional war. And they often applied concepts drawn from Cold War–era theories of (nuclear) deterrence and escalation to the very different (conventional) deterrence and escalation challenges posed by Iran. Their mixed track record in Iran raised questions about whether U.S. policymakers need to revise their assumptions regarding conventional deterrence and escalation, and cast doubt on their ability to effectively manage conflicts with far more capable adversaries like China, Russia, and North Korea.[8]

The past four decades, and especially U.S. and Israeli experiences since October 7, 2023, provide invaluable insights into the conventional deterrence and escalation-management challenges posed by Iran and its proxies, yielding lessons that might also inform U.S. efforts to counter adversaries elsewhere in the world. By shedding light on this experience, this paper will hopefully help U.S. policymakers and warfighters become more proficient in these core national security competencies, whose importance will only grow in the coming years as the United States navigates an increasingly fraught global security environment.

Notes

1. Thus, former Defense Department official Dan Caldwell argued that hundreds if not thousands of troops could be killed, oil prices could spike, and the region could be destabilized. Dan Caldwell and Simone Ledeen, "Debate: Should the U.S. Intervene in Iran?" Free Press, June 16, 2025, https://www.thefp.com/p/debate-should-the-us-intervene-in. Tucker Carlson (@TuckerCarlson) wrote on X that a war could kill thousands of Americans, June 4, 2025, 9:02 p.m., https://x.com/TuckerCarlson/status/1930430114602402183. Matthew Duss and Sohrab Ahmari foresaw "another big Mideast war." Matthew Duss and Sohrab Ahmari, "Trump Is in Danger of Repeating Bush's Middle East Mistakes," *Washington Post*, June 21, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2025/06/22/iran-war-opposition-trump/. Trita Parsi, executive vice president of the Quincy Institute, stated that "any attack by the U.S. will lead to full-scale attack by the Iranians against U.S. bases in the region, and a full-scale war between the U.S. and Iran." Nadeen Ebrahim, "A U.S. Strike on Iran Could Open a 'Pandora's Box' in the Middle East, Experts Warn," CNN, June 18, 2025, https://www.cnn.com/2025/06/18/middleeast/us-iran-pandoras-box-intl.
2. "Top Khamenei Advisor Ali Larijani: U.S. Strike on Iran's Nuclear Sites Was Meant to Force Tehran to Surrender—But It Was Trump Who Came Begging for Restraint and Downplayed the Damage from Iran's Nuclear Retaliatory Strikes to Save Face," TV clip 12116, Middle East Media Research Institute, June 29, 2025, https://www.memri.org/tv/ali-larijani-trump-iran-retaliation-us-strike.
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5. Will Weissert et al., "During Netanyahu Visit, Trump Warns Iran of Further U.S. Strikes If It Reconstitutes Nuclear Program," Associated Press, December 29, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/trump-netanyahu-gaza-ceasefire-arab-nations-229253766673f18c1195550572edd2ce.
6. Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), post on Truth Social, January 2, 2026, 2:58 a.m., https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/115824439366264186; Sophia Cai, "Trump to Politico: 'It's Time to Look for New Leadership in Iran,'" Politico, January 17, 2026, https://www.politico.com/news/2026/01/17/trump-to-politico-its-time-to-look-for-new-leadership-in-iran-00735528.
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2

Deterrence and Escalation Management in Iran's Strategy

Since its establishment in 1979, the Islamic Republic has understood that its anti–status quo agenda would lead to conflict with the United States, whose regional influence it seeks to eliminate; and with America's regional allies, which it seeks to either dominate or—in the case of Israel—destroy. Moreover, the regime believes that the United States seeks its overthrow, whether through a coup, an invasion, or a nonviolent color revolution. Accordingly, like other anti–status quo actors such as Russia and China, the IRI has developed a gray zone strategy to deter its enemies and advance its interests, while managing escalation and avoiding war.[1] Yet it has also shown that it can decouple its long-term, zero-sum struggle with the "Great Satan" from routine, relatively pragmatic diplomatic and military dealings with Washington.

Deterrence in Iran's Gray Zone Strategy

If risk management is a major driver of Iran's gray zone strategy, deterrence is its foundation. Over the past four decades, Iran has built a deterrence/warfighting triad to advance this strategy, consisting of military forces controlled or supported by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

This triad consists of (1) an array of proxy militias, trained and equipped by the IRGC Qods Force and armed with rockets, drones, and missiles, to surround Iran's enemies with a "ring of fire" and carry out ground attacks; (2) an arsenal of long-range missiles and drones, controlled by the IRGC Aerospace Force, capable of hitting targets throughout the region; and (3) littoral naval forces, controlled by the IRGC Navy, that can threaten freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz and, with the help of Yemen's Houthis, the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

For many years, Hezbollah's arsenal of 150,000-plus rockets, drones, and missiles served as the backbone of Iran's strategic deterrent, and was expected to inflict catastrophic damage on Israel in a future war.[2] (Israeli intelligence had reportedly estimated that Hezbollah would launch 1,500–2,500 rockets a day in the event of war—overwhelming Israeli defenses.[3]) Israel's destruction of 80 percent of this force in less than a day on September 23, 2024, struck a grievous blow to Iran's deterrent posture.[4]

Moreover, Tehran's cyber corps—consisting of elements controlled by the IRGC and Iran's Ministry of Intelligence—provides additional options for imposing costs on its enemies. And Iran's nuclear hedging strategy provided a degree of latent deterrence against Israel and the United States by raising the risk of a nuclear breakout, until Israeli and American strikes in June 2025 set back Iran's nuclear program. Thus, Tehran's robust, multifaceted deterrent created space for it to operate in the gray zone, while its gray zone activities further bolstered its deterrent posture—creating synergies between the two.

Iran has conducted gray zone activities in accordance with a dog-eared playbook dating back to the 1980s, which consists of tools and repertoires it has augmented over time, ranging from hostage taking, embassy invasions, attacks on maritime traffic, and terrorist attacks to drone, rocket, and missile strikes, information operations, and all kinds of cyber activities (see figure 1).

Each gray zone actor—Iran, Russia, China, and even the United States during the Cold War—has a unique gray zone "way of war." Yet the generic gray zone modus operandi is grounded in a near universal feature of human psychology—the desire to test limits to see what one can get away with—which will be recognizable to anybody who has had a younger sibling, a teenage child, or known an overly ambitious colleague who is fond of bending rules.

DETERRENCE, COMPELLENCE, AND ESCALATION: A GLOSSARY

Deterrence involves coercive threats or actions, including the use of force, to dissuade another actor from doing something it would have done otherwise. There are several types of deterrence:

- *General deterrence* seeks to dissuade an actor from taking any action contrary to the deterring party's interests, while *immediate deterrence* seeks to dissuade an actor from undertaking imminent or specific actions.
- *Interwar deterrence* seeks to prevent the outbreak of war, *intrawar deterrence* seeks to prevent escalation in wartime.
- *Deterrence by denial* seeks to dissuade an actor by frustrating its objectives, *deterrence by punishment* seeks to dissuade an actor by imposing unacceptable costs.
- *Direct deterrence* seeks to dissuade an actor from attacking the deterring party's territory or interests, while *extended deterrence* seeks to dissuade an actor from attacking third parties.[1]
- *Self-deterrence* occurs when an actor opts not to act due to its own fears and concerns, despite a lack of explicit adversary threats.

Compellence involves coercive threats or actions to convince an actor to stop doing something it is already doing or to do something it otherwise would not have done.

- Deterrence and compellence are two sides of the same coin in that both depend on the manipulation of "risk, threats, and choice" to influence another party's behavior.[2]
- Distinguishing between the two can prove difficult, as "deterrent and compellent threats may 'mingle' depending upon the actions and reactions of the coercer and target."[3]
- Compellence is often more difficult to achieve than deterrence because the coerced actor must halt certain, often observable, activities and yield to the will of another, while a deterred party can save face by claiming that it never intended to act.[4]

Escalation is the intensification or expansion of a conflict to inflict greater human and material costs (vertical escalation) or encompass additional territory, domains, or actors (horizontal escalation).[5]

[1] Michael J. Mazarr, *Understanding Deterrence*, Perspectives Paper (RAND, 2018), https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE295.html.
[2] Patrick C. Bratton, "When Is Coercion Successful? And Why Can't We Agree on It?" *Naval War College Review* 58, no. 3 (2005): 99–120, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA521130.pdf. See also Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (Yale University Press, 1966), 69–91.
[3] Bratton, "When Is Coercion Successful?" https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA521130.pdf.
[4] Bratton, "When Is Coercion Successful?" https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA521130.pdf.
[5] Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (Penguin, 1965).

Figure 1. Iran's Gray Zone Toolkit

Thus, as part of its gray zone strategy, Iran will test and probe to see what it can get away with, relying on proxies and covert action to preserve deniability, provide standoff, and avoid decisively engaging the adversary. It will, however, act unilaterally if necessary. It relies on incremental action to shroud its intentions in ambiguity and make its enemies uncertain about how to respond. It responds to challenges in a proportionate manner to communicate its desire to avoid escalation. And it paces its activities temporally and spaces them geographically so that adversary decisionmakers do not feel rushed, cornered, or otherwise pressured to act.

In gray zone conflicts, there is no well-defined line (or, in journalistic argot, "brink" or "precipice") that marks the transition from "peace" to "war," because in the mind of the gray zone actor, competition and conflict exist along a continuum with no clear demarcation between the two. Rather, these are generally murky, slow-motion conflicts characterized by occasional escalatory peaks and frequent de-escalatory troughs.

While Iran has generally preferred to operate in the gray zone, it has waged conventional warfare when necessary. Thus, Iran:

- Launched more than five hundred missiles against Israel when the latter attacked its nuclear and missile programs in June 2025
- Intervened in Syria's civil war (2011–24) to save its sole state ally after concluding that doing so would not prompt a U.S. or Israeli military response
- Fought an eight-year war with Iraq (1980–88), which it called the "imposed war"—not only because it was invaded but perhaps also because it was forced to fight conventionally instead of in the gray zone, as it probably would have preferred

In recent years, however, the IRI has shown greater audacity, expressed in part by an increased willingness in the past decade to hunt down and abduct or kill Iranian dissidents in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere.[5] During this period, it has also launched attacks on Israel, Pakistan, Iraqi Kurdistan, the Gulf Arab states, and U.S. interests in the Middle East, including:

- A drone launched from Syria, en route to deliver explosives to Palestinians in the West Bank, which was shot down over northern Israel in February 2018[6]
- A missile strike against U.S. troops in Iraq following the killing of Qasem Soleimani in January 2020—and plots to kill former U.S. officials implicated in his death
- Missile and drone strikes in January 2024 targeting Jaish al-Adl insurgents in Pakistan, in retaliation for attacks in Iran[7]
- A January 2024 missile strike in Erbil, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, against what it claimed was an Israeli intelligence headquarters
- Massive missile strikes on Israel in April and October 2024 in response to Israeli attacks in Syria and Lebanon
- Missile strikes on Israel and Qatar following the Israeli and American preventive attacks in June 2025

Yet, even as Iran's actions in recent years have become more overt, direct, and intense, the fundamental principles guiding its overall approach remain unchanged. The aforementioned strikes were generally one-off affairs that relied on standoff firepower, thereby ensuring that the conflict would remain limited, and that Iran would not become decisively engaged. And they were carried out in the context of a broader strategy that still relied on incremental action, proxy activities, and the calibrated use of force to avoid escalation and war. Thus, after launching direct attacks on its enemies, Iran has generally stood down, at least temporarily—or continued to push back in other geographic arenas (the Levant, Iraq, Yemen, or the Persian Gulf) or operational domains (land, air, sea, or cyber) by less escalatory means—reverting to its traditional gray zone approach. The tools and repertoires that underpin the IRI's gray zone strategy and help manage risk and escalation are discussed in greater detail below.

IRAN'S IMAGE MANAGEMENT, AND U.S. AND ISRAELI SELF-DETERRENCE

While all nations seek to manage risk when resorting to force, the Islamic Republic's current leadership has demonstrated a singular focus on risk management, which is a major driver of its gray zone strategy. For Tehran, avoiding a major conventional conflict that could revive the trauma of the Iran-Iraq War has been an all-consuming preoccupation, which is why it has often used proxies to offload risks and costs. This reality, however, runs counter to the image that the Islamic Republic seeks to project: that of a tenacious, martyrdom-seeking nation that should not be trifled with. It promotes this image, at least in part, to intimidate enemies and bolster deterrence, and in the past, these efforts were remarkably successful.

The United States (and Israel) has often been self-deterred—acting with great restraint even when deterrent warnings had not been issued—granting Iran and its proxies significant freedom of action due to fears that an attack on Iran or its interests could lead to an "all-out" regional war. This can perhaps be traced to their own traumas involving Iran, including its support for proxies that since the early 1980s have killed and wounded thousands of Americans and Israelis in Lebanon, Iraq, and elsewhere. Tehran, moreover, has often stoked this fear by threatening "all-out" war if attacked—even though its entire modus operandi was created to avert just such an outcome.[8]

Iran's actual approach was summed up neatly by former Iranian Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan, who now serves as a military advisor to the Supreme Leader. Days after a U.S. drone strike killed IRGC Qods Force Commander Qasem Soleimani, Dehghan stated that

> in any circumstances, we will not enter into an all-out war against the United States…Our retaliation must be resolute but proportionate to the action taken by the United States. We must be able to manage the conflict, contain its repercussions, and limit its scope. At the same time, our retaliation…must be a deterrent response that prevents the United States from repeating such crimes…Our response will be crushing, strong, and fateful, and it must have a deterrent effect…[but] at the same time, it must not lead to war with the United States.[9]

Since the June 2025 war, avoiding another war with the United States and Israel has become, more than ever, Iran's central concern. Accordingly, as long as the regime does not fear for its immediate survival, it is likely to tread lightly in its dealings with Washington and Jerusalem. In the face of a *potential* threat to its survival, it would likely use just that level of force necessary to avert the threat and inflict pain on its enemies, while husbanding resources for future rounds with the United States and Israel. An immediate threat to its survival, however, could cause Iran to lash out more violently—though its ability to do so was greatly diminished during the June 2025 war, and the forces it would need in such a scenario might be destroyed preemptively by the United States and Israel.

Managing Risk and Escalation: Tools and Repertoires

Many analysts are fond of explaining Tehran's military modus operandi largely in terms of proxies and deniability. While not incorrect, this explanation is incomplete. To operate in the gray zone and beyond, Iran has developed a diverse set of tools and repertoires to facilitate these activities, while managing risk and curbing the potential for escalation and war (see figure 2). This is how it works:

- **Deniability and standoff.** While deniability is sometimes important for Tehran, the regime generally makes no special effort to obscure its role in enabling proxy activities. Thus, weapons and munitions sent to proxies often still bear the data plates and logos of Iranian manufacturers.[10] More important for Tehran is the standoff afforded by proxies or long-range precision munitions like drones and missiles, which allow it to avoid becoming decisively engaged with the enemy. This approach worked for a very long time because the United States and Israel played largely by Tehran's rules, hitting back at its proxies and not at Iran itself. Thus, for decades the IRI dictated the terms of engagement with its enemies and avoided paying a military price for its policies, until Israel and the United States flipped the script and targeted Iran itself.

