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**The Failure of Deterrence:
How the Addiction to
"Painful Blows" Led
Israel to October 7 –
and Why We Need a
New Security Doctrine**

The Failure of Deterrence: How the Addiction to "Painful Blows" Led Israel to October 7 – and Why We Need a New Security Doctrine

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Abstract

In recent decades, as the conflict management paradigm has become entrenched in the political sphere, the concept of deterrence has become the organizing principle of Israel's security doctrine. The link between the two is no accident: deterrence is a useful strategy for those who wish to maintain the status quo vis-à-vis their rivals. As Israel moved farther away from a desire for political arrangements and deepened its control of the West Bank, decision-makers concluded that a broad and active reliance on deterrence could provide security in the conditions of an ongoing confrontation. Israeli governments assigned the defense system an impossible mission: getting the hostile states and organizations that surround Israel to acquiesce in the situation that emerged after the Six-Day War by intimidating them. But the Israeli concept of deterrence does not correspond with the strategic purposes of military deterrence and was designed on the basis of mistaken assumptions about the other side's motives. Even though it is possible to make effective use of deterrence in certain contexts, its broad use in order to prevent escalation does not suit the nature of the conflict. In practice, 'deterrence' was enlisted in the service of the failed conception of conflict management as well as of the political agenda of the settler right wing.

The present study examines the failures of the Israeli understanding of deterrence, both as a concept and in practice, and endeavors to show that Israel would be better off if it stopped thinking in terms of deterrence. The argument is that Israel did make effective use of deterrence in the past – to the point that it got the Arab world to come to terms with its existence in the 1948 borders. Today, however, Israel is employing deterrence not to deal with an existential threat but in order to get its neighbors to accept the status quo on the Palestinian issue it is trying to impose.

The analysis shows that Israeli policy has been infected by a long-term confusion between *deterrence by denial*, which seeks to discourage attacks by demonstrating sufficient power to repel them, and *deterrence by punishment*, which aims to deter aggression by the threat of a harsh response. Deterrence by

punishment, it is argued, is not suitable for a situation in which the opponent is determined to modify the status quo, because it is impossible to evaluate what punishment would deter it from attacking. The events of October 7 exemplify that deterrence alone cannot guarantee stability. Accordingly, Israel must now decide between a continued policy of endless warfare or a renewed effort to settle the conflict.

Introduction: The Cult of Deterrence

In January 2009, at the end of Operation Cast Lead, then–prime minister Ehud Olmert faced the cameras and proclaimed: "If [Hamas] repeats its wild attacks it will again be surprised by Israel's heavy blow – I recommend that they don't try us." In November 2012, at the end of Operation Pillar of Defense, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and then–Defense Minister Ehud Barak summed up the operation. Netanyahu proclaimed: "I said that we would exact a heavy price from the terrorist organizations. The terrorist organizations assumed that we would refrain from an offensive operation against them. They were wrong!" Barak added "We instructed the IDF to achieve the following goals: Strengthening deterrence ... and [delivering] a severe blow to Hamas and the terrorist organizations... These goals were achieved in full. Hamas and the Jihad received painful blows... We acted with determination and power." In late August 2014, at the end of Operation Protective Edge, Benjamin Netanyahu proclaimed: "Hamas was struck hard and did not obtain even one of the conditions it had set for a cease-fire – not even one! ... A blow like it received now – Hamas has never suffered since it was founded." In November 2019, at the end of Operation Black Belt, Netanyahu said: "The goals of the operation have already been achieved in full. The goal of the operation was the targeted killing of the commander of the Islamic Jihad, and he was eliminated. Our enemies got the message – we can reach anyone, even in his bed. I hope this lesson has been learned." In May 2021, after Operation Guardian of the Walls, Netanyahu proclaimed that "When we launched the operation I defined its key objective: to land a heavy blow on the terrorist organizations, to disrupt their abilities, and to restore quiet while establishing deterrence. That is precisely what we have done." In August 2022, at the end of Operation Breaking Dawn, Prime Minister Yair Lapid announced: "Operation Breaking Dawn gave the initiative back to Israel, restored Israeli deterrence. All the goals were achieved.

The Jihad's entire military command in Gaza was eliminated within three days. The IDF's power and sophistication delivered a severe blow to the enemy."¹

If an anthropologist came to Israel and had only this collection of statements available he would scratch his head in astonishment. The Hebrew dictionary he bought told him that in Hebrew the word "deterrence" means "a threat whose purpose is to prevent another from undertaking some undesirable action." But none of these statements threatened the use of force in order to prevent some future action by the other side; instead, they referred to the actual use of extreme force in the present. What is more, the operations do not seem to have achieved their goal, because the sides have continued to fight at frequent intervals. Perhaps the anthropologist would conclude that "deterrence" is some ancient ritual that requires periodical sacrifice.

The last two decades have been the era of deterrence. We sought to deter the Iranians, Hezbollah, and Hamas. We wanted to deter the Palestinian Authority from taking diplomatic steps and in general to deter the entire Middle East. In the absence of a willingness to change the geopolitical situation or a belief that such change is possible, deterrence became the core of Israel's security strategy – we will deter all of them in order "to manage" the various conflicts and preserve an imaginary status quo. The present document maintains that the Israeli doctrine of security is based on a myth – the erroneous belief that the repeated and aggressive use of force creates "deterrence" and that this deterrence is the purpose of using force. It aims to demonstrate that the notion of deterrence that underlies this myth is failed and broken and leads to a flawed conceptualization of the situation and faulty

The present document maintains that the Israeli doctrine of security is based on a myth - the erroneous belief that the repeated and aggressive use of force creates "deterrence" and that this deterrence is the purpose of using force.