- **Protracting vs. intensifying**. In gray zone conflicts, advantage is generally accrued by cumulative gains rather than knockout blows. Tehran's patience, penchant for incremental action, and motivational advantages (at least prior to October 7, 2023) gave it an edge in its protracted gray zone conflicts with the United States and Israel, and ensured that the conflict would remain limited as long as the latter played by its rules. By contrast, escalation played to the strengths of the United States and Israel, which enjoy military overmatch and escalation superiority over the IRI, as was demonstrated by Israel's April and October 2024 airstrikes on Iran and the June 2025 war.

  Pacing, spacing, and calibrating. Tehran arranges its activities in time and space to avoid creating a sense of urgency or a perception of imminent threat in the minds of foreign decisionmakers, and to thereby prevent an overreaction and a loss of control over events. (The pacing of events may also be influenced to some extent by the demands of Iran's consensus decisionmaking.) Days, weeks, or months may pass between Iranian activities during a gray zone campaign, or before Iran responds to an adversary's actions.

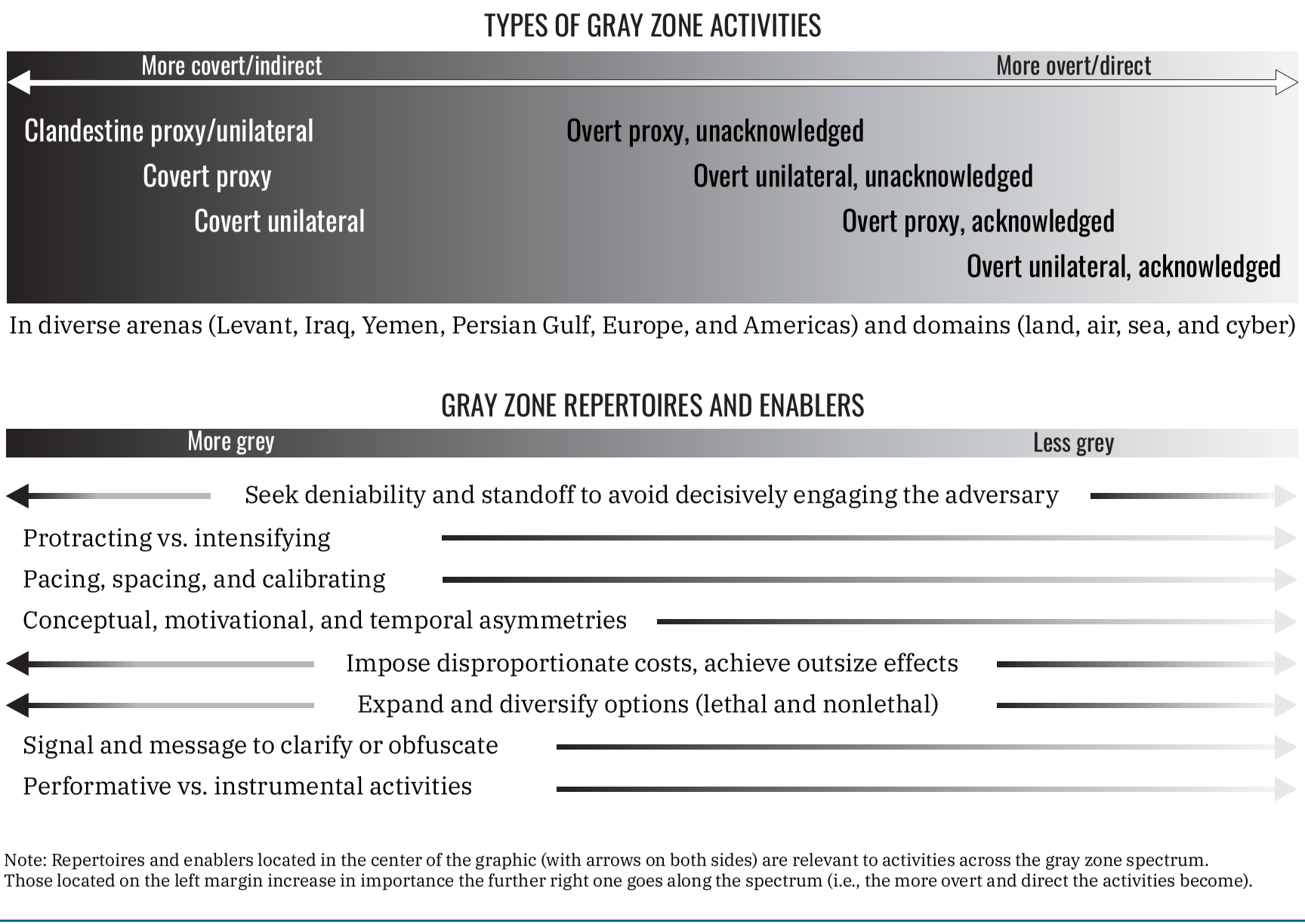
  Likewise, Tehran generally uses force in a measured, tit-for-tat manner, responding to a perceived challenge in a broadly proportional way. It does so to garner legitimacy for its actions, to be more predictable, and to telegraph its desire to keep the conflict within established bounds, thereby limiting the potential for miscalculation and escalation. Iran, however, has sometimes responded massively to adversary actions. Thus, it launched huge missile strikes on Israel in April and October 2024 in response to the killing of three IRGC Qods Force generals in Damascus and Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut, respectively. In both cases, Iran probably saw the responses as proportionate to the humiliation felt and the damage done.

- **Conceptual, motivational, and temporal asymmetries.** Iran's gray zone strategy has traditionally worked by leveraging key differences (i.e., asymmetries) in the way Tehran and its enemies think and operate. The most important asymmetry is conceptual. Iranian policymakers tend to see conflict as the natural state of affairs between nations, reflecting the eternal struggle between good and evil, oppressor and oppressed, justice and injustice. U.S. policymakers, by contrast, tend to see peace and war in stark, binary terms, drawing on cultural and legal traditions that conceive of peace as the natural state of affairs between nations, with wars being exceptional events. This creates opportunities for Iran to employ low-level violence in the gray zone between peace and war that exists in the minds of U.S. policymakers.

  Motivational asymmetries have also been important. The United States, as a great power with global commitments, cannot respond to every low-level challenge by Iran and its proxies. This creates space for Iran and its proxies to act, while facilitating efforts to contain conflict. After October 7, 2023, however, Israel concluded that Iran and its proxies posed an immediate existential threat, and since then it has enjoyed a motivational edge vis-à-vis Iran and its proxies.

  Finally, temporal asymmetries have played an underappreciated role in shaping escalation dynamics in the conflict. Iran has a three-thousand-year history and the IRI's leadership has been in power for decades. (Ali Khamenei became Supreme Leader in 1989, Qasem Soleimani headed the IRGC-QF for more than twenty years

Figure 2. Iran's Gray Zone Conflict Spectrum: Beyond Proxies and Deniability



Note: Repertoires and enablers located in the center of the graphic (with arrows on both sides) are relevant to activities across the gray zone spectrum. Those located on the left margin increase in importance the further right one goes along the spectrum (i.e., the more overt and direct the activities become).

before he was killed in 2020.) This allows Iran to pursue long-term strategies that require patient persistence. It will often defer confrontations so that it can engage its enemies under more favorable circumstances, thereby reducing the potential for escalation, while hoping to outlast them. By contrast, Americans and Israelis are often impatient and easily distracted, and this has frequently facilitated Iran's long game. But players of the long game risk having their carefully crafted strategies upended by adversaries willing to preempt them—as happened during the June 2025 war.

- **Imposing disproportionate costs, achieving outsize effects.** Iran has developed diverse means—rockets, aerial and naval drones, missiles—to impose disproportionate costs and produce outsize effects on its enemies. This reduces the potential for escalation by intimidating the IRI's enemies. The October 1983 suicide truck bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut by a shadowy group that later became Hezbollah, and the Iranian drone and cruise missile strike on Saudi oil-processing facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais in September 2019, exemplify low-tech asymmetric attacks that imposed disproportionate costs and yielded outsize effects. U.S. forces withdrew from Lebanon after the Marine barracks bombing, an operation that inspired generations of terrorists. And the attack on Saudi Arabia's oil industry was a dramatic wakeup call that highlighted the kingdom's vulnerability to attack. The lack of an overt American military response to the latter, moreover, demoralized Gulf allies, who felt that U.S. policy had put them in Tehran's crosshairs and then left them to fend for themselves.

- **Expanding options: lethal and nonlethal.** Over the past four decades, Iran has expanded its policy toolkit, creating diverse options for imposing costs on adversaries, including both lethal and nonlethal means. The utility of this approach was demonstrated when Iran responded to the U.S. "maximum pressure" policy, starting in May 2019, with a gray zone counterpressure campaign of "maximum resistance" that was, at least initially, nonlethal by design.

  Thus, during the first seven months of this campaign, Iran conducted dozens of nonlethal attacks on oil transport and infrastructure in the Gulf region, and on U.S. troops in Iraq. Indeed, prior to the aforementioned drone and cruise missile strike on Saudi Arabia's oil industry in September 2019, Supreme Leader Khamenei reportedly stipulated that no civilians or American personnel should be killed, presumably to limit the potential for escalation.[11] This strike demonstrated that disproportionate effects could be achieved by nonlethal means.

- **Signaling and messaging to clarify or obfuscate.** Iran's leaders generally seem to think that keeping their enemies guessing about their intentions bolsters deterrence. But when Iranian policymakers have faced intolerable risks, they have often used diplomatic channels and public messaging to clarify intentions and de-escalate. (U.S. and Israeli policymakers have learned to do so as well.) They have also used denial and dissimulation to save face and deflect pressures to retaliate.

  Thus, in January 2020, Iran reportedly notified Iraq and the United States of its plans to retaliate for the killing of Qasem Soleimani, giving U.S. troops time to shelter.[12] And after launching sixteen missiles at U.S. troops at al-Asad Air Base in Iraq, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif tweeted that Iran had "concluded" its operation and did not want further escalation or war.[13] Meanwhile, then–IRGC Aerospace Force Commander Amir Ali Hajizadeh claimed that the strike had killed many U.S. service members, enabling Iran to save face as it ceased fire. (In fact, none were killed, though more than one hundred suffered traumatic brain injuries.[14])

  When Hezbollah retaliated against Israel in August 2024 for killing the group's most senior military official, Fuad Shukr, it may have tacitly signaled its desire to keep the conflict within established bounds by launching 320 rockets and drones—approximately the same number of munitions that Tehran launched against Israel the previous April. Even though the attack was thwarted by an Israeli preemptive strike, Hezbollah claimed success—obviating the need to try again.[15] And prior to striking Iran's nuclear sites in June 2025, the United States reportedly notified Iran via Oman of its intention to do so—so that personnel could be evacuated to avoid unnecessary loss of life. Tehran likewise notified Washington prior to retaliating against al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar.[16]

- **Instrumental vs. performative activities.** Most of the activities of Iran and its proxies are instrumental in intent, undertaken to inflict material or human costs—though in a manner calculated to avoid escalation. When doing so is deemed too risky, they may engage in largely "performative" activities calculated to impress their supporters and harass their enemies, rather than kill them. Thus, following the U.S. strike on Tehran's nuclear

program, not only did Iran give notice of its response (as described above), it also launched a small missile salvo that was not likely to overwhelm enemy defenses—and it selected a hardened target (an air base), which reduced the likelihood of casualties. Likewise, most attacks by the groups comprising the so-called Islamic Resistance in Iraq (the Iraqi *muqawama*) from mid-2020 through mid-2022 targeted U.S. logistical convoys operated by Iraqi contractors, therefore entailing little chance of harming Americans. Dismayed, some resistance groups ridiculed such acts of performative resistance, calling for a more aggressive approach.[17]

Some observers have claimed that Iran's unprecedented missile strikes on Israel in April and October 2024 marked a fundamental departure from its traditional reliance on proxies in favor of direct attacks—thus marking a change in its "way of war." Although these actions set precedents, crossed red lines, and marked an intensification of the conflict, the fundamental logic guiding Iran's overall conduct remained unchanged: these were one-off actions that relied on standoff firepower, thereby ensuring that Iran would not become decisively engaged and that the conflict would remain limited. And they were carried out in the context of an overall strategy that still relied on incremental action, proxy activities, and the calibrated use of force to avoid escalation and war. After these strikes, Iran reverted to its traditional gray zone approach, with its emphasis on low-level proxy and unilateral violence, using the tools and repertoires it had developed over decades of gray zone campaigning. Thus, in all the ways that really mattered, the strikes on Israel in April and October 2024 represented more continuity than change, and a difference of degree rather than of kind.

The conflict entered a new phase when Israel launched a preventive attack on Iran's nuclear and missile programs—what has since become known as the June 2025 war. Though it was a dramatic escalation, it remained a limited war, using limited means, to achieve limited ends. As a war of long-range fires, neither side used its full military potential, and the tyranny of distance and various operational factors limited the rate at which Israel could generate fighter sorties and Iran could launch missiles. Moreover, Tehran had expected that Hezbollah's huge rocket and missile arsenal would be at its disposal, enabling it to achieve escalation dominance and to inflict mass destruction on Israel. With Israel's elimination of much of this force on September 23, 2024, Iran could no longer hope to achieve these objectives.

Throughout the war, both sides observed limits on the use of force: Iran did not attack the Israeli nuclear reactor at Dimona, while Israel launched several limited strikes on the IRI's oil and gas industry in order to demonstrate its ability to do so and deter attacks on its own critical infrastructure. And Tehran's largely token response to the U.S. strike on its nuclear program toward the end of the war reflected its desire to save face while avoiding further escalation, as U.S. involvement meant ending the war was now the order of the day.

Notes

1. This section draws heavily on Michael Eisenstadt: *Operating in the Gray Zone: Countering Iran's Asymmetric Way of War*, Policy Focus 162 (Washington Institute, 2020), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/operating-gray-zone-countering-irans-asymmetric-way-war; *Deterring Iran in the Gray Zone: Insights from Four Decades of Conflict*, Policy Note 103 (Washington Institute, 2021), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/deterring-America-gray-zone-insights-four-decades-conflict; and "Iran's Gray Zone Strategy: Cornerstone of Its Asymmetric Way of War," *PRISM* 9, no. 2 (2021), https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2541911/irans-gray-zone-strategy-cornerstone-of-its-asymmetric-way-of-war/.
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10. Michael Eisenstadt: *Operating in the Gray Zone: Countering Iran's Asymmetric Way of War*, Policy Focus 162 (Washington Institute, 2020), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/operating-gray-zone-countering-irans-asymmetric-way-war.
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3

Deterrence and Escalation Dynamics with Iran and Its Proxies: U.S. and Israeli Experiences

The United States and Israel have been engaged in protracted conflicts with the Islamic Republic for more than four decades, providing a wealth of insights into deterrence and escalation dynamics with Iran and its proxies. This chapter consists of two thumbnail case studies that describe recent U.S. and Israeli efforts, respectively, to deter and manage escalation with Iran and its proxies.

Case Study 1. The United States vs. the Axis of Resistance—From One Maximum Pressure Campaign to Another

Since the Islamic Republic's founding in 1979, Iran has been at war with the United States. The IRI believes that America seeks its overthrow so that it can dominate Iran and the region. Past bouts of conflict include:

- The takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and the holding of fifty-two American embassy employees hostage for 444 days (1979–81)
- The killing of 241 Marines in a Beirut truck bombing by a shadowy pro-Iran group that subsequently became Hezbollah (1983)
- U.S. operations to protect Persian Gulf shipping from Iranian attacks toward the end (1987–88) of the Iran-Iraq War, which led to a series of clashes with Iranian naval forces and the inadvertent downing of an Iranian airliner in July 1988, killing all 290 passengers aboard
- Iranian proxy attacks that killed more than six hundred U.S. troops in Iraq in the years following the 2003 U.S. invasion[1]
- Pressure and counterpressure campaigns both preceding the 2015 JCPOA and following the 2018 U.S. withdrawal from the deal, leading to tension and armed clashes between the two countries

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq transformed that country into the main arena of Iranian proxy warfare against the United States. In the two decades since, Iran and its proxies have been guided by a complex set of calculations that provide insight into how regime decisionmakers manage tensions and contradictions in their policies. While Iran has long sought to expel U.S. forces from Iraq,[2] it eventually came to believe there were short-term upsides to their presence:[3]

- The United States has repeatedly defeated Iran's strategic enemies: Iraq under Saddam Hussein, the Afghan Taliban (now resurgent), and most recently the Islamic State. If allowed to remain in Iraq, U.S. troops might once again help defeat IS if it makes a comeback in Syria.[4]
- U.S. troops could be targeted in Iraq (or in Syria) without serious diplomatic repercussions because of Tehran's influence in Baghdad, while attacks on U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates could have serious diplomatic repercussions and undermine Tehran's efforts to drive a wedge between them and Washington.
- Tehran feared that if its proxies ousted U.S. troops from Iraq, Washington might terminate sanctions waivers that provide a degree of sanctions relief for the Islamic Republic by allowing Baghdad to purchase gas and electricity from Iran. (Washington recently halted the electricity waivers to pressure Iran and nudge Iraq toward energy independence.[5])

If Iraq has been the main arena of conflict, Tehran's clandestine nuclear program eventually became the main source of contention after its existence was disclosed publicly in 2002. Preoccupied with the war on terrorism and then Iraq, the George W. Bush administration initially deferred to the EU3 (UK, France, and Germany) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and supported demands that Iran "suspend" enrichment and other nuclear activities, but Tehran agreed to do so only temporarily (in agreements with the EU3 between 2003 and 2005), insisting on its "right" to enrich. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was elected president of Iran in 2005, renewed enrichment, which led to the unraveling of the agreement with the EU3. In response, the IAEA referred Iran to the UN Security Council for noncompliance with its Safeguards Agreement. The Bush administration thereafter adopted a dual-track sanctions and incentives approach toward Iran, which the Obama administration continued.[6]

The administration of President Barack Obama agreed to negotiate "without preconditions" upon taking office in January 2009 and started direct talks with Iran regarding nuclear confidence-building proposals. When those failed, it authorized work on a new UN Security Council resolution (1929) sanctioning Iran, and engaged Congress and foreign partners regarding additional sanctions on Iran. Believing that ultimately the choice was between a deal permitting enrichment and war,[7] the Obama administration concluded an agreement with Iran in 2015 (the JCPOA) that imposed a fifteen-year cap on Iran's ability to enrich, and provided for enhanced monitoring by the IAEA in return for sanctions relief.[8] Upon expiration of these caps, the agreement would have permitted Iran to produce unlimited quantities of weapons-grade uranium, potentially providing a path to nuclear threshold status.

The first administration of President Donald Trump took office in January 2017, and in May 2018 it withdrew from the JCPOA—which the president had called "the worst deal ever"—initiating a policy of maximum pressure that it hoped would facilitate a comprehensive deal with Iran on the new administration's terms.[9] In May 2019, it tightened sanctions—ending waivers for eight countries that had continued to purchase Iranian oil—in an effort to halt oil exports and force Iran to the negotiating table. In response, Iran warned that if the sanctions were not lifted, it would progressively curtail compliance with the nuclear deal,[10] and it launched a gray zone "maximum resistance" counterpressure campaign to compel the United States to lift the sanctions. Washington stated, however, that only the death of American personnel would trigger a U.S. military response, effectively opening its regional allies to attack.[11]

Thus, in the summer and fall of 2019, Iran launched a series of limpet mine, drone, and cruise missile strikes on oil infrastructure and shipping in the Persian Gulf region, and downed a U.S. Global Hawk surveillance drone (see figure 3 for attacks by Iran and its proxies on U.S. and coalition interests since May 2018). Meanwhile, it ratcheted up proxy attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq, carrying out nineteen proxy mortar and rocket attacks in the first seven months of this campaign. Not once did U.S. forces reply kinetically until an American contractor was killed in December.[12] In response, the United States struck facilities in Iraq and Syria belonging to Kataib Hezbollah (KH), Iran's most important Iraqi proxy, killing twenty-five militiamen and wounding fifty, and in early January 2020, it launched the drone strike that killed Qasem Soleimani, who—U.S. officials claim—was plotting a series of attacks on U.S. embassies in the region.[13] (Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who headed KH and oversaw all pro-Iran militias in Iraq, was also killed in the strike.) Iran then launched sixteen missiles against U.S. military personnel at al-Asad Air Base in Iraq, while its Iraqi proxies launched a wave of rocket attacks against the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. This was followed by a relative lull until the summer, except for a rocket attack in March that killed three coalition soldiers.

In mid-2020, proxy attacks in Iraq gradually increased, but then fell off dramatically following U.S. threats of retaliation in the autumn and early winter. Washington had threatened to evacuate and close its embassy in Baghdad if attacks continued, which would have enabled it to attack Iran or its proxies without fearing blowback against U.S. personnel in Iraq.[14] During this period, Iran expanded its stockpile of enriched uranium, increased enrichment to 20 percent, and resumed centrifuge R&D work to create further leverage over Washington.

President Joe Biden took office in January 2021. His administration's initial focus was on deterrence, de-escalating tensions through diplomacy, and returning to the JCPOA—followed by the negotiation of a "longer and stronger" nuclear deal that would address other concerns as well, including Iran's missile program and its regional activities.[15] Initial efforts to engage were hindered by Iran's demand for the immediate lifting of nuclear sanctions, its rejection of direct talks, its demands for guarantees that the United States would not leave a new deal, and the election of a hardline president, Ebrahim Raisi, in June 2021. When talks resumed in November, Iran took an even tougher position, demanding sweeping changes

to points previously agreed upon, and the lifting of all sanctions.[16]

Meanwhile, pro-Iran proxies ramped up improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on U.S. logistical convoys in Iraq and targeted U.S. troops in Syria for the first time. Because the convoys in Iraq were operated by local contractors, these attacks were largely acts of "performative resistance" that enabled Iran's proxies to strike a defiant pose without risking harm to U.S. personnel. More ominously, however, Iran's proxies started using precision-guided suicide drones against U.S. troops in Iraq, and then Syria.

The United States responded to these attacks with great restraint in an effort to avoid escalation. Most of the time, U.S. forces responded by dispersing troops and hardening positions, intercepting—when possible—incoming munitions, and with counterbattery fire.[17] From the time President Biden took office in January 2021 to the Hamas-led massacre in Israel on October 7, 2023, U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria were attacked on ninety occasions—though many of these attacks sought to harass rather than harm—while the United States responded with airstrikes against militia infrastructure on four occasions.[18]

Moreover, during this period, Iran ramped up development and deployment of advanced centrifuges, increased enrichment to 60 percent, and grew its enriched-uranium stockpile, partly in response to Israeli attempts to sabotage the program. These developments further complicated ongoing nuclear diplomacy with Iran.[19]

In 2022–23, nuclear talks continued to founder, while Iran dramatically increased its stockpile of high-enriched uranium (HEU).[20] Absent progress toward a deal, Washington sought a series of informal understandings with Tehran to de-escalate tensions.[21] Thus, while warning Tehran not to produce weapons-grade uranium, Washington reportedly sought to halt the growth of Iran's HEU stockpile. The United States also sought a halt to attacks in Iraq and Syria, an end to the transfer of Iranian suicide drones to Russia,[22] and a deal to free American hostages held by Iran. In return, Tehran reportedly sought relief from U.S. oil sale sanctions,[23] the freeing of frozen Iranian funds,[24] and freedom for several Iranians convicted of sanctions violations and other crimes.

Some understandings were eventually reached. Proxy attacks in Iraq dropped significantly in mid-2022, while Iran's oil sales registered a significant increase with the relaxed enforcement of U.S. sanctions.[25] In September 2023, the United States and Iran conducted a prisoners-for-hostages swap, while Washington unfroze $6 billion in Iranian funds held largely in South Korean banks that were earmarked for humanitarian purposes. (The funds were transferred to Qatar, but frozen again after October 7.[26])

The Hamas-led October 7 attack on Israel upended U.S. efforts to de-escalate tensions with Iran. Attacks on U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria spiked dramatically, and three U.S. soldiers were killed in a January 2024 drone attack on the Tower 22 logistical base in eastern Jordan. The United States responded in early February 2024 with a major airstrike against seven IRGC-related facilities in Iraq and Syria, killing several dozen militiamen, and several days later carried out the targeted killing of a key KH commander in Baghdad.[27] Following these attacks, IRGC-QF Commander Brig. Gen. Esmail Qaani visited Iraq to tell Iran's proxies there to rein in attacks, resulting in a prolonged lull that continues to this day.[28] Tehran also temporarily reduced its stockpile of 60 percent–enriched uranium in the first months of 2024 by down-blending it—in perhaps another bid to manage tensions with the United States.[29]

By the time President Trump took office in January 2025, Iran had further stepped up its HEU production, possibly to enhance its bargaining leverage over the new administration,[30] which initially sought to address this challenge through negotiations. In March–May 2025, perhaps in part with an eye toward energizing nuclear diplomacy with Iran, the United States launched a seven-week air campaign against the Houthis, Operation Rough Rider, ostensibly to restore freedom of navigation through the Bab al-Mandab Strait.[31] The operation ended when the Houthis agreed to halt attacks on U.S. ships in the Red Sea—though they pledged to continue attacks on Israel and shipping with any connections to Israel as long as the war in Gaza continued.[32]

Meanwhile, nuclear talks remained stalled. In mid-March, President Trump sent a letter to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei proposing direct talks and warning of consequences if a nuclear deal was not concluded within sixty days after the start of negotiations.[33] By mid-2025, Iran had accumulated ten bombs' worth of HEU and a total of twenty-two bombs' worth of enriched uranium.[34] After President Trump's sixty-day ultimatum expired in mid-June, he quietly signaled support for an Israeli air campaign against Iran's nuclear and missile programs, which commenced on June 13, 2025, and later came to be informally known as the twelve-day war. The United States joined toward the end of the campaign with a bomber and cruise missile strike on June 22, 2025, against three

nuclear sites (Operation Midnight Hammer), and Iran responded with a missile strike on al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar. Both sides reportedly provided advance notice of their actions to limit the potential for casualties and to avoid escalation.[35] Since then, Iran has voiced defiance but it has not moved to rebuild its nuclear program—though it has continued work on a site destroyed by Israel in October 2024.[36] Reconstruction efforts to date have focused mainly on rebuilding Iran's air defenses and its ballistic missile array.[37]

Conclusion

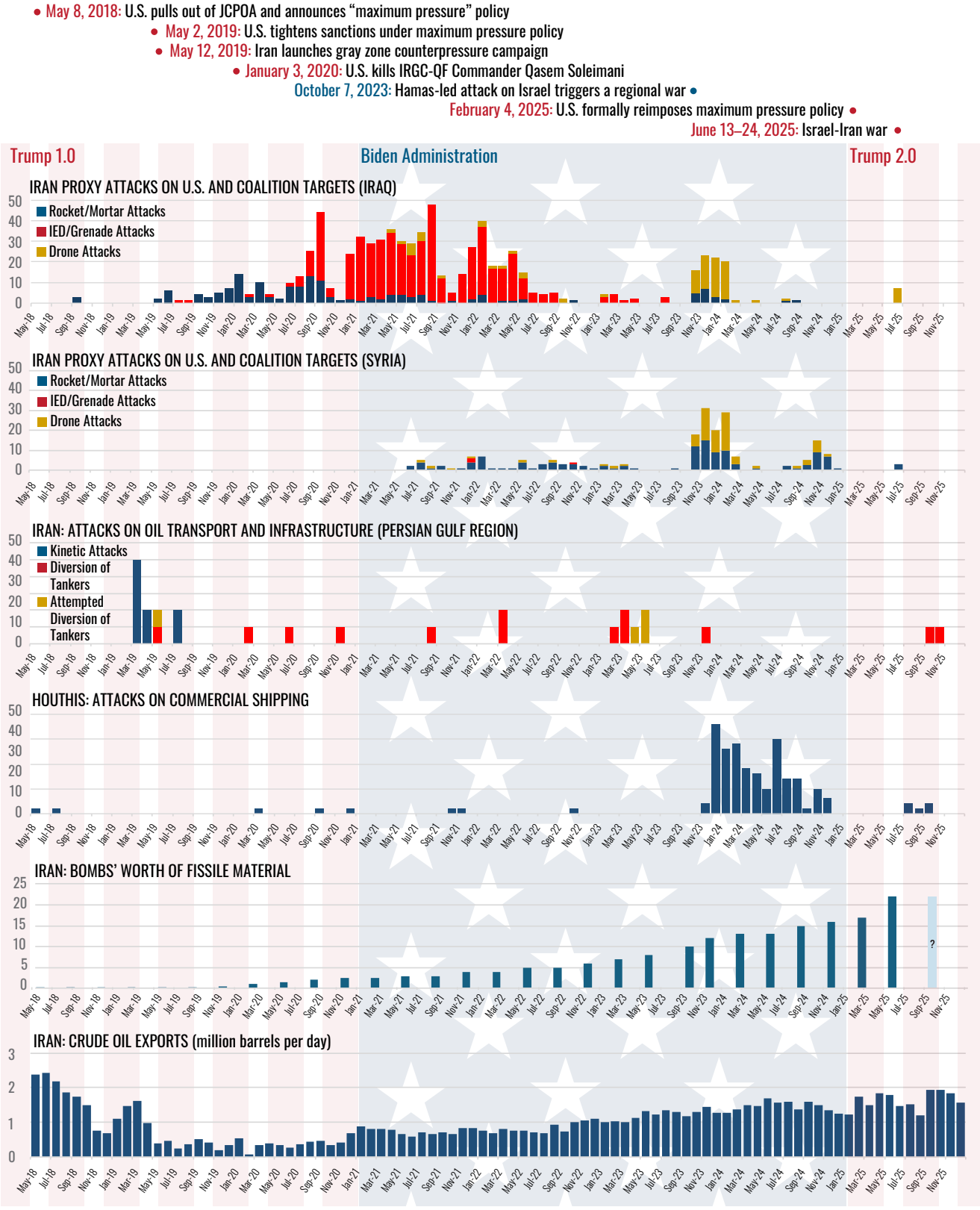
Washington has often struggled to deter Tehran, which has countered U.S. pressure campaigns with gray zone counterpressure campaigns. Iran has operated through proxies, using rockets, drones, and missiles to harass and impose costs, and has employed non-kinetic means that have proven hard to counter—hostage taking, cyber operations, and the stockpiling of HEU—to pressure the United States.