¹ These quotations were collected and provided with introductions by Ronen Shklarsh (@themusht) <https://x.com/themusht/status/1740227642899722565.X> (28.12.2023, 6:26).

thought processes. The events of October 7 and the ensuing war compel us to rethink the foundations of Israel's security doctrine. As will be argued in detail, the concept of deterrence must be devalued, in view of its failures and the crises it has brought about.

Israel developed an addiction to deterrence as a substitute for a decision about the future of the occupied territories and the settlement project.

Even though deterrence is chiefly a military strategy, the problematic nature of the Israeli notion of deterrence is not limited to its military aspects. To understand why the Israeli defense establishment has become addicted to the discourse of deterrence we must probe the political environment that created it and, even more importantly, made the emergence of an alternative to it impossible. Israel developed an addiction to deterrence as a substitute for a decision about the future of the occupied territories and the settlement project. The quest for deterrence is the military side of the concept of conflict management, which in turn is really just a euphemism for promoting the political agenda of the Israeli right wing.

In the first part of this study we will briefly survey the theoretical background of the theory of deterrence. In the second part, we will analyze the unique concept of deterrence by punishment that has developed in Israel. Then we will consider several substantive flaws in the Israeli concept of deterrence that make it intrinsically incoherent. Finally, we will explain how these problems were exacerbated by the lack of a political ability to evaluate the status quo that Israel achieved after 1967.

Chapter 1: Two Types of Deterrence

As it was defined by the best known architect of nuclear deterrence, the Nobel Prize–winning American economist Thomas Schelling, the verb *deter* means “to turn aside or discourage through fear; hence, to prevent from action by fear of consequences.”² The roots of deterrence are as old as human fear, but this fact makes deterrence trivial. Every individual or group that demonstrates instrumental rationality – adapting the means to the goals in light of considerations of benefit – always deters and is deterred. When the light changes from green to red I am deterred from driving through the intersection even though I am in a hurry to reach my destination. The theory of deterrence that developed after the Second World War does not relate to this trivial aspect of deterrence as we think of it in daily language, but to the creation of stable deterrence that can prevent war.³ It follows that deterrence is not measured by its momentary effectiveness but by its persistence.

Because military deterrence employs threats in order to deter the other side from acting in a certain way – usually launching an attack or starting a war – the use of force is a sign of the failure of deterrence. If it turns out to be necessary to employ force, the deterrence strategy has failed in its goal of making your anticipated reaction a decisive consideration for the other side.

Deterrence, like its cousin compellence, is a form of coercion.⁴ Whereas compellence is meant to cause the enemy to act in a certain way, deterrence draws a line in the sand that the other side must not cross. Deterrence dissuades your enemy from acting, whereas compellence requires that you take

² Schelling 1966, 71.

³ In addition, deterrence was once commonly limited to a military response to a military threat (Morgan 1983). Today, however, the tendency is to a broader definition, in view of the changing threats after the end of the Cold War (Knopf 2009).

⁴ Schelling (1966, 71). Another term in this semantic field is “dissuasion,” considered to be more extensive than deterrence and the opposite of persuasion. Some distinguish dissuasion from deterrence along the time axis: dissuasion takes place in the preliminary stage when the adversary lacks the ability to produce a threat; deterrence comes later, when the adversary is capable of doing so (Singh 2014).

the first step.⁵ This aspect embodies the most important *function of deterrence* – *maintaining the status quo*.⁶ *If action is not intended to preserve the current situation, deterrence is not the appropriate tool.*⁷ Similarly, *when the enemy finds the status quo intolerable deterrence is destined to fail sooner or later.*⁸ Consequently, deterrence is a strategy that makes sense only when the side employing it is interested in maintaining the status quo and will achieve its goal for a protracted period only if other side, too, prefers the status quo over the alternatives.

The theory of deterrence developed against the background of the Cold War, when the nature of warfare changed after nuclear weapons entered the arsenal. For the first time, the main purpose of military force was to prevent wars, not to win them.⁹ Whereas throughout the history of conventional warfare attack and defense played the main role, in nonconventional war their importance declined. The fear of mutual destruction led to the abandonment of attack strategies, while the element of defense lost its importance because a hermetic defense against the nuclear threat was impossible.¹⁰ Given the overwhelming destruction caused by nuclear war, creating deterrence becomes the optimum choice.¹¹ The new situation, in which war is an existential threat, made it necessary to formulate a new strategy that would limit the rivalry between the

5 Schelling, 70.

6 George and Smoke 1974.

7 It can, however, be used along with other tools. For example, you might deter the enemy from attacking so that you can prepare a future preemptive strike. This is a more limited aspect of deterrence and harder to plan once the enemy realizes that you too are interested in terminating the status quo.

8 A counter-example to the apparent stability of conventional deterrence is the situation between Israel and Syria, where the border in the Golan Heights remained quiet after the 1974 ceasefire agreement. Although that border was stable, the situation between the two countries has been far from stable. They fought each other in Lebanon in 1982 and in many small incidents over the years. The Syrians also "privatized" the conflict by supporting terrorist organizations throughout the Middle East.

9 A canonic formulation of this position is that by Bernard Brodie: "Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose" (Brodie 1946, 71). As proof, Carl von Clausewitz did not mention deterrence in his magnum opus *On War*, but only attack and defense.

10 For a survey of the theory of a "first-strike" use of nuclear weapons, see Harkabi 1964 (101–104).

11 During the Cold War, the introduction of defensive capabilities such as anti-ballistic missile systems (ABMs) undermined the stability of nuclear deterrence to the point that in 1972 the superpowers signed a treaty to limit the deployment of anti-missile systems. The main fear was that such systems would trigger the development of additional nuclear weapons in order to overwhelm the defenses and encourage the sides to launch a nuclear attack before their abilities were nullified. What stirred the parties to sign the treaty was not so much the defensive means as the threat of undermining the balance of Mutually Assured Destruction.

two sides to a tolerable level below the threshold of open combat. Thus was born the doctrine of deterrence. Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) would create a balance of fear that would deter the opposing sides from being the first to launch a nuclear war.¹² The logic of this kind of deterrence is based on the magnitude of the danger: the fear of the catastrophic effects of nuclear war is so great that it creates a delicate but stable global balance of power.¹³ An important aspect of this kind of deterrence is its mutuality – not only the other side, but you too must be deterred from pressing the launch button.¹⁴

Nuclear deterrence's great advantage is that it's "perfect": it has never failed,¹⁵ neither at the height of the Cold War when the two superpowers were constantly at loggerheads throughout the world, nor in armed conflicts between countries that possessed nuclear weapons.¹⁶

In the literature about deterrence, a complex taxonomy of various types of deterrence emerged. For our purpose, though, what is important is the distinction between two key deterrence strategies:

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- 12 See, e.g., Wohlstetter 1959. Note that there is an alternative to the MAD thesis, known as "minimal deterrence." It holds that a country should not invest in more nuclear weapons than are necessary to deter the enemy from launching a first strike (Harkabi 1964, 77–79). Minimal deterrence is identified with medium nuclear powers such as China, India, and Pakistan.
 - 13 On the American side, preserving the status quo was essential as part of the more general policy of containment, which recognized that the Soviet model was not sustainable and that Soviet expansion had to be held in check until the country collapsed. Deterrence was a logical policy because the goal was to maintain the status quo. The Soviets did not develop a parallel theory of deterrence.
 - 14 Harkabi 1964, 55–59.
 - 15 When the risk is that of nuclear war and assured destruction, the superpowers needed more than just the knowledge that it would be irrational to attack; they sought certainty that neither side would misinterpret the other's actions as preparations for an attack. Accordingly, they created sophisticated signaling mechanisms, with a network of military attachés, diplomats, and third countries, to transmit soothing messages from one side to the other when necessary. At the height of the Cold War, the U.S. and the Soviet Union even set up a hotline between the White House and the Kremlin to permit direct messages between their leaders in times of heightened tension ("the red telephone"). In practice, alongside the deterrence game, the need to maintain signaling networks led the sides into a cooperative game to verify that the signaling networks were reliable. Of course, a fair amount of luck was also required.
 - 16 Examples include the Soviet Union and China, during their border conflict in 1969, and India and Pakistan during the Kargil War (1999). At that time Pakistan had not yet developed an offensive nuclear capacity, and there was therefore no balance of terror based on Mutually Assured Destruction —meaning that the situation could develop into a tactical nuclear conflict. Nevertheless, the introduction of nuclear arms to both sides of the equation made it possible for Pakistan to climb down and keep the limited confrontation from developing into a full-scale conventional war.

- Deterrence by punishment: the threat of undesirable effects of an attack on the attacker itself, such as the possibility of massive destruction of the enemy's civilian infrastructure or damage to its strategic assets.¹⁷
- Deterrence by denial, whose goal is to persuade the enemy that it must refrain from war because it cannot achieve its goals.¹⁸ Here an example is concentrating forces on the border.¹⁹

The two types of deterrence are based on the instrumental rationality of cost-benefit considerations. Deterrence by punishment makes the other side weigh whether the "punishment" it will suffer in the wake of an attack is worth it, considering the anticipated outcome of the attack; deterrence by denial makes it possible to deter the enemy from attacking by means of consolidating and transmitting sufficient power to make it believe that the attack has only minimal prospects of success.²⁰

Deterrence by punishment is preferable in the context of nuclear war, when the fear of catastrophic damage can maintain an effective balance of terror. By contrast, conventional deterrence is identified with deterrence by denial, for two reasons. First, conventional deterrence is more fragile and imperfect precisely because no threat of destruction looms over the adversaries. In the nonconventional scenario, neither side has a rational interest to diverge from status quo, whereas in the conventional scenario not even very heavy costs will suffice to keep a side that feels that the status quo is contrary to its fundamental interests from looking for an alternative. When the price of armed conflict is not a sufficient restraint, deterrence by denial becomes the main tool.

The second reason that deterrence by denial is preferable in the conventional context is that it is easier for us to estimate how our military might can thwart offensive plans than how the other side perceives the intensity of the threat

¹⁷ Note that deterrence by punishment as conceptualized in the literature does not require actual retribution but only a threat of it.

¹⁸ Snyder 1961.

¹⁹ We also need to distinguish specific deterrence, whose purpose is to prevent a particular action by the other side, from general deterrence, which does not target any particular situation or target.