Washington, however, failing to understand how its own military capabilities inspire fear in others, has often been self-deterred and acted with inordinate restraint due to concerns that its actions could lead to "all-out" war. While diplomacy and blandishments (e.g., relaxed enforcement of sanctions) have sometimes induced Tehran and its proxies to temporarily tamp down or halt attacks on U.S. interests, this has often come at the price of pushback elsewhere.

Yet when Washington has flipped the script on Tehran and targeted high-value proxy and Iranian assets by kinetic means, such action has often halted attacks, at least temporarily. A willingness to escalate, impose costs, and target Iran itself has led to de-escalation, and to successful intrawar deterrence—rather than the "all-out" war some had predicted. This is because both sides developed tools and repertoires to limit the potential for escalation—although the United States did so on a slower timeline, as its past restraint hindered opportunities for operational learning.

Looking forward, Iran is likely to continue its efforts to undermine U.S. influence in the Middle East through gray zone activities—although growing unrest in the country and a more risk-acceptant and assertive leadership in Tehran could pose more complex deterrence and escalation management challenges, resulting in additional rounds of open conflict.

Figure 3. Iran's "Axis of Resistance" vs. the United States, May 2018–



Note: These graphs provide a reasonably accurate picture of activities involving Iran and its proxies that have shaped U.S.-Iran conflict dynamics, but they should not be considered definitive. They often obscure as much as they reveal; for instance, the graphs depicting proxy attacks on U.S. and coalition targets in Iraq and Syria do not display the numbers and size of the rockets used or the accuracy of the attacks—which often had a significant bearing on military effects and U.S. responses. Moreover, the graph that shows attacks by Iran on oil transport and infrastructure in the Persian Gulf region depicts only actions in response to U.S. measures and omits the many cases in which Iran diverted tankers involved in the smuggling of Iranian oil. By contrast, the graph depicting Houthi attacks on commercial shipping shows all incidents since May 2018 (the first occurred in April of that year), as freedom of navigation is a vital U.S. interest. For sources, see endnote 95 to this chapter.

Case Study 2. Israel vs. the Axis of Resistance: Culmination and Waypoint in the "Campaign Between Wars"

One of the Islamic Republic's foremost foreign policy objectives is the destruction of Israel.[38] To achieve that goal, the IRI has armed and trained proxies in Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen to surround Israel with a "ring of fire" and carry out October 7–type attacks.[39] In doing so, it hoped to enmesh Israel in a series of endless proxy wars that would tank the economy, spur emigration, and eventually lead to the conquest and destruction of the country.[40] Indeed, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has predicted Israel's demise by 2040.[41]

To counter these designs, for nearly two decades Israel waged a series of deterrence campaigns in Gaza to contain Hamas and ensure a degree of quiet there—what some Israelis have referred to as "mowing the grass"—while it addressed more pressing challenges elsewhere.[42] And since January 2013, Israel has waged a gray zone campaign of its own in Syria and beyond—its so-called campaign between wars—to prevent Iran from transferring advanced arms (surface-to-surface, antiship, and surface-to-air missiles) to Lebanese Hezbollah via Syria; to prevent Hezbollah from developing, with Iranian help, a precision missile production capability; and to prevent Iran from transforming Syria, with the help of its Iraqi proxies, into a platform for attacks on the Jewish state.[43] To this end, Israel conducted hundreds of airstrikes, raids, and covert actions in Syria to disrupt and delay these efforts.[44] It also conducted a number of covert operations in the maritime domain to disrupt covert oil shipments to Syria and Hezbollah.[45] But it generally eschewed attacks on Hezbollah in Lebanon, and it refrained from direct attacks on Iran—to avoid further escalation and the possibility of war.

Then, in 2022, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett announced what he called "the Octopus Doctrine," a new approach for dealing with Iran and its proxies.[46] Israel would no longer target only Iran's proxies (the octopus's "tentacles") but Iran itself (the octopus's "head")—by going after senior IRGC-QF officers in Iran and abroad.[47] This approach supplemented long-running covert campaigns of sabotage and targeted killings in Iran to disrupt and delay its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs.[48] However, absent a willingness to use military force to backstop these covert campaigns—and U.S. support to do so—Israel could only delay these efforts; halting or rolling them back was not possible. Hezbollah's growing rocket and missile force and Iran's expanding long-range missile arsenal threatened to further limit Israel's freedom of action, and to rain down mass destruction by conventional means in the event of war, while Iran's growing HEU stockpile raised the specter of a rapid nuclear breakout.

The October 7 Hamas-led attack changed all that; it came as a total surprise for Israel and signified a major deterrence failure as well. Hamas's leaders believed that Israel was vulnerable to attack due to the political and social divisions exposed by months of acrimonious protests over judicial reform, and they were encouraged by Arab-Jewish violence in Israel during a previous round of fighting in May 2021.[49] Muhammad Deif, head of Hamas's military organization in Gaza, apparently believed that the Arabs in Israel and the West Bank, along with the members of the axis of resistance (Iran and its other proxies—Hezbollah, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, and the Houthis) would join Hamas if it attacked Israel.[50]

By contrast, Israel's leaders believed that Hamas had been cowed by nearly two decades of deterrence campaigns,[51] that Hamas could not carry out a large-scale surprise attack,[52] and that Hamas was focused on tightening its grip over Gaza by improving economic conditions there.[53] Thus, on October 7, only 767 Israeli soldiers were deployed along the Gaza border to fend off an attack by about 5,000 fighters and civilians.[54]

The next day, on October 8, Hezbollah initiated daily attacks against military targets in northern Israel using rockets, mortars, antitank missiles, and drones, opening a "support front" to tie down Israeli forces and thereby help Hamas in Gaza. Israel, fearing an October 7–type attack on its northern border, evacuated some 65,000 residents from this area. Hezbollah responded by shelling the largely evacuated residential dwellings in the border villages and towns, seeking to make them uninhabitable.

In the following weeks, the Houthis (on October 19) and Iran's Iraqi proxies (on November 2) joined the fight (see figure 4 for attacks by Iran and its proxies on Israel since October 7, 2023). During the war, the Houthis attacked Red Sea shipping that they believed was linked to the Jewish state and launched more than 500 ballistic missiles and drones against Israel. Most failed en route or were downed by coalition forces in the Red Sea or by Israeli defenses; only a handful struck targets in Israel, killing one civilian.[55] For its part, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq launched at least

381 drones and cruise missiles at Israel, although fewer than a quarter reached Israeli territory or airspace; only four struck targets in Israel, killing two soldiers.[56] Meanwhile, Iran ramped up its support for Palestinian terrorist cells in the West Bank by smuggling in money and weapons, further aggravating the deteriorating security situation there.[57] Iran and Hezbollah also increased cyberattacks on Israel by more than 300 percent after the start of the war, though none were strategically consequential.[58]

Hezbollah's decision to open a support front was a second Israeli deterrence failure. Prior to October 8, an increasingly tenuous balance of deterrence existed along the Israel-Lebanon border. For years, Israel's responses to Hezbollah provocations were generally measured and nonlethal, to limit the potential for escalation—due to concerns over Hezbollah's growing rocket and missile force.[59] Israeli restraint, however, emboldened the group, which carried out a number of hostile acts in the first half of 2023. Thus, Hezbollah attempted an audacious cross-border IED attack in March, allowed a Hamas cell in southern Lebanon to launch rockets into northern Israel in April, and set up tents on the Israeli side of the border in June.[60]

After October 8, however, Israel responded forcefully, focusing on eliminating the threat to its northern border, while deterring further escalation. To this end, it targeted the 7,000–10,000 fighters of Hezbollah's elite Radwan Force in southern Lebanon, who would have spearheaded any October 7–type assault against northern Israel, in an effort to push them away from the border.[61] The dispatch, moreover, of two U.S. carrier strike groups to the East Mediterranean early in the conflict may have deterred Hezbollah from expanding its war against Israel,[62] or induced Iran to prevent Hezbollah from doing so to ensure that its foremost proxy would be available for future contingencies.[63]

The situation along the border during the first ten months of the war, however, remained highly volatile. Three days after an errant rocket launched from Lebanon killed a dozen children in the Druze village of Majdal Shams in the Golan Heights on July 27, 2024, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) killed Hezbollah military chief Fuad Shukr and successfully preempted a massive Hezbollah retaliatory strike on August 25, consisting of three hundred rockets and twenty drones.[64]

With combat in Gaza entering a less intensive phase—the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) had already conducted extensive forays into Gaza City, Khan Yunis, and Rafah, but was unwilling to enter the refugee camps around Deir al-Balah where Israeli hostages were believed to be held—Israel commenced a new phase in its war with Hezbollah:[65]

- Israel launched a spectacular operation on September 17–18 that was years in the making, using booby-trapped pagers and walkie-talkies to kill more than forty Hezbollah operatives and wound more than three thousand.[66]

- The IAF killed nearly the entire senior leadership of Hezbollah's Radwan Force on September 20 as it met in Beirut.

- The IAF destroyed most of Hezbollah's rocket force and precision missile array on September 23 in an intense, wide-ranging aerial blitz that lasted only several hours.

- The IAF killed Hassan Nasrallah, the organization's iconic leader, on September 27 by dropping more than eighty MK-84 two-thousand-pound bombs on Hezbollah's Beirut headquarters.

- Israeli ground forces swept into southern Lebanon on October 1, and in the weeks that followed methodically dismantled the military infrastructure created by Hezbollah to support an October 7 –type attack on Israel.

On November 27, Hezbollah agreed to a ceasefire that required it to disarm. By then, in post–October 8 combat, Israel had killed more than 5,000 Hezbollah fighters and wounded more than 13,000,[67] while losing 80 soldiers.[68] Israel reportedly also destroyed 70–80 percent of Hezbollah's rocket and missile arsenal, leaving it with fewer than a hundred precision-guided missiles.[69] Meanwhile, some 100,000 Lebanese residents had fled the war zone for safety.

One of the indirect consequences of Israel's defeat of Hezbollah was the fall of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024 following a military offensive by rebel forces led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. The fall of the Assad regime has greatly hindered Iran's efforts to resupply Hezbollah and ended its efforts to transform Syria into a platform for attacks on Israel.

Since agreeing to the ceasefire, Hezbollah has tried to rearm and reestablish its presence and infrastructure in southern Lebanon and elsewhere, in violation of the agreement. Consequently, Israel has continued to act against Hezbollah, conducting nearly a thousand airstrikes and hundreds of ground operations and killing more than four hundred Hezbollah operatives as part of its post–October 7 zero tolerance policy regarding threats to its security. For its part, Hezbollah

has responded only a handful of times.[70] It is hard to conceive of a more dramatic reversal of the prewar deterrence equation.

Israel and Hezbollah had proved adept at avoiding major escalation for the first year of the war. Hezbollah knew that a broader, more intense conflict could do great harm to its military capabilities and to its supporters, and might spark a popular backlash in Lebanon. But by attacking Israel and participating in the war, it ensured that Israel would eventually escalate—given the deep intelligence penetration and decisive military-technical overmatch the IDF had achieved vis-à-vis Hezbollah since the 2006 war. Reeling from the blows it had been dealt and likely fearful of losing its remaining capabilities, Hezbollah was compelled to abandon its prior insistence on linking a ceasefire in Lebanon with a ceasefire in Gaza.

Israel and Iran also demonstrated an impressive ability to manage their conflict after October 7, until Israel launched its preventive war against the Islamic Republic. The road to Tehran, however, was anything but direct.

On April 1, 2024, Israel struck a satellite annex of the Iranian embassy in Damascus, killing seven IRGC-QF officers—three of them generals. This included Brig. Gen. Mohammad Reza Zahedi, the Qods Force commander responsible for Lebanon and Syria, who was eulogized in Tehran as a principal planner of the October 7 attack.[71]

Iran retaliated on April 13 with its first-ever direct attack on Israel, consisting of 331 munitions (110 ballistic missiles, 36 cruise missiles, and 185 suicide drones) targeting Israeli military facilities.[72] Iran telegraphed its intention to strike and took two weeks to plan for the operation, giving Israel, the United States, and their partners (UK, France, Jordan, and several other regional states) time to prepare for the onslaught and to mount an effective defense.[73] As a result, only seven to nine missiles got through, and only one person was injured.

Iran likely expected more munitions to get through, but not enough to spark a war. This was not a performative act, as some have claimed, for Tehran could have created an aerial spectacle with far fewer munitions and claimed success—no matter the outcome. It took nearly two weeks to respond because complex operations take time to prepare, while the regime likely relished the opportunity to make its enemies sweat and squirm as they awaited its response. There is no evidence that the delay was meant to afford Israel time to prepare in order to avoid heavy losses, and thereby preclude further escalation. Finally, an emboldened Iran may have believed, like Hamas did, that Israel was unraveling from within, and with this attack it sought to create—in the words of then–IRGC Commander Gen. Hossein Salami—"a new equation" with Israel in which "any attack" on Iranian "people, property, or interests" would prompt "a reciprocal [direct] response from…the Islamic Republic."[74]

This episode also highlighted a major difference in approach between Israel and the United States. After the Iranian strike, President Biden urged Israel to "take the win" and forgo a response.[75] This reflected a preference for deterrence by denial. Israel, however, wanted to hit back hard, reflecting a preference for deterrence by punishment.[76] Israel eventually responded with a standoff strike that neutralized a single S-300 surface-to-air (SAM) battery near Isfahan. It likely calculated that a limited response would preclude tensions with Washington and escalation with Tehran—while deterring further attacks by creating options for follow-on strikes.[77]

Tehran had taken its best shot, Israel emerged unscathed—thanks in no small part to the U.S.-led coalition—and it lost its fear of Iran in the process. Israel would soon challenge Tehran's attempt to create a new deterrence equation by killing Hezbollah military chief Fuad Shukr in Beirut on July 30, and Hamas politburo head Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran the next day. Warnings to Iran from President Biden, along with the dispatch of a second carrier strike group and a guided missile submarine to the region in early August, may have deterred Iran from retaliating further.[78] Hezbollah, by contrast, responded to Shukr's killing by attempting a massive rocket and drone strike on August 25 that the IAF preempted.

After Israel killed Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah in September 2024, Supreme Leader Khamenei initially seemed content to allow Hezbollah to avenge its leader's death. However, under pressure from IRGC hardliners, he apparently reconsidered his position, and Iran retaliated on October 1 with a barrage of two hundred missiles.[79] Some 180 entered Israeli airspace (about 20 apparently malfunctioned upon launch or en route) and a large number were intercepted by Israeli and U.S. missile defenses. More than forty landed in Israel, which reported no casualties—though a Palestinian in the West Bank was killed by falling debris from an Iranian missile.

Israel responded with an airstrike on October 26 that neutralized Iran's three remaining S-300 SAM batteries and damaged several missile production and nuclear weapons R&D–related facilities.[80] Iran's

leaders pledged to retaliate, but recognizing that they could no longer defend the country's airspace, they opted for restraint.[81] Iran might have also feared that retaliation could spur Israel to attack economic targets or prompt President Biden to support an Israeli strike on its nuclear program during his final months in office.