²⁰ It is hard to state clearly that one type of deterrence is preferable to the other. Still, an analysis of 58 test cases of indirect conventional deterrence found that preventive deterrence was more effective (Huth and Russett 1988).

(the punishment) as measured against its goals.²¹ In a conventional conflict, it is difficult to achieve a stable equilibrium between the two sides, because the enemy's evaluation of the benefit it will derive from victory, or even a limited achievement, may change. A price deemed intolerable at one point in time may be perceived as acceptable in light of new considerations of which the deterring side may not be aware. Because deterrence is a strategy to preserve the status quo, in the conventional context it must be combined with other elements, given the difficulty of evaluating whether the negative incentive is sufficient to prevent the outbreak of the war.

The failure of Israel's concept of deterrence is rooted in the fact that it employs the different strategies in the wrong contexts. As will be made plain below, Israel's ambiguous nuclear deterrence is of the denial variety, meant to signal to the Arab world the futility of an attempt to destroy Israel.²² But in most military contexts, in order to remain vague and because none of its enemies possess sufficient nonconventional means to pose an existential threat to it,²³ Israel employs conventional deterrence marked by elements of punishment. In the context of October 7, we can imagine that had Israel depended chiefly on deterrence by denial, it would have stationed sufficient forces on the Gaza perimeter to hold back any attack, and this would have been enough to deter Hamas from launching one. By contrast, the dependence on deterrence by punishment – that is, exacting a heavy price – assumes that we understand the other side's cost-benefit calculations, and this leaves us open to the possibility of misestimations.

²¹ See Snyder 1970.

²² The present study does not address nonconventional deterrence by Israel.

²³ Israel has faced nonconventional threats in the past. For example, the Assad regime in Syria maintained a huge arsenal of chemical weapons. Most of it was dismantled under international pressure at the start of the Syrian Civil War; what remained was eliminated by Israel after the fall of the Assad regime. Threats of this sort never developed into an existential threat to Israel. To date Israel has preferred to maintain its policy of ambiguity and has avoided adopting a policy of open nuclear deterrence. Although this goes beyond the scope of the present study, the policy of ambiguity remains valuable even if other countries in the Middle East acquire nuclear capabilities.

Chapter 2: Blue and White Deterrence

Deterrence has been a fundamental element of Israel's security doctrine from its founding;²⁴ some assert that its roots go even farther back.²⁵ Deterrence, along with Early Warning and Decisive Victory, are the three vertices of the 'security triangle' at the heart of the Israeli outlook.²⁶ Many believe, however, that deterrence is the heart of the classic Israeli doctrine, the touchstone used to define situations, goals, achievements, and failures.²⁷

In order to understand the roots of the concept of deterrence in Israel one must go back to the events that shaped it. After the War of Independence and the armistice agreements, the Israeli establishment proceeded from the assumption that there would be many more rounds of fighting between Israel and the Arab states and that a stable equilibrium was not a realistic objective. The Israeli-Arab conflict was marked by a strong asymmetry between Israel and the Arab states with regard to population, territory, and resources.²⁸ The security establishment understood that the country was not equipped to end the Arab threat by military means. Consequently, it adopted a defense doctrine intended primarily to gain time. The idea was that the Arab world would eventually realize that it could not eliminate Israel by force. As Ben-Gurion stated while the War of Independence was still raging:

²⁴ Ben-Israel 2013. At the same time, it is worth noting that Ben-Gurion himself, who is credited with formulating Israel's security doctrine, never referred to the security triangle - of Deterrence, Early Warning, and Decisive Victory. When he was asked to name the pillars on which Israel's security was based, he named a strong military, cooperation with the powers, the Jewish people, and the Jewish genius. Although it is far from clear when the security triangle achieved its current form, it seems to have been sometime in 1980s (Arad 2016; Bar 2024). Either way, today the three components of the security triangle are regarded as the foundational pillars of Israel's security doctrine, and that is what matters for our purposes.

²⁵ For an analysis of the concept of deterrence in the time of the pre-State Yishuv, see Rid 2012.

²⁶ The 2006 Meridor Report affirmed the importance of deterrence in Israel's security doctrine, and added to the triad of deterrence, early warning, and decisive victory, the element of civil and military defense (Meridor and Eldadi 2018). The Meridor Report was not officially adopted by the Government. Because no Israeli Government has ever endorsed a formal security doctrine. The practical adherence to the Meridor Report has made it part of the "unwritten constitution" of Israel's security doctrine.

²⁷ Freilich 2018, 43.

²⁸ Freilich 2018, 40–42.

There is one historical difference between us and the Arabs... A last battle is not possible for us. We can never assume that we can deliver a knockout blow to the enemy and that will be the last battle, after which there will be no need for confrontation and no danger of war... It isn't possible to eliminate them, given their vast manpower and natural increase... With all the efforts that we must make, it is impossible for us to assume that we can put an end to the problem in a single war. Our enemies can assume this. After every war that takes place and after every war from which we emerge victorious, we will still be facing the same problem... If there is a war tomorrow and we win it – we will face the fear of a third, fourth, and fifth round.²⁹

The 'security triangle' was created dynamically to suit the needs of that time. Deterrence was intended to postpone new rounds of fighting as long as possible;³⁰ Early Warning was meant to give the IDF enough time to prepare for war when deterrence failed; and Decisive Victory meant a quick and clear military victory that would restore deterrence (and Israel perceived this as possible only if it operated inside enemy territory).³¹ Of the three, deterrence had pride of place as the main vehicle for achieving the objective of postponing future rounds of violence and reducing their scale.³²

²⁹ Quoted by Ben-Israel 2013, 29–30.