Instead, Tehran increased production of HEU to one bomb's worth a month.[82] In addition, for the first time in more than twenty years, it resumed nuclear weapons R&D work, perhaps to facilitate a rapid nuclear breakout.[83] And seeing how massive missile salvos could not penetrate Israeli defenses, it launched an effort to double or triple its inventory of 2,500 missiles within a few years so that it could overwhelm Israeli defenses in future confrontations.[84]

In light of these developments, Israel, which vowed after October 7 to never again remain passive in the face of looming existential threats, launched a preventive attack (Operation Rising Lion) against Iran's nuclear and missile programs on June 13, 2025. On June 22, the United States joined the attack, conducting B-2 bomber and Tomahawk cruise missile strikes (Operation Midnight Hammer) on Iran's three main nuclear sites.

During Rising Lion, Israel killed eleven senior nuclear scientists and more than thirty senior military officers. It destroyed more than eighty SAM batteries (about 80% of Iran's air defenses). It destroyed much of Iran's ballistic missile array, including between one-half and two-thirds (200–300) of its mobile missile launchers, about half (800–1,000) of its surviving long-range missiles, and various missile production facilities.[85] Most important, IAEA chief Rafael Grossi assessed that Iran's main nuclear enrichment facilities had incurred "very serious damage" and "are not functioning anymore." However, its stockpiles of HEU apparently remain buried at Isfahan, Natanz, and Fordow, and Iran may retain stocks of spare centrifuges that it could use to restart enrichment.[86] As for the war's human toll, Tehran reported that 1,062 people (786 military personnel and 276 civilians) were killed, and human rights organizations reported 4,475 injured.[87]

For its part, Iran launched more than 550 missiles and 1,000 drones at Israel. (According to one unverified report, an additional 120–150 missiles failed to launch due to sabotage.[88]) About 50 missiles and 1 drone got through Israeli defenses, killing 33, wounding 3,343, and displacing some 15,000 people whose dwellings were damaged or destroyed.[89] Several military facilities were also reportedly hit during the war, while the Bazan Oil Refinery in Haifa, Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, and Soroka Medical Center in Beersheba incurred significant damage.[90] In retaliation for the U.S. strike on its nuclear program, Iran launched fourteen ballistic missiles at al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar; thirteen were intercepted and one got through, reportedly damaging a communications facility.[91]

Despite the potential for escalation, the conflict was contained. Iran did not target Israel's nuclear reactor in Dimona, and other than several carefully calibrated signaling strikes against petrochemical facilities by both sides, neither conducted sustained attacks on critical infrastructure.[92] Moreover, the presence of one, and sometimes two, U.S. carrier strike groups in the Arabian Sea at various times since October 7 may have deterred Iran from expanding the conflict to the Gulf.

Since the June 2025 war, Iran has tried to revive Hezbollah, rearm the Houthis, reconstitute its air defenses, and rebuild its arsenal of missiles and drones. There are no signs, however, that it has tried to rebuild its nuclear program—perhaps biding its time while considering its options, given the potential risk of attempting to do so.[93] It has shown, however, that it remains a determined and persistent adversary; it will not be deterred from reconstituting its conventional capabilities, while waiting for the right time to reconstitute its nuclear program. Meanwhile, Israel has launched a new phase of its expanded campaign between wars, conducting almost daily airstrikes and ground operations in Lebanon while waging covert activities in Iran to prevent it from rebuilding.[94]

The events that followed October 7 dealt a severe blow to Iran's quest for regional dominance. In the past four decades, the IRI had transformed itself, through great effort, from a strategically lonely country to the leader of the region's most cohesive bloc—the axis of resistance; from a country encircled by enemies after the September 11, 2001, attacks (with U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf) to a country that surrounded its enemies with well-armed proxies and threatened them with long-range missiles; and from a nuclear aspirant to a nuclear threshold state whose status as such was legitimized by the 2015 nuclear deal.

Many of these achievements have now come undone; Tehran's axis of resistance, its missile program, and its nuclear program have all sustained heavy blows. And Iran remains vulnerable to attack by covert Israeli teams operating on its own territory, and by Israeli and American aircraft that would likely enjoy unimpeded access to its airspace in another round of fighting.

The June 2025 war also marked the near total collapse of Iran's national security concept. Since the early 1980s, the Islamic Republic has used proxies to fight its enemies far from its borders while avoiding a war with the United States or Israel. During the war, it was forced to fight on its own turf—without the help of proxies or allies—against both Israel and the United States. And its nuclear hedging strategy, designed to enable it to become a nuclear threshold state while avoiding an Israeli or American attack, ultimately hastened the very outcome it was designed to prevent.

Conclusion

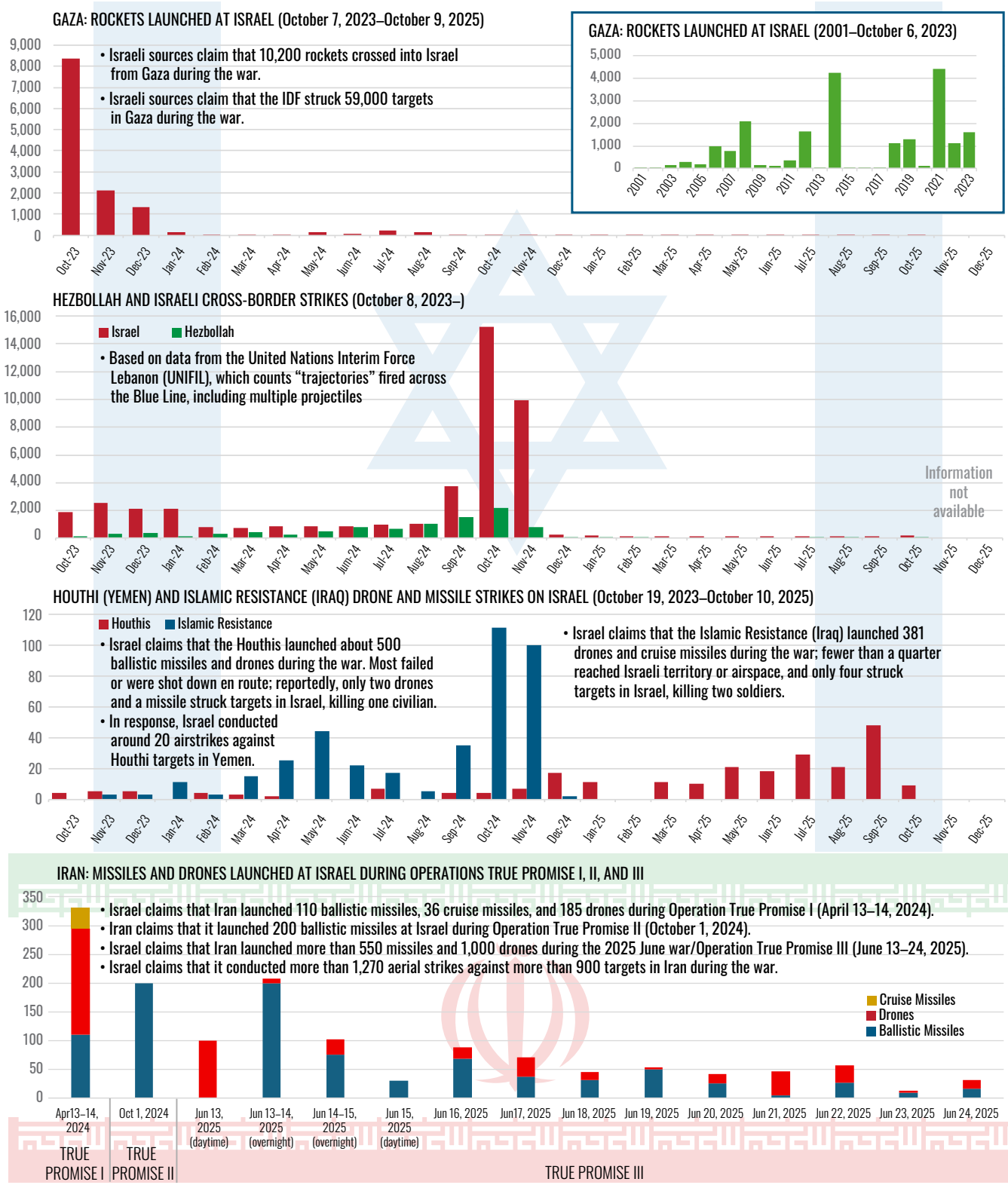
Prior to October 7, Israel's effort to disrupt Iran's designs had slowed the buildup of capabilities in the axis of resistance and thwarted Syria's transformation into a platform for attacks on the Jewish state. It had failed, however, to prevent the emergence of a proxy "ring of fire" or to halt the progress of Iran's nuclear and missile programs. Iran and its proxies had effectively deterred Israel from acting decisively against these looming threats. Moreover, Israel's deterrence campaigns in Gaza and the various branches of its campaign between wars in Syria and beyond had failed to prevent the attacks of October 7 and after.

Yet October 7 profoundly altered this dynamic. With war against the axis of resistance now deemed by Israel a matter of national survival, it reaped the benefits of its decade-long campaign between wars, which had laid the intelligence foundation and provided the operational learning needed to defeat the axis. Israel's successes in the military campaigns that followed were enabled by extensive intelligence preparation, decisive military-technical overmatch, steadfast determination to confront an existential threat—and the stalwart support of the United States.

Israel's post–October 7 military campaigns flipped the script on its enemies and reversed the prewar deterrence equation. Israel now enjoys significant latitude to act against Iran and its proxies, and deters them in important ways—though not in every way that is important. While Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iran are trying to rearm, Israel and the United States are trying to stop them. Much will depend on whether (1) Israel's policy of "mowing the grass," which failed in Gaza on October 7, can succeed in the post–June 2025 war era with Iran and its proxies; and (2) Israel's pursuit of absolute security through prevention is a sustainable policy, or if it will have to eventually submit once again to the vexing uncertainties of deterrence.

Figure 4. Iran's "Axis of Resistance" vs. Israel, October 7, 2023–

- October 7, 2023: Hamas-led attack on Israel triggers a regional war; group agrees to a ceasefire on October 9, 2025.
- October 8, 2023: Hezbollah launches rocket, missile, and drone strikes on Israel; group agrees to a ceasefire on November 27, 2024, though fighting has continued since then.
- October 19, 2023: Houthis launch drone and missile strikes on Israel; they agree to halt attacks after Hamas accepts a ceasefire on October 9, 2025.
- November 2, 2023: Islamic Resistance in Iraq launches drone strikes on Israel; following Hezbollah's lead, it agrees to halt attacks on December 23, 2024.
- June 13–24, 2025: Israel-Iran war



Note: These graphs provide a reasonably accurate depiction of conflict dynamics between Israel, Iran, and its proxies since October 7, 2023. They should not be considered definitive, however, as different sources often provide conflicting data regarding the scope, intensity, and duration of these activities. Please note that the vertical axes of all the bar graphs are drawn to different scales, as is the horizontal axis of the Iran bar graph. For sources, see endnote 96 to this chapter.

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4

Insights: Conventional Deterrence

The past four decades have yielded numerous insights about how to deter Iran and its proxies; these were largely confirmed by the events that followed the Hamas-led attack on October 7, 2023, and the June 2025 war.

Dictate the Terms of Engagement

For decades, the United States and Israel played by Tehran's rules, responding to proxy attacks by attacking its proxies. This left the Islamic Republic unscathed and undeterred—thereby enabling its long game. Experience in recent years has shown, however, that (1) the best way to derail Iran's long game is by preempting it; (2) the best way to counter Tehran's proxy strategy is by taking the fight to Iran itself; and (3) the most effective way to deter Tehran is to impose costs—leaving the IRI and its proxies worse off (more vulnerable, less capable, and more unstable) than before.

Since October 7 in particular, the United States and Israel have been more willing to push back against Iran's proxies: disrupting their activities, imposing costs, and in the case of Israel, inflicting searing defeats. Moreover, Israel broke the taboo against direct attacks on Iran with airstrikes in April and October 2024, along with its devastating June 2025 preventive war, which the United States eventually joined.

Israel's ability to turn the tables on Iran was enabled by the decimation of Hezbollah's rocket and missile force—Iran's de facto strategic deterrent—in an intense aerial blitz on September 23, 2024, which cleared the way for the aerial assault on Iran more than eight months later. Both operations were facilitated by extensive intelligence preparation, decisive military-technical overmatch, steadfast determination in the face of a perceived existential threat, and in the case of the attack on Iran, essential U.S. support. Israel was also aided by the tendency of Iran's leaders to drag out negotiations, which probably convinced Washington to support its plan to attack.

Since the June 2025 war, Iran has been deterred from taking major steps to rebuild its nuclear program, knowing this would likely prompt a renewed strike. However, it is testing Israel and the United States by rebuilding its ballistic missile program—wagering that this might be a wedge issue between the two. Much will depend, then, on whether the United States and Israel present a united front on this challenge, and whether Israel can deal with it on its own by covert means and long-range strikes, if the United States decides that it has other priorities.[1]

Deterrence Effects Are Often Short-Lived

Iran is a patient, persistent adversary; if action in one geographic arena or operational domain is deemed too risky or proves too costly, Iran will pause before resuming its activities under more favorable circumstances, or it will push back elsewhere. This is why it constantly seeks to expand its policy toolkit to maximize its options. It is also why with Iran, deterrence effects are often short-lived. Thus, after the United States killed Qasem Soleimani, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that American deterrence had been "restored."[2] Yet within several months, its proxies had resumed attacks against U.S. troops in Iraq while Tehran plotted to kill American officials involved in Soleimani's death. Moreover, experience shows that Iran will always find ways to impose costs by means that are difficult to counter or that fall below the U.S. response threshold—for instance, by taking hostages, launching nondestructive cyberattacks, or stockpiling HEU. As a result, these activities have become normalized.

IRGC Aerospace Force Commander Amir Ali Hajizadeh, who was killed during the twelve-day war, succinctly captured the dynamic nature of the gray zone deterrence challenge when he said:

> Maintaining deterrence is like riding a bicycle… you have to keep pedaling all the time, or else, the bicycle will fall. Therefore, deterrence does not mean that you reach a certain point, and then you frame it, put it in some corner, and say that you have deterrence. No. You have to preserve it.[3]

Former CENTCOM Commander Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. likewise captured this dynamic with his concept of "contested deterrence," which implies that efforts to deter Iran will be continuously challenged, and therefore require constant tending.[4]

Many American policymakers and analysts seem to think about conventional deterrence—in the gray zone or beyond—in the same way they think about war and peace: in either/or terms. This tendency toward binary thinking is probably a vestige of Cold War–era nuclear deterrence theory, where deterrence either succeeded or failed—and failure meant disaster (more on this below). But as shown by the case studies above, conventional deterrence is *not* a binary, either/or matter; mixed outcomes are the norm. Thus, successful conventional deterrence in the gray zone generally consists of inducing the adversary to act less often, using less capable means, against less consequential targets.

General Deterrence Challenges, Immediate Deterrence Opportunities

Iran's foreign policy is characterized by strategic consistency and tactical flexibility. Once Tehran commits to a broad policy, it usually stays the course, making general deterrence difficult. But, as mentioned above, it will often back down from a particular course of action when challenged and will push back elsewhere—even if this yields less advantageous outcomes. Thus:

- When Tehran's attacks on oil transport and infrastructure in summer 2019 had no effect on U.S. policy, Iran's proxies stepped up rocket attacks against American troops in Iraq.[5]
- When rocket attacks on U.S. personnel in Iraq in mid-2020 risked further escalation, Iran's proxies eventually ramped up IED attacks on U.S convoys operated by Iraqi contractors—which posed little danger to Americans there.
- When escalating attacks in Iraq risked a political backlash against Iran's proxies in mid-2021, they shifted attacks to Syria.

While much of Iran's conduct is best understood through a systems approach—in which actions in various arenas and domains reflect a unified policy logic playing out on a three-dimensional game board—some Iranian actions should be seen as narrow, tit-for-tat responses to specific actions by the United States or its allies. These include efforts to kill former U.S. officials to avenge the 2020 killing of Qasem Soleimani;[6] perennial cyber interference in U.S. elections in response to perceived U.S. efforts to foment regime change in Iran;[7] and the occasional diversion of foreign tankers in the Persian Gulf in response to the seizure of Iranian oil or other cargoes by the United States or its allies, as occurred in July 2019, March 2023, and in November and December 2025.[8]

Who, What, and How of Deterrence

For proxies, deterrence dynamics are shaped primarily by each group's unique "personality" and relationship with Tehran. For the Islamic Republic, its decision calculus and internal politics are paramount. And in both cases, deterrence dynamics are shaped by the activities being deterred—whether kinetic, cyber, or nuclear—as well as the adversary's deterrence strategy.

PROXY GROUP "PERSONALITY"

The proxies in Iran's axis of resistance all ostensibly embrace a culture of jihad, martyrdom, and resistance,[9] and believe in their inevitable triumph because while their enemies "love life…we love death."[10] Yet, in fact, they vary greatly in their tolerance for risk, which affects their responsiveness to deterrence threats.

For instance, Hezbollah, the linchpin of Tehran's axis, has generally been relatively cautious and risk-averse. This is due to its proximity to Israel, which makes it more vulnerable militarily than more distant proxies; its participation in Lebanese politics, which constrains its options; and the need to avoid actions that could cause grievous harm to its largely Shia support base. Yet its domestic and regional standing has also depended on its continued commitment to

armed "resistance" to Israel. Hezbollah's leaders must balance all these factors in their decisionmaking.

Iran's Iraqi proxies face similar constraints. Many participate in Iraqi politics and must consider the impact of their actions on their political prospects. They are also subject to pressures from rivals and allies, and from an Iraqi government in turn subject to pressure from both the United States and Iran. It is therefore not surprising that after seeing Hezbollah eviscerated, the members of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq announced in December 2024 that they would follow Hezbollah's lead and cease attacks against Israel (in response to Israeli warnings that the *muqawama* and the Iraqi government would be held responsible if they did not do so).[11]

The Houthis, by contrast, are not constrained by domestic politics and are imbued with a tribal conception of manhood and honor, a zealous commitment to jihad, and a triumphalist ethos rooted in a string of military victories since 2014. Like the Islamic State in its heyday, the Houthis are highly risk-acceptant, which poses difficult deterrence challenges. A protracted and bloody military campaign that includes Yemeni-led ground operations which threaten the Houthis' control of terrain may be the best way to alter their deterrence calculus—though such an option is not currently on the table.[12] However, while the Houthis have warned that their pause in attacks on Israel—tied to the Gaza ceasefire concluded in October 2025—would last only as long as the ceasefire did, they have not renewed attacks even though Israel continues to conduct strikes in Gaza in response to Hamas's refusal to disarm.[13] It is not clear if this is because the Houthis are deterred, recuperating from recent Israeli and U.S. strikes, or preoccupied with internal politics—though it indicates that even their enthusiasm for warmaking has limits.

PROXY TIES TO TEHRAN

It would seem that groups most closely tied to Tehran should be most easily deterred by pressuring Iran. But reality is more complex. Iranian policymakers have generally deferred to Hassan Nasrallah's judgment concerning Israel and traditionally granted him significant latitude in dealing with the Jewish state. Thus, Hezbollah has sometimes taken calculated risks with Israel, and its success in pushing Israeli forces out of Lebanon in 2000 and fighting them to a standstill in 2006 burnished its resistance narrative—even if the latter war also caused tensions with Tehran due to the high costs it entailed. These past successes, however, contributed to a series of miscalculations by Hezbollah in 2023–24 that cost it dearly.[14] On the other hand, Hezbollah's massive rocket and missile arsenal served as Iran's de facto strategic deterrent vis-à-vis Israel. It was therefore considered too valuable to risk in the routine "resistance" activities for which Tehran relied on its other proxies, and Supreme Leader Khamenei forbade Hezbollah from expanding the war against Israel after October 7, for the regime wanted to ensure that the group remained available to assist Iran should it be attacked, or should it decide to launch an attack on Israel.[15]

By contrast, Tehran's various Iraqi proxy groups have always been an unruly flock. Some have proven less responsive to Tehran's guidance than others, though Iran has generally been able to keep them in line. Thus, although several groups opposed the return of U.S. troops to help fight the Islamic State in 2015, Qasem Soleimani convinced them not to actively oppose it.[16] And while Soleimani's stature enabled him to impose discipline over them, his successor, Esmail Qaani, has struggled to do so. For example, in November 2021, Asaib Ahl al-Haq launched a drone attack on Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi's residence, reflecting tensions between the group and the prime minister, which almost certainly would not have happened if Soleimani had been alive.[17] But toeing Tehran's line is the general rule. Thus, Iran's Iraqi proxies ceased attacks on Israeli and U.S. interests during the brief November 2023 ceasefire between Hamas and Israel. And after three American soldiers were killed in Jordan in January 2024, attacks on U.S. personnel were halted at Qaani's behest to avoid further escalation.[18] Yet they have not heeded his request to cease attacks on the Iraqi Kurdistan region—probably because the Kurds are a much less risky target than the Americans.[19]

Hamas, though a beneficiary of Iran's military largesse, was never truly a proxy. Indeed, during the Syrian civil war, it supported rebels fighting the Bashar al-Assad regime, causing a prolonged rift with Tehran. Hamas always pursued its own narrow interests, constantly provoking Israel by rocket and other attacks. Since 2005, this has led to numerous clashes and five wars—including the longest Arab-Israeli war to date. But Tehran supported Hamas because its strategy was to enmesh Israel in a series of endless proxy wars that would lead to its destruction.[20] If Hezbollah was too valuable to use in this way, Hamas was eager to play such a role—for its own reasons. Hamas was also emboldened by a series of political and military successes and a reading of history that made it hard to deter. These include its 2007 takeover of Gaza; past success deterring major Israeli ground incursions into Gaza; growing tensions in Israeli society—between Arabs and Jews, and among Jews; the belief that if

Hamas attacked Israel, the axis of resistance would join in;[21] and its belief that victory over Israel was within reach.[22]

Finally, the Houthis have always insisted on their independence from Tehran—a situation that serves Iran's interests, as it can claim that it lacks the ability to control what may now be its most capable proxy. Yet the autonomy of its proxies is also a problem for Tehran. On at least two occasions, proxies initiated devastating wars with Israel without prior coordination: Hezbollah in 2006 and Hamas in 2023. The Hamas-led attack on October 7, moreover, led to the unraveling of Iran's regional alliance network and a war with Israel and the United States that has raised the prospect of additional rounds of fighting. So, while Tehran's proxy strategy has often complicated its adversaries' deterrence efforts, it has also created major complications for Iran itself.

TEHRAN'S CALCULUS

The IRI has always prioritized its own interests over those of its proxies or of non-Iranian Shia communities. Thus, the Islamic Republic has repeatedly abandoned beleaguered Shia communities to their fate rather than intervene on their behalf. This occurred when Iraqi Shia rose up against Saddam Hussein in 1991; when Afghan Shia Hazaras were slaughtered by the Taliban in 1998; when Hezbollah went to war with Israel in 2006; and when protests involving largely Shia demonstrators in Bahrain were crushed by security forces in 2011.

Likewise, the IRI's proxies exist to serve Iran, not vice versa, and the regime has offloaded onto them the risks and costs it refuses to incur itself. Thus, Tehran did not provide direct military support to Hamas or Hezbollah in their fight against Israel following the October 7 attack. The sole known exception was Iran's October 2024 missile strike on Israel to avenge the killing of Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah—due to his uniquely intimate ties with Tehran. (IRGC-QF Brig. Gen. Abbas Nilforoushan was meeting with Nasrallah at the time and was also killed in the strike, but it seems unlikely that this was the reason for Iran's massive response.) And when Israel struck Iran in April and October 2024 and launched a preventive war against the Islamic Republic in June 2025, no proxies came to its aid.

DETERRING WHAT?

Deterrence dynamics are also influenced by whether the goal is to deter kinetic, cyber, or nuclear activities. Each poses unique challenges.

- **Kinetic attacks.** Rocket, drone, missile, or IED attacks are particularly risky as they can provoke a military response. Iran and its proxies have managed this risk in various ways, including the use of harassing fires (in which they "aim to miss"), various forms of "performative resistance," and nonlethal destructive attacks. The latter have included limpet mine attacks on oil tankers (May and June 2019) and drone and cruise missile strikes on petrochemical infrastructure in Saudi Arabia (May and September 2019).[23] Needless to say, lethal attacks remain part of the axis of resistance's repertoire as well. Because of the many ways in which these attacks can be conducted, it has not been possible to deter every kind of kinetic activity by the axis, which is why military action to disrupt these attacks is sometimes necessary.

- **Cyber activities.** These present a more complicated challenge, in part because much of what happens in the cyber domain may not even be apparent to the target. Tehran is the principal actor in this domain, though it has reportedly conducted joint cyber operations with Hezbollah, which some analysts consider to be a near-peer partner.[24]

  Efforts to deter destructive cyberattacks through warnings, public attribution of responsibility, or threats of retaliation seem to have largely succeeded.[25] However, they have not forestalled all attacks, many of which have been thwarted by preventive action, cyber defenses, or other mitigation measures.[26]

  Deterring cyberspying and ransomware attacks is more difficult, as the attack surface of advanced networked societies is extensive, and there are numerous information security vulnerabilities to exploit.[27] For much the same reason, Iranian cyber-enabled influence and election interference operations have continued largely unabated.[28] These kinds of threats are very difficult to deter or disrupt, which is why they persist.

- **Nuclear enrichment and weapons R&D.** Tehran's nuclear decisionmaking has long been shaped by fears that Israel or the United States might launch a military strike if it tried to acquire the bomb. Other factors influencing Iran's nuclear calculus include: fears that it might face diplomatic isolation, crushing sanctions, and a regional proliferation cascade if it got the bomb; concerns that its nascent nuclear arsenal would be vulnerable to sabotage,

diversion, or unauthorized use; and possible doubts about the utility of nuclear weapons. After all, nuclear weapons failed to prevent U.S. defeats in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, as well as the demise of the Soviet Union—nor did they deter Iran from sponsoring proxy attacks on U.S. interests or directly attacking Israel.

Due to these concerns, Iran adopted a nuclear hedging strategy that sought to create a nuclear weapons option, which its proponents believed could provide the benefits of the bomb without the risks.[29] As part of this strategy, Iran was stockpiling ever-growing quantities of HEU, and prior to the June 2025 war it might have restarted covert weapons R&D work.

Despite its general caution, Iran has frequently pushed nuclear boundaries, and deterring such activities has proven difficult. For while covert action can temporarily disrupt and delay such activities and military strikes can cause more severe disruptions, neither step is likely to stop a determined proliferator. Achieving more sustained deterrence effects might require military strikes against economic and internal security–related targets in order to threaten regime stability—though this could prompt Iran to target critical infrastructure in the Gulf. And while a credible military threat is necessary to deter an Iranian nuclear breakout, it is not sufficient; a broad shaping effort using all the instruments of national power is required to convince Iran that getting the bomb is not in its interest.[30] For this reason, preventing an Iranian nuclear breakout is not a straightforward deterrence problem.

DETERRING HOW?

Effective deterrence requires the communication of credible threats. Policymakers, however, generally try to preserve options, avoid commitments, and extend timelines.[31] Consequently, they tend to avoid measures like red lines that could lend credibility to their threats by committing them to a specific course of action. And when policymakers have drawn red lines, they have often proven unwilling to enforce them, even though red lines can induce adversaries to proceed with caution—at least temporarily.

Thus, Israel has repeatedly drawn red lines for Iran's nuclear program, then retreated when they were crossed. These include: the acquisition of a civilian nuclear power plant; the capability to enrich uranium; the enrichment and stockpiling of uranium; enrichment at the deeply buried facility at Fordow; and production of enough 20 percent–enriched uranium for a bomb (250 kg).[32] The United States and E3 (UK, France, and Germany) have also tried their hand at drawing nuclear red lines, and their efforts likewise left something to be desired. Thus, in 2022, they warned Iran that producing weapons-grade uranium (90% enriched) would trigger the "snapback" of UN sanctions—which potentially gave Iran the latitude to enrich up to that line and to effectively produce weapons-grade uranium.[33] At any rate, Iran had not yet challenged that line when its program was bombed in June 2025. (UN sanctions were subsequently snapped back in September 2025 due to Iran's "nonperformance" of its JCPOA commitments.[34])

Likewise, shortly after President Trump ratcheted up his maximum pressure campaign in May 2019, Washington warned Tehran that any action resulting in the death of an American would trigger a U.S. military response—implying that the United States would not respond to nonlethal attacks against its interests, or to attacks on its allies, affording Tehran substantial room for maneuver.[35] By taking this approach, the United States effectively left Saudi Arabia and the UAE to fend for themselves after Iran attacked Saudi and Emirati targets in the summer of 2019—thereby abetting the wedge strategies the IRI has often used to divide the United States from its allies.

A Holistic Approach Using All Instruments of National Power

Iran and its proxies have shown that they will respond to diverse pressures, inducements, and forms of suasion; effective deterrence therefore requires the use of all instruments of national power. For instance, the deterrence calculus of Iran and its proxies may be influenced by political developments at home or abroad. Thus, in response to American threats before the 2020 election that it would close down the U.S. embassy in Baghdad if proxy attacks continued, the *muqawama* groups throttled back their activities, as Tehran feared President Trump might seek a pretext for striking Iran to help him at the polls.[36] The political timing of this deterrent warning made it particularly effective.

Conversely, domestic turmoil in Israel helped convince Hamas that the country was divided and distracted and would be unable to respond effectively when attacked on October 7, 2023. During the war, ongoing unrest and Israel's challenges in fighting a multifront war likely helped convince Iran that it could create a

new deterrence equation with Israel, contributing to its decision to launch a massive retaliatory drone and missile strike on April 13, 2024.

On a completely different plane, Israeli covert actions targeting Tehran's nuclear program may have convinced at least some Iranian decisionmakers that the Islamic Republic should not go for the bomb as long as the regime is penetrated by foreign intelligence services—lest disaffected Iranians working with foreign agents divert weapons to blackmail the regime or destroy regime targets. For this reason, continued demonstrations of an ability to penetrate Iran's most sensitive national security programs should be a key component of U.S. and Israeli efforts to dissuade Iran from going for the bomb.