³⁰ In practice, as will be explained below, two distinct concepts of deterrence are involved here: strategic deterrence and cumulative deterrence.

³¹ The wording here is a bit simplistic, because the present document does not address every element of Israel's security doctrine, even though they are intertwined. For the relations among them, see, e.g., Bar-Joseph 2024, 59–65; and Rid 2012.

³² Rid 2012.

1. The deterrence that succeeded: The Arab world now accepts Israel's existence

In light of the asymmetry between Israel and the Arab world, the country aspired to balance its geopolitical inferiority by amassing military superiority in arms and personnel in order to create deterrence by denial.³³ Uri Bar-Joseph designated this version "cumulative deterrence" – frustrating the Arab world's ambition to overwhelm Israel by means of force and getting the moderate elements there to recognize its existence as a *fait accompli*, thereby creating the conditions for peace treaties with them (or at least non-belligerence agreements).³⁴ Even though the basic logic of cumulative deterrence is preventive, Israel had to demonstrate actual strength in order to make the Arabs painfully certain that, despite their huge geographic and demographic advantage, it did indeed enjoy

33 Another aspect of Israel's effort to create a favorable imbalance of power, as part of cumulative deterrence, is its development (according to foreign publications) of nonconventional weapons. Israel armed itself unilaterally and continues to work to maintain this asymmetry. Although Israel's nuclear deterrent was asymmetrical in terms of capabilities, since only Israel possesses a doomsday weapon, it created a kind of symmetry between the geopolitical factors, where the Arab world has the advantage, and the military factor, where Israel does. Israel, with its much smaller territory, population, and resources, "balanced the equation" by bringing nuclear weapons into the picture.

Even though, on the surface, nuclear weapons were also meant as strategic deterrence – an implied threat should the Arab countries launch an all-out war to destroy Israel – in practice Israel's nonconventional deterrent did not enter the picture until after the Arabs had been routed in the Six Day War, achieving the objectives of cumulative deterrence. According to Bar-Joseph (2024, 86–87 and 119–121), Israel's nonconventional deterrence played no role for Egyptian and Syrian decision-makers in advance of the Yom Kippur War; nor did it figure in Israel's considerations then, either. The Arab world implicitly recognized Israel's existence as an inevitable reality as early as the 1967 Khartoum Summit (even though that conference is known for its "three noes"). Here we will not consider Israel's nonconventional deterrence, in part because there is an acoustic separation (and, some hold, a physical separation) between it and Israeli military deterrence. Note that in practice Israel's nuclear deterrence has not kept its enemies from attacking it. They follow the reasonable assumption that the threshold for its use is very high, leaving them ample room to maneuver beneath it. October 7 is the most recent and painful example of this. Assume that Israel had found its back against the wall then—that Hezbollah, too, had attacked on October 7, that there had been a mass uprising on the West Bank, and that the Iranians took advantage of the opportunity to rain ballistic missiles on the center of the country. The chaos would have been extreme; Israel would have lost control of large swaths of its territory for several weeks, until it regrouped and recovered them. The damage to the civilian front would have been immense. Israel would not have toppled, but there is no doubt it would have found itself in the most dangerous situation since the War of Independence. Even in this horrific scenario, however, it is unlikely that its nonconventional arsenal could have had any deterrent effect. This fact exposes a serious problem with the effort to set the rules of the game by means of deterrence — after a rule is promulgated, smart players will look for a way to get around it or find holes in it. Hence, in practice, the most important aspect of the unilateralism was the conventional superiority that Israel has worked to cultivate from its establishment to the present day.

34 Analytically, cumulative deterrence is not really deterrence, but a form of strategic coercion meant to nudge the Arab world in the desired direction.

a military advantage they could not easily overcome.³⁵ The Israeli concept of cumulative deterrence is indeed an outlier among conventional concepts of deterrence, but it suited the unique conditions in which the country found itself in its early years. This approach, which is effectively a new incarnation of Jabotinsky's Iron Wall doctrine, was the supreme objective of the Israeli concept of security.³⁶

The cumulative deterrence achieved its goal. After the Six-Day War, the Arab world largely dropped the idea of defeating Israel in a conventional conflict; after the signing of the peace treaty with Egypt, the option of a total conventional war by the Arab world against Israel was no longer on the table.³⁷ Since then, conventional threats against Israel have been on the wane, first with the collapse of Iraq and after that the weakening of Syria as a result of its civil war.³⁸ This process received its verbal expression in the Arab peace initiative of 2002, when all members of the Arab League publicly agreed to a peace plan and recognition of Israel.³⁹ Although Israel has not yet reached out to grasp their 27 hands, its cumulative deterrence has remained

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35 At the same time, it should be noted that in Schelling's terms cumulative deterrence is not deterrence at all, but a form of coercion or, more precisely, coercive diplomacy. The goal is to compel the Arab world to recognize Israel and negotiate with it.

36 Ben Israel 2014, 35–40.

37 Bar-Joseph 2024, 155.

38 Freilich 2018, 84–88.

39 See "The Arab Initiative: A Strategic Miss and Historical Opportunity" (Molad, 2013), at <https://www.molad.org/images/upload/files/APImolad.pdf>.

firm.⁴⁰ In the long term, the cumulative deterrence is liable to be eroded because of Israel's unwillingness to reach a settlement of the conflict, conduct that strengthens hostile parties that maintain that there is no reason to aspire to agreements with it.

2. The deterrence that failed: The punitive approach does not prevent war and escalation

Alongside the success of the cumulative deterrence that prodded the Arab world to give up its aspiration to destroy Israel, Israel developed a lower level that, following Bar-Joseph, we will call "strategic deterrence" and "current deterrence."⁴¹

Strategic deterrence aims to deter the enemy from starting a war. Because preventing war is not necessarily the same thing as propelling the other side towards a political settlement, strategic deterrence is distinct both conceptually and practically from cumulative deterrence. Although after the Six-Day War Egypt did give up its ambition to destroy Israel, it still started the Yom Kippur war in order to force Israel to enter negotiations with it.⁴² Not even the clear military victory of 1967 could establish strategic deterrence.

This point makes it clear that there is no correlation between victory and deterrence: the Arab states and terrorist organizations launched military operations against Israel precisely when the latter was at the height of its

40 After the Hamas attack on October 7, there were fears that this cumulative deterrence had collapsed and Israel's enemies thought the time was ripe to return to the original plan. As of the date of writing these lines, this fear seems to have been unfounded. First, because the strongest forces in the Arab world, led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt, did not perceive the situation as a strategic change that would justify revising their attitude towards Israel. Second, because Israel's forceful actions and the collapse of the Assad regime exposed the hopelessness of Iran's Ring of Fire strategy for destroying Israel. Israel's conventional superiority remained clear and to some extent grew stronger; even the harshest blow Israel had suffered in decades ended in a series of even more painful blows to its enemies. To no little extent, the greatest threat facing Israel remains the internal threat. This situation may change in the future, as Turkey's star rises in the region and the peace agreement with Egypt is eroded; but Israel can take steps to reduce such future risks.

41 Bar-Joseph (1998, 42). His taxonomy includes "specific deterrence," which means drawing clear red lines that, if crossed, would lead to an attack by Israel. The closure of the Straits of Tiran was one such red line. This deterrence, too, failed, in the run-up to the Six Day War. Since then Israel has rarely drawn clear red lines.

42 In fact, the situation was reversed: the Arabs looked for cumulative deterrence to force Israel to begin negotiations (Bar Joseph 2024, 122–134).

might and avoided confrontation when it was at a low ebb.⁴³ For example, the Egyptians initiated raids into the Sinai Peninsula less than a month after the end of the Six-Day War, even though it had been Israel's most spectacular victory ever. On the other hand, Syria chose not to react to the bombing of the nuclear reactor in Deir al-Zor, despite the weakness that the IDF had shown in its failed ground campaign in the Second Lebanon War.

Military victory cannot forge effective strategic deterrence because deterrence is a policy tool intended to preserve the status quo. When the status quo is unacceptable to the side being deterred, its military weakness will not be enough to dissuade it from launching a war, even if its opponent's military superiority is unquestionable. What dissuades future attacks is not a military defeat but a status quo that is perceived as good enough for everyone.⁴⁴ This fundamental insight is missing from the political and security discourse in Israel, which tends to see strong deterrence as an alternative to stability. The belief is that the stronger the deterrence, the easier it will be to preserve a less stable situation, because the other side will be afraid to challenge it. But this fear sometimes exists in our imagination more than in their mind.

In the period between the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur war, the failure of strategic deterrence (deterrence that can avert war) was clear, as was the success of the cumulative deterrence (which had induced Arab countries to abandon the idea of annihilating Israel.). At this point, the Israeli security establishment should have dethroned the concept of deterrence from its primacy in the Israeli concept of security and updated it accordingly. However, a set of political considerations, to be examined below, caused the security establishment to stick to the idea of deterrence despite its unsuitability and despite the fact that Israel's strategic environment started to change dramatically in the mid-1970s, with the advent of asymmetric terrorism.

Along with the threat of a total war, in its early years Israel had to cope with asymmetrical threats in the form of infiltrators. To deal with them, the Israeli doctrine of deterrence included another level, which Bar-Joseph referred to as

⁴³ Adamsky 2016, 167.

⁴⁴ On this see Bar-Joseph 2005.

"current deterrence" (or in Israeli jargon, "routine security"), aimed at preventing an escalation of the operations against Israel on fronts where the conflict continued to simmer over a low flame. This form of deterrence took an extreme punitive approach, as indicated by then–Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan in 1956:

We did not have the ability to protect every water pipeline against being blown up and every tree from being uprooted. Nor did we have the power to prevent the murder of workers in orchards and of families in their sleep. But we did have the ability to place a high price on our blood, a heavier price than was worth it for the Arab population, Arab armed forces, and Arab governments to pay. The meaning of the reprisal operations is that Israel sees infiltration as an intolerable form of hostilities and instructs its forces to cross the border and attack in the Arabs' land. That attack is not an act of retribution; it is an act of punishment and warning that if government in question does not assert its power over its residents and does not prevent them from attacking Israel, Israeli forces will devastate its country.⁴⁵

Even if there was some logic in the adoption of an aggressive approach for strategic deterrence because of the asymmetry between Israel and the Arab world, it is extremely doubtful that the punitive approach to routine security was relevant even in Dayan's time. In any case, back then that logic had not yet trickled down into every aspect of Israel's use of military force. Israel knew how to exert force that was not intended only to intimidate.