Finally, Iran has used diplomacy as a deterrent shield during periods of heightened tension or vulnerability—wagering that Washington would restrain itself and rein in Israel during negotiations. And it has sometimes pursued deals, such as the JCPOA, that have constrained its adversaries. Thus, Washington did not push back against Iran's destabilizing regional activities in the run-up to the 2015 nuclear deal to avoid scuttling negotiations, and it refrained from pushing back afterward to avoid undermining the deal. However, the Israeli and U.S. attacks on Iran's nuclear program in June 2025 occurred amid ongoing U.S.-Iran nuclear diplomacy, upending the assumptions underpinning Iran's approach.

Balancing Deterrence, Compellence, and Disruption

U.S. efforts to both deter and sanction Tehran have sometimes worked at cross-purposes. The first Trump administration's maximum pressure policy, which sought to strangle Iran's economy by cutting off its oil sales, crossed one of the IRI's oldest red lines, dating to the early 1980s: "If Iran cannot export oil from the Gulf, no one will."[37] This move convinced Tehran that the way to sanctions relief was via a gray zone counterpressure campaign, and its forceful response should not have surprised anyone. This case demonstrates the importance of understanding an adversary's red lines, which should be crossed only if doing so will advance a vital U.S. interest, and if the United States is prepared to deal with the likely blowback.

By contrast, the January 2020 killing of Qasem Soleimani—the architect of Iran's proxy strategy—has had long-term adverse effects on Iran's regional position, as his successor, Esmail Qaani, has shown that he lacks his predecessor's drive, diplomatic skills, and charisma. Soleimani managed efforts after 2003 to counter the U.S. military presence in Iraq, oversaw the response in 2014 to the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), coordinated with Russia in a joint effort to crush rebels fighting the Assad regime in Syria, and oversaw efforts to transform the Houthis into an Iranian proxy. Qaani cannot point to any similar list of achievements. Soleimani was an irreplaceable, iconic leader, and it was not unreasonable to argue beforehand that the impact of his demise would justify the risks entailed.[38]

Conversely, while Israel's covert attempts to disrupt and delay Tehran's nuclear program have yielded benefits, they have also, at times, spurred Iran to accelerate its nuclear activities. Thus, after the November 2020 killing of chief nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, Iran boosted enrichment to 20 percent and started producing uranium metal.[39] After the April 2021 covert attack on a centrifuge production facility at Natanz, Iran boosted enrichment to 60 percent and replaced damaged centrifuges with more advanced models.[40] And after the June 2021 attack on a centrifuge production facility in Karaj, Iran refused to repair damaged IAEA monitoring cameras and moved centrifuge production to a more secure underground location in Isfahan.[41] This experience shows that covert action can be counterproductive if not backstopped with the threat of military force in order to deter unwelcome responses.

Denial and Punishment

In recent decades, the United States has tended to rely on deterrence by denial to counter Iran's destabilizing regional activities. Thus, to convince Tehran that its attacks will be thwarted and its goals frustrated, the United States has since 2012 based mine-countermeasure ships in the region to deal with the threat of naval mines. It has stood up maritime task forces (e.g., the International Maritime Security Construct, or IMSC, in 2019) to deter attacks on freedom of navigation. And it has created an integrated air and missile defense architecture to intercept drones and missiles (the so-called Middle East Air Defense initiative, or MEAD, formalized in 2022). Conversely, the United States has generally eschewed punitive military action that would impose costs but might be seen by Iran as escalatory.[42]

Accordingly, U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria have, in recent years, relied largely on defensive measures to

accomplish their missions in the face of attacks. These include passive force-protection measures (hardening facilities and dispersing forces); counterbattery fires;[43] and ground-based air and missile defenses (e.g., the counter–rocket, artillery, and mortar, or C-RAM, system)—augmented by defensive fighter patrols.[44] U.S. forces generally launched offensive airstrikes only after U.S. personnel were killed or wounded, after close calls, or to preempt or disrupt planned attacks.[45]

However, in the Middle East—with its strong, patriarchal honor cultures—strength is respected and hard power is the coin of the realm.[46] And despite its general preference for deterrence by denial, America's own experience shows that a balanced strategy blending denial and punishment—to thwart Iran's activities and hold at risk assets it values—is a more effective way to deter the Islamic Republic.[47] Thus, when the United States hit back hard at Iran or its proxies—by killing Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad in January 2020 or by killing a senior KH operative in Baghdad in February 2024—it achieved more enduring deterrence effects than was otherwise possible. Likewise, the recent Israeli and American strikes on the IRI's nuclear program and the prospect of additional strikes appear to have deterred Iran from rebuilding its nuclear program—at least thus far.

Capability and Credibility

For deterrent threats to work, they must be credible—and while America's foes have rarely doubted its military capabilities, they have often questioned the credibility of its commitments. Thus, while U.S. carrier strike groups have deployed regularly to the Persian Gulf region since the late 1980s, Tehran soon grew accustomed to their presence. As a result, they failed to deter Iran from attacking neutral shipping in the Gulf during the Iran-Iraq War; to deter its proxies from carrying out thousands of attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq after 2003; or to deter Iran from plotting to kill the Saudi ambassador to the United States in Washington in 2011. Likewise, the deployment of a U.S. carrier strike group and bombers to the region in early May 2019 failed to deter attacks on oil transport and infrastructure in the Gulf and against U.S. troops in Iraq. In this case, the potential threat posed by the U.S. maximum pressure policy convinced Iran that a military response was necessary.

But the deployment of carrier strike groups can have a significant deterrent effect in certain contexts when coupled with pointed, credible warnings.[48] Thus, the rotation of several carrier strike groups through the region after October 7 and President Joe Biden's stern warnings to Iran and its proxies ("Don't!") may have helped deter Hezbollah from escalating its war with Israel, and Iran from opening another front in the Gulf region during the June 2025 war.[49]

Deterrence by Disclosure

Tehran has sometimes deferred or canceled attacks when preparations were detected, and publicly disclosed by its adversaries.[50] Thus, in May 2019, Iran canceled a planned attack using missiles mounted on dhows after the plan was leaked to the media;[51] instead, KH launched a cruise missile strike on Saudi Arabia's East-West Pipeline several days later.[52] Likewise, after U.S. Central Command established the IMSC in the Persian Gulf in September 2019, attacks on shipping dropped precipitously as increased surveillance reduced the chances of plausible deniability and tactical surprise.[53] And in November 2022, a planned attack on Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure was apparently scotched after U.S. and Saudi forces were alerted and the press was notified of the plot.[54] Thus, Tehran may sometimes be deterred, at least temporarily, when denied the benefits of secrecy and surprise. However, the perceived need to act may override all other considerations when honor (the need to save face) and interest (concerns that inaction could embolden its enemies) are at stake. This was the case when Iran lashed out militarily in the summer of 2019 in response to the tightening of U.S. sanctions, and when it launched retaliatory strikes on Israel in April and October 2024. In such cases, the public disclosure of military plans is unlikely to affect Iranian decisionmaking.[55]

Respond Consistently and Act Unpredictably to Complicate Tehran's Risk Calculus

As a great power with global commitments, Washington has often overlooked low-level challenges by Tehran to avoid getting drawn into yet another Middle East "forever war." This has allowed Iran to wage a persistent campaign to undermine U.S. interests in the region. When the United States has responded, it has often done so predictably, acting in a symmetrical, tit-for-tat manner. This has made it easier for Iran to manage risk while imposing costs.

Thus, from May to December 2019, the first seven months of Tehran's counterpressure campaign in response to the U.S. maximum pressure policy, pro-Iran proxies attacked U.S. troops in Iraq more than nineteen times with mortar and rocket fire without drawing a single kinetic response.[56] Attacks became more frequent and intense until a U.S. military contractor was killed in late December of that year.[57] Had the United States responded sooner, more consistently, and less predictably, it might have avoided the contractor's death, which set in train a series of events that led to the killing of Qasem Soleimani in January 2020. Paradoxically, Soleimani's demise, which came after a period of U.S. military restraint, reinforced President Trump's image as an unpredictable risk-taker, bolstering U.S. deterrence vis-à-vis Iran.[58]

Likewise, in the Biden administration's first thirty-three months, pro-Iran proxies attacked U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria about ninety times, with the United States responding with airstrikes against militia infrastructure on four occasions.[59] And in the first four months following the October 7 attack on Israel, pro-Iran proxies launched more than 170 drone and rocket attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria,[60] while the United States responded about ten times.[61] When America finally hit back with a major strike against IRGC installations in Iraq and Syria in January 2024 and by killing a senior KH official in Baghdad the following month, the show of resolve contributed to a lull in attacks in Iraq and Syria that has continued to this day.[62]

Finally, while on the tactical and operational levels the United States has often been risk-averse and relatively predictable, on the policy level it has a well-earned reputation as an erratic actor capable of dramatic U-turns. In the past thirty-five years, five of six American presidents have tried to keep the United States out of Middle East wars, but ended up committing troops to combat or sending substantial forces to the region to deter adversaries:

- After Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, President George H. W. Bush organized a coalition to liberate the emirate, even though officials had previously stated that Washington was not treaty-bound to defend it.[63]

- After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush, who as a candidate rejected nation-building, ordered the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and undertook ambitious nation-building efforts in both countries.[64]

- After northern Iraq fell to ISIS in June 2014 and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the Caliphate, President Barack Obama, who had declared that he was elected to end wars, not start them, led the campaign to defeat the group.[65]

- After promising to halt "endless wars" and avoid new military entanglements, President Trump ordered Qasem Soleimani's killing in January 2020, risking further escalation, shortly after pro-Iran proxies killed an American contractor in Iraq.[66]

- President Biden, after overseeing a long-planned drawdown of U.S. forces from the Middle East, ordered the redeployment of substantial U.S. forces to the region after October 7, 2023, in order to prevent a broader conflict.[67]

- In his second term, President Trump—after trying to negotiate a better deal with Iran to supplant the 2015 nuclear agreement—ordered U.S. forces to join the Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear program in June 2025, despite predictions that this would lead to "all-out" war.

This track record, however, is an asset that Washington should leverage—in tandem with Israel's post–October 7 tolerance for risk—to create uncertainty about U.S. intentions and bolster deterrence vis-à-vis Iran and its proxies.

Aligning Ends, Ways, and Means

Too often, the United States (and Israel) have failed to align ways and means with policy ends in Iran. Thus, they have often sent mixed messages—potentially complicating efforts to deter Iran and its proxies. Some of these mixed messages have consisted of empty threats and bluster. And sometimes U.S. messaging meant to reassure important domestic constituencies that the administration sought to avoid war risked undermining efforts to deter Iran.

Thus, President Obama once warned that "I don't bluff" in connection with his frequent claims that "all options are on the table" regarding Iran's nuclear program.[68] Yet senior Obama administration defense officials publicly dismissed military action as a means of thwarting Iran's nuclear ambitions.[69] And the Obama administration failed to counter Iran's destabilizing activities in Syria and Yemen following the conclusion of the JCPOA. In short, it eschewed military pressure while

negotiating the deal for fear of scuttling the talks, and it decided not to counter Iran's more assertive regional activities after the deal for fear of undermining it.

Likewise, after the United States withdrew from the JCPOA, with Israel's encouragement, neither country had a plan for deterring Iran from exceeding the enrichment caps established by the agreement. Israeli military planners had assumed they would have more than a decade to prepare for an Iran no longer constrained by the JCPOA, and thus the IDF was not prepared for the deterrence challenges posed by the removal of these constraints. Israeli covert action, moreover, slowed but could not halt Iran's renewed nuclear progress. As a result, Iran embarked on a fissile material buildup that eventually led to the Israeli and U.S. attacks on its nuclear program in June 2025.

And when the Biden administration sought to revive the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and pursue a "longer and stronger" agreement,[70] it relaxed enforcement of sanctions on Iran's oil sector—apparently as part of efforts to de-escalate tensions—and eschewed military threats as Iran deployed advanced centrifuges and increased production of enriched uranium. It is not clear how the Biden administration expected to negotiate a better deal without applying economic or military pressure on Iran.[71]

These persistent failures point to systemic shortcomings in U.S. (and Israeli) policy formulation and implementation, rooted in human nature and the often chaotic character of democratic governance, which need to be recognized if they are to be effectively addressed.

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5

Insights: Escalation Dynamics and the Specter of "All-Out" War

At various times in recent years, U.S. policymakers, analysts, and journalists have expressed concern that the United States or Israel was on the brink of "all-out" war with Iran.[1] While the potential for escalation during a crisis or limited conflict should never be dismissed, its likelihood has generally been greatly overstated. This is because Iran has long sought to avoid a war with the United States, and its entire military modus operandi was designed to avoid such an outcome—and to ensure that if a war did come, it would remain limited. Iran has also sought to avoid a war with Israel, since it could draw in the United States—as occurred in June 2025. The United States and Israel had likewise long sought to avoid war with Iran, though when war finally occurred in June 2025, it was the outcome of a conscious Israeli decision made in coordination with the United States, not of an accident or an uncontrolled process.[2]

Iran's proxies have likewise acted in accordance with a limited war logic. By late 2023, Israel was fighting a regional war with the axis of resistance. The members, whether on their own or at Tehran's urging, sought to carefully calibrate their attacks to impose costs without causing further escalation.

Accidental War?

Since October 7, 2023, only two chance events are known to have touched off significant escalatory processes. The first was the July 27, 2024, Hezbollah rocket attack on Majdal Shams, in the Golan Heights, that killed twelve children. Israel responded by killing Hezbollah military head Fuad Shukr, and by effectively preempting the group's retaliatory response—which Hezbollah declared a success, thereby closing the action-response cycle. The second was the Israeli pager attack against Hezbollah on September 17–18, 2024, whose timing was apparently dictated by fears that the modifications to Hezbollah's booby-trapped pagers were about to be discovered.[3] Israel had planned to eventually shift its military focus from Gaza to Lebanon in order to strike a decisive blow against the organization, and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and senior military officers had unsuccessfully lobbied the Israeli government to do so as early as October 11, 2023. So it appears that only the timing of the pager attack—which was intended to pave the way for a series of follow-on strikes and a ground campaign against Hezbollah forces in southern Lebanon—was affected by a chance event.[4]

Both sides, moreover, kept the June 2025 war limited, avoiding the widespread targeting of critical infrastructure or the spread of fighting to the Gulf. This, however, was hardly the first time that the United States or Israel had fought Iran and its proxies and avoided a broader conflict. Indeed, the United States and Iran have repeatedly avoided stumbling into a war despite four decades of conflict that has included:

- The killing by various pro-Iran proxies of 241 U.S. Marines in Beirut in October 1983, 19 U.S. airmen at Khobar Towers, Saudi Arabia, in June 1996, and more than 600 U.S. service members in Iraq between 2003 and 2011[5]
- The killing by U.S. naval forces of scores of Iranian sailors in clashes at sea toward the end of the Iran-Iraq War (1987–88), as well as 290 civilians when the USS *Vincennes* accidentally shot down an Iranian passenger jet in July 1988[6]
- The killing of IRGC-QF Commander Qasem Soleimani in a U.S. drone strike in January 2020 and the wounding of more than a hundred U.S. service members, who suffered traumatic brain injuries in the retaliatory missile strike

Likewise, over the past decade Israel has killed scores of IRGC personnel and hundreds of pro-Iran militia fighters in hundreds of airstrikes in Syria and in covert operations in Iran, without triggering a war.[7] And

during the June 2025 war, Israel, the United States, and Iran succeeded in keeping the conflict limited in intensity, scope, and duration, despite the death of 1,062 Iranians (786 military personnel and 276 civilians) and 33 Israelis.