Since the Yom Kippur war, however, the Israeli concept of deterrence has been assimilated to the routine security approach and openly adopted the logic of punitive deterrence. Israel began to see itself as the sheriff of the Middle East. The peace treaty with Egypt eliminated the main conventional threat. Starting in the 1970s, the weight of the asymmetric threats, in the form of attacks and

⁴⁵ Quoted by Bar 1990, 92.

hostile operations by terrorist organizations and substate organizations had been increasing, even as the threat of war diminished. The Israeli concept of deterrence became more extreme, to match the nature of the threat, and now focused on the punitive goal of making "the Arabs" afraid of the implications of their actions.

In the Western world, the rise of asymmetric threats led to serious thought about whether the theory of deterrence was appropriate to the new situation. According to many, the theory of deterrence no longer suits the modern world, with the decline of the threat of war between the superpowers and the rise of asymmetric threats; others hold that it could still play an important role in the new geopolitical reality.⁴⁶ The Israeli security establishment, too, conducted discussions about the appropriate response to asymmetric threats, discussions that, given the frequency and urgency of the matter for Israel, were sometimes more thorough than those conducted in the rest of the world. Nevertheless, despite some reservations about the concept of deterrence in an age of asymmetry, the possibility that it might no longer be appropriate was never taken into account. Instead, the establishment started from the assumption that deterrence should be adapted to the new situation. Deterrence ceased to be a means and became an objective, as Israel began employing force in the name of deterrence, instead of using deterrence as a means to avoid war. Dayan's idea of current deterrence, already problematic when formulated, became the end-all and be-all and penetrated all elements of the Israeli practice of conventional deterrence, which, in turn, came to dominate all forms of the use of military force.⁴⁷

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⁴⁶ See, e.g., the discussion in Adler 2009.

⁴⁷ Adamsky 2016, 169.

In keeping with its doctrine of punitive deterrence, Israel came to see itself as a legislator, prescribing punishments and behavioral norms whose violation would lead to sanctions. These norms will be respected in proportion as the potential criminals see the sanctions as sufficiently severe and vigorously implemented. In this conceptualization, successful deterrence is manifested by the frequent exercise of force that causes the other side to "internalize" the norm. According to its advocates, Israeli punitive deterrence is consequently "an exemplary learning process."⁴⁸ Every exercise of Israel's military power is now focused on enforcement. In line with criminology theory, it must always be severe, clear, and immediate. The goal is immediate punishment that restores "quiet," where quiet is the status quo that Israel dictates unilaterally.

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This idea has shaped Israel's security policy vis-à-vis Hamas in Gaza for the last decade. It reached the point that the 2013 version of the IDF strategy document upgraded the IDF arsenal to include "deterrence operations," whose goal is "to persuade the enemy that the price and/or risk of a certain action it might choose exceed the benefit that might be expected from that action."⁴⁹ In 2015, deterrence operations were replaced by "limited operations" that "would make the enemy aware of the magnitude of the potential damage to be expected from a deterioration of the situation and the low utility of its action if it does not abandon its policy, and that generate pressure on it to halt its activities."⁵⁰ These means reflect the erroneous idea that the enemy can be compelled to acquiesce in a status quo it sees as intolerable merely by the use of military force.

The 2015 version of the IDF strategy document embodies a profound change in the theory and practice of the Israeli concept of deterrence. This document comes the closest to an official security doctrine published in Israel in recent

⁴⁸ For such a whiggish analysis of the Israeli concept of deterrence, which sees it as a rational modal of normative design, see Lieberman 2013.

⁴⁹ See Finkel 2020, 9.

⁵⁰ IDF Strategy 2015.

decades – a conscious attempt to formulate principles for the use of force in an era when asymmetric warfare is the main threat. Several sections of the document are devoted to deterrence.⁵¹

25. Deterrence is created in the mind, but is also based on physical and tangible elements that are part of the enemy's considerations, such as the outcome of previous confrontations, routine actions that demonstrate the futility of a confrontation, and the constant threat of employing force.

...

28. For every enemy, deterrence must be -

A. Without a particular context - general and cumulative over time, in order to maintain the status quo and set game rules that Israel wants.

B. In a particular crisis situation - specific and focused, in order to force the enemy to act or to refrain from acting, in order to stop a deterioration and prevent war.

C. The elements of deterrence are:

(1) A credible threat of strong offensive operations that will exact a heavy price in the case of an attack on us. This element is based on -

(a) building a force that is in part visible to the enemy and that embodies the ability and willingness to cause it damage

⁵¹ Interestingly enough, the section on deterrence no longer appears as a separate chapter in the updated IDF strategy document for 2018 and its contents have been scattered to other locations.

(b) cognitive operations that express our willingness to accept risks

(c) limited offensive operations to signal that there has been a deviation from "the rules of the game" and a willingness to accept risks

(2) Building a force that makes plain the lack of benefit for the enemy (such as defensive systems)

(3) Frustrating and disrupting capabilities.⁵²

Here we see a good example of the cacophony that characterizes the Israeli concept of deterrence, which jumbles up punishment, prevention, the use of force, defense, and disruption. Because this definition of deterrence includes almost every element of military strategy, it is unclear how to evaluate its suitability to the situation or to measure its success, since it exists both when we attack proactively and when we are attacked and respond, and also when we frustrate the enemy's plans or abilities to attack. Hence it is simpler to ask when we do not deter the enemy. From this there follows, of course, the question of whether a concept of deterrence that implies that the enemy is always deterred has any validity to it.

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The security establishment, which was aware of the difficulty of creating deterrence against terrorist organizations, reached the conclusion that what didn't work with force would work with much greater force. This idea was fostered by Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi, with his idea of "lethality": because the

52 IDF Strategy 2015, 19–20.

terrorist organizations do not have a formal structure or ambitions to hold back a regular army in some specific location, we should measure their defeat by how much damage we caused the enemy, chiefly the killing of terrorists. As Kochavi put it, "at the end of every stage in the fighting, one should examine the scope of the enemy and the targets that were destroyed."⁵³ Because damage in itself does not guarantee victory, and because it is not clear what political objective it is meant to serve, the lethality approach is in effect an expansion of the concept of punitive deterrence to the point of absurdity.

This approach, too, failed in the series of military operations that the IDF, under Kochavi, conducted in the Gaza Strip. Although, thanks to technological advances, the IDF did become more efficient at killing terrorists and destroying terrorist infrastructure, the operations did not create the desired deterrence. After every operation, the organizations regrouped and grew stronger. There are two reasons for this. First, as we have seen, deterrence is a policy that serves preservation of the status quo; when one side is not interested in preserving the status quo there is no reason to assume that military weakness will dissuade it from fighting.

Second, lethality is actually an asset for the terrorist organizations. When Israel employs more force and more civilians are killed, Israel becomes a cruel aggressor in the eyes of the local population and of key members of the international community. When the organization is still able to stand on its feet at the end of the lethal round it is seen as having emerged victorious. This is precisely the deterrence trap that Emanuel Adler identified as characteristic of the asymmetric relations between a state and a terrorist organization.⁵⁴

⁵³ Quoted by Levi (2022) in his excellent analysis of the lethality doctrine.

⁵⁴ Adler 2009, 85–86.

Chapter 3: The Failures of the Israeli Concept of Deterrence

In this chapter we will consider several grave failures of the hyper-punitive concept of deterrence that Israel has adopted. The first failure has to do with the very ability of punitive deterrence to achieve its desired goals. A second failure relates to the priority that Israeli security thinking awards to deterrence over better alternatives. A third failing involves the ability to confirm the existence of effective deterrence.

1. The first failure: Punitive deterrence does not suit Israel's security situation

In order to be aware of the dangers posed by the concept of punitive deterrence that has developed in Israel, we must examine the profound difference between punishment in the field of criminology and punishment delivered by armed force. Criminologists think about crime in a context where the state has a monopoly on the use of force and the ability to set standards for the citizens subject to its authority. Criminals do break the law, but only rarely are they challenging the state's authority to enact laws and punishments. This is not the situation with terrorist organizations or foreign enemies. They deny Israel's authority to determine the rules of the game and even reject the rules themselves. Israel does not enjoy a monopoly on the use of force against its enemies but is attempting to achieve a particular stable and enduring status quo. Because this status quo is frequently intolerable to its adversaries, they cannot accept it – and consequently will employ force again and again in order to shatter the status quo. This is a thesis of deterrence that undercuts itself.⁵⁵

We must emphasize that the fact that the status quo is intolerable for terrorist organizations does not imply that we should try to achieve a situation they

⁵⁵ According to Bar-Joseph (2024, 76), this process actually pushed enemies to employ force when Israel entrenched a status quo they found intolerable.

can accept; but it does mean that punitive deterrence is not the appropriate military strategy for dealing with such organizations.

In addition, precisely because the nature of the conflict between Israel and its enemies includes the frequent use of force, the attempt to "legislate" stable standards of behavior is problematic: the parties are locked in active competition and the status quo frequently becomes uncomfortable for them. Israel's attempt to set rigid standards of behavior by ramping up the severity of punishment forces its enemies to engage in a rapid learning process in order to breach these standards and become more sophisticated.⁵⁶

Assume that Israel decides that any rocket fire into communities in the south of the country will be met by an aggressive response. Hamas could internalize this norm but challenge Israel in other ways: for example, with exploding balloons or antitank missiles fired at the roads around the Gaza Strip. How would Israel behave then? The rule it promulgated does not define a reaction to these events, so it would face a dilemma: holding back and accepting a new status quo set by the other side, or further escalation and acknowledgment that deterrence has failed again.

In fact, all the deterrence operations have proven unable to set rigid rules. It is precisely Israel that has been forced to accept increasingly aggressive behavior by its adversaries. There are two clear examples of this. First, after the Lebanon War Israel and Hezbollah accepted that the conflict would be limited to the security zone. The assassination of Hezbollah Secretary-General Abbas Moussaoui in February 1992 pushed the organization to revise its policy and fire Katyusha rockets into northern Israel. Unable to tolerate this new situation, in 1993 Israel launched Operation Accountability, with the goal of drawing a new red line of attacks on civilian communities. But Israel was no longer able to put the genie back in the bottle, not even after Operation Grapes of Wrath and later campaigns. Hezbollah became a symmetrical partner that also had a hand in setting the deterrence equation.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Rid 2012, 142.

⁵⁷ This policy rebounded against Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary general of Hezbollah, in September 2024, demonstrating the fragility of a deterrence equation that the other party is unhappy with.

A more troublesome example involves Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Operation Summer Rains (2006) was