Conventional wars, then, do not start by accident, though the course of such wars can be influenced by chance events.[8] (Nuclear wars are a very different matter—due to short missile flight times, decision windows measured in minutes, the fear of disarming first strikes, and the potential for catastrophic human and technical errors that could seal the fate of nations—though they are beyond the scope of this paper.[9]) Thus, during Operation Grapes of Wrath, conducted against Hezbollah in 1996, Israeli artillery strikes against targets in the village of Qana, Lebanon, inadvertently killed 106 noncombatants, leading to the premature termination of the war. And during the 2006 war with Hezbollah, Israeli airstrikes in and around Qana that mistakenly killed 28 noncombatants led to a temporary halt in the fighting.

Miscalculation Fixation

Wars do, however, result from miscalculation. History is replete with examples, including World War I, the 1967 Six Day War, the 2006 Lebanon war, and the June 2025 war—which occurred because Iran erroneously believed it could accumulate ever-growing quantities of HEU with impunity.[10]

The United States, Israel, and Iran, however, have miscalculated at various times without triggering a war. Thus, as noted previously, U.S. efforts to halt Tehran's oil sales as part of its maximum pressure policy caused Iran to launch a gray zone counterpressure campaign in May 2019. In December 2019, one of Iran's Iraqi proxies killed an American military contractor,[11] leading to the killing of Qasem Soleimani. And Israel's killing of Brig. Gen. Mohammad Reza Zahedi and his staff in Damascus in April 2024 led Iran to launch its first-ever direct attack against the Jewish state.[12] None of these responses were expected at the time.

These cases show, however, that missteps and miscalculation need not lead to war when the parties involved have developed the tools and repertoires needed to manage escalation fairly effectively. Conversely, when Israel went to war with Hezbollah in 2024 and Iran in 2025, and when the United States joined the Israeli attack on Iran, they did so as a result of conscious decisions.

Escalation Preoccupation

What are the origins, then, of the idea that a limited conflict with Iran or its proxies could lead to uncontrolled escalation and "all-out" war? There are several possibilities. It may be rooted partly in historical accounts like Barbara Tuchman's classic about the outbreak of World War I, *The Guns of August*, in which entangling alliances and rigid military mobilization timetables made war more likely—themes reprised in Christopher Clark's 2012 bestseller about the outbreak of World War I, *The Sleepwalkers*.[13] Indeed, Crisis Group published a 2019 study titled "Averting the Middle East's 1914 Moment" reinforcing this notion.[14] It may also be a vestige of Cold War–era nuclear strategy in which concerns about "disarming first strikes" and "use it or lose it" dilemmas, combined with missile flight times measured in minutes, generated fears about surprise attacks and rapid escalatory processes.[15] Indeed, Cold War–era studies of nuclear strategy are filled with discussions about "all-out" war.[16] Alternatively, it might reflect a deeply rooted, culturally grounded American notion about how wars should be fought, based on the belief that once war breaks out, all means available should be employed to achieve rapid victory.[17] The Weinberger and Powell doctrines of the 1990s, which called for the use of decisive force to overwhelm adversaries and terminate conflicts swiftly with minimum losses, embodied this ideal.[18]

The popularity of these notions may also be due to various individuals and entities with a vested interest in promoting them. The first consists of foreign policy "restrainers" who want the United States to end its overseas commitments, focus on the Indo-Pacific region, or avoid yet another Middle East "forever war"—this time with Iran. The second is the media, which has an interest in exaggerating the potential for escalation and for "all-out" war in order to increase clicks and sell newspapers. Finally, the Islamic Republic promotes this narrative to deter Washington, foment discord in the United States, and bridge divisions in Iran by highlighting external threats.[19]

Abolishing ("All-Out") War

Finally, the expression "all-out" war—and its close cousin "full-scale" war—should be banished from this discussion, as neither provides an accurate or analytically useful description of past and possible future conventional conflicts involving the United States, Israel, and Iran. This was made clear during the June

2025 war, which relied almost exclusively on standoff fires and involved a significant but still limited slice of the participants' overall conventional capabilities. By definition, this was not an "all-out" war—not least due to the absence of ground and naval combat or the use of U.S. and Israeli nuclear weapons. Moreover, the parties set geographical, operational, and other limits on the fighting, though of course had these limits been breached or abandoned, the conflict could have intensified or broadened. Simply put, a conventional "war of fires" will necessarily be a limited conflict—even if it is hard fought and highly destructive.[20]

Dueling Metaphors

Thought precedes action, and many of the terms, metaphors, and mental models that U.S. policymakers and analysts apply to conventional deterrence and escalation processes are flawed, often leading them to overstate the potential for inadvertent war with Iran. They therefore need to be refined, or replaced with concepts that better reflect the complex dynamic at work if the United States is to more effectively deter and manage escalation with Iran and its proxies.[21]

For instance, Americans are accustomed to describing the concept of escalation using a ladder metaphor.[22] Ladders allow for only one way up and one way down. The fixed number of ladder rungs implies limited options as one climbs or descends. Ladders are also easier to ascend than to descend, which nicely captures a central aspect of escalation dynamics—it is often difficult to de-escalate a conflict due to concerns about avoiding reputational harm as a result of a climbdown. So the ladder metaphor has its virtues, but it captures only one dimension of the conflict with Iran and its proxies, which involves diverse actors operating in multiple arenas and domains. The metaphor of a solitary ladder does not capture this complexity, which is more accurately depicted, perhaps, by the cluttered complexity of a Chutes and Ladders game board (see figure 5). Here, the numerous (escalatory) ladders and (de-escalatory) chutes (or "off-ramps") on the board may more effectively portray the logic and dynamics of the three-dimensional game that Iran and its proxies are playing.

Yet the oft-used escalation "off-ramp" metaphor also has its shortcomings. Experience shows that when Iran and its proxies de-escalate by taking an "off-ramp" in one arena or domain, it is often so that they can take an "on-ramp" later to resume their original activity under more favorable circumstances, or escalate elsewhere.

A more useful metaphor for thinking about escalation and de-escalation with Iran and its proxies may be that of a disc jockey working multiple turntables and audio mixers—combining music from diverse sources to create a single integrated effect. The DJ's multiple turntables represent the various arenas and domains in which Iran and its proxies operate, while the audio-mixer consoles—which permit a seemingly infinite number of settings—represent the broad array of options available to Iran and its proxies using the tools and repertoires at their disposal. The broad array of options available serves as a safety valve by enabling Iran and its proxies to scale down activities in one arena or domain when things get too hot while stepping up activities in another—enabling them to manage escalation and avoid war.

Yet while this metaphor might help illustrate how Iran operates on its own or with those proxies over which it generally (though not always) exerts the most influence—such as Hezbollah and the various pro-Iran groups in Iraq—it does not necessarily capture the dynamic involving its more independent-minded proxies and partners, such as Hamas and the Houthis. For these proxies, a more accurate metaphor might be that of a jazz ensemble in which the leader chooses the tune, sets the tempo, and defines the vibe, but allows other members of the group to riff or improvise, potentially taking the music in a whole different direction (though this metaphor may sometimes apply to Hezbollah and the Iraqi *muqawama* as well).[23]

Figure 5. Chutes and Ladders

These metaphors may provide a degree of insight into how Tehran and its proxies operate and why the United States and Israel have not stumbled into an "all-out" war with Iran, despite decades of tension and conflict. And while escalation is always possible, the success of the parties in keeping the conflict limited—at least thus far—reflects not just the skill and subtlety of at least some of the players, but also their success in creating options beyond vertical escalation. As experience has shown—at least thus far—the most likely way for Israel, the United States, and Iran to find themselves at war is for one or more of them to decide that a low-level gray zone conflict no longer serves their interest, and to opt for war as a means of gaining decisive advantage.

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6

Policy Implications and Recommendations

More than four decades of conflict and a twelve-day war have yielded essential insights into deterrence and escalation dynamics with Iran and its proxies. This has particular relevance as Iran and Israel prepare for another round of conflict, and the United States contemplates military action against the regime following its massacre of thousands of protesters. What are the main takeaways from this experience?

Dictate the terms of engagement. For decades, the United States and Israel played by Tehran's rules, responding to proxy attacks by attacking its proxies. This left the Islamic Republic unscathed and undeterred—thereby enabling its long game. Experience in recent years has shown, however, that (1) the best way to derail Iran's long game is by preempting it; (2) the best way to counter Tehran's proxy strategy is by taking the fight to Iran itself; and (3) the most effective way to deter Tehran is to impose costs—leaving the IRI and its proxies worse off (more vulnerable, less capable, and more unstable) than before.

Thus, Tehran must understand that efforts to revive its nuclear program and restore military capabilities destroyed during the June 2025 war will be thwarted, that significant costs will be imposed each time the United States or Israel strikes, and that future attacks may target critical infrastructure—further destabilizing the regime. The regime must also understand that the renewed use of lethal force against Iranian protesters could trigger destabilizing strikes against its internal security forces.

Complicate Tehran's risk calculus. Risk management and avoidance is central to Tehran's modus operandi, so actions that increase uncertainty and risk for Iran may bolster deterrence. U.S. actions, therefore, should be unpredictable (i.e., emphasizing asymmetric rather than tit-for-tat responses) and provide a taste of worse to come if Iran does not alter its course. A more risk-acceptant leadership, however, might loosen limits on the use of force, and should it conclude that it faces an imminent threat to its survival, it might lash out in an unrestrained fashion. Moreover, the IRI's impending post-Khamenei leadership transition may herald a change in the regime's approach to risk, with implications for deterrence, escalation management, and strategy.

Outside-in and inside-out. There are several ways to respond to attacks by Iran or its proxies. Targeting its proxies (an outside-in approach) can limit Tehran's ability to act via indirect means (e.g., proxy attacks). Targeting Iran itself (an inside-out approach) can limit its ability to engage in direct action (e.g., drone or missile strikes) and alter its risk calculus. Each approach addresses only part of the problem, however, while a combined approach—as events since October 7, 2023, have shown—can limit Tehran's options for both indirect and direct action, while altering its risk calculus.

A holistic approach. Deterrence is not just a military mission; effective deterrence often requires the use of *all* instruments of national power—diplomatic, informational, military, economic, and cyber—to alter the adversary's cost-benefit calculus. Events in Israel since the October 7 attack, moreover, have shown that domestic tensions can undermine a country's deterrent posture. The United States should bear this in mind when considering how its own polarized politics and culture wars might affect its ability to deter foreign adversaries.

Diverse tools and repertoires. The U.S. military tends to fixate on lethality; however, sometimes "less is more" because nonlethal tools can impose costs while reducing risks of escalation. Likewise, developing diverse repertoires pertaining to the use of force, as well as the ability to act in multiple arenas and

domains, may bolster deterrence and create options beyond vertical escalation.

Discard flawed notions regarding deterrence, escalation, and "all-out" war. Thought precedes action, and many of the terms, metaphors, and mental models that U.S. policymakers and analysts apply to conventional deterrence and escalation processes are flawed, often leading them to overstate the potential for inadvertent war with Iran. They therefore need to refine or replace them with concepts that better reflect the complex dynamic at work with Iran and its proxies and to abandon ill-suited concepts like "all-out" war.

Manage tensions between deterrence, compellence, and disruption. U.S. efforts to compel Tehran through sanctions have sometimes caused it to lash out militarily, undermining deterrence. This means that maximum pressure requires maximum deterrence. But deterrence is not the be-all and end-all of policy, and the benefits of some actions—for instance, the killing of Qasem Soleimani—have sometimes outweighed any adverse short-term impacts on deterrence.

Deterrence effects are often short-lived. In protracted conflicts, deterrence is not a default state that can be "restored" when challenged; rather, it is a dynamic, open-ended process. This is because Iran and its proxies are determined adversaries that incessantly test and probe to see what they can get away with. When thwarted in one arena or domain, they will often push back in another, so successful deterrence in one area is often a harbinger of challenges elsewhere.

Success means less frequent, less consequential adversary actions. Iran and its proxies cannot always be deterred from engaging in kinetic attacks, though they can be induced to act less often, using less capable means, against less consequential targets. Deterring malign, nondestructive cyber activities is even more difficult, as advanced, networked societies are inherently vulnerable to these kinds of attacks, though threats of in-kind retaliation may succeed in deterring destructive cyberattacks. As for Iran's nuclear ambitions, while military threats are a necessary component of any effort to dissuade the IRI from building the bomb, a broader, more subtle shaping strategy is needed to convince the regime that nuclear weapons will more likely harm than enhance its security. For this reason, preventing Iran from getting the bomb is not a straightforward deterrence problem.

Covert and overt. There is no single "right" approach for dealing with Iran and its proxies. If domestic and regional considerations constrain U.S. policy, gray zone activities—which often occur below the radar and are therefore less politically contentious—may be the best way to advance American interests. If U.S. policy is not constrained by such considerations, a combination of gray zone activities and overt military action that exploits U.S. military-technical overmatch and escalation dominance may ensure more enduring deterrence effects. Experience shows, however, that covert action and gray zone activities alone are often insufficient to deter and disrupt the activities of Iran and its proxies, and that overt military action may be necessary to achieve more consequential policy outcomes.

Denial and punishment. While deterrence by denial (e.g., relying on robust missile and drone defenses to thwart attacks) may seem to be less destabilizing than deterrence by punishment, it is often less effective because it enables Tehran to better calibrate risk and wager only those assets it considers expendable. By comparison, deterrence by punishment (e.g., strikes against high-value assets such as missile bases and production facilities) increases uncertainty and potential costs for Tehran. Experience has shown that an approach combining denial *and* punishment, bolstered by forceful messaging, is more likely to yield enduring deterrence effects.

Capability and credibility. While military planners often focus on capabilities needed to deter, credibility is perhaps an even more important consideration; for while forces can be rapidly surged from elsewhere, credibility cannot be. And while credibility is hard-earned, it can be squandered in an instant by a misstep or a failure of resolve. This underscores the importance of responding firmly and consistently to challenges to U.S. interests.

Credible messaging. Mixed messages, ill-conceived red lines, and well-intentioned efforts to reassure an American public wary of foreign military entanglements have often undermined the credibility of U.S. deterrence messaging and encouraged Iran to test limits. This underscores the need to focus more high-level attention on the crafting of deterrent messages and on ensuring message discipline.

Deterrence by disclosure has its limits. Iran can sometimes be deterred by publicly exposing

its military preparations when detected, if doing so affects its prospects for success. But Iran may sometimes act even when its preparations are exposed, for reasons of honor (to save face) or interest (because it fears inaction could embolden its enemies).

Past lessons, future challenges—in the Middle East and beyond. Events since October 7, 2023, have shown the benefits of U.S.-Israel cooperation to counter Iran's axis of resistance, and demonstrated that military conflicts can be kept limited in scope, intensity, and duration. By continuing to work together, the United States and Israel may thwart Iran's efforts to rebuild its proxy network, its military capabilities, and its nuclear program. And by becoming more proficient at the core national security competencies of conventional deterrence and escalation management, U.S. policymakers and warfighters will be better positioned to deal with the national security challenges posed by Russia, China, and North Korea in the months and years to come.

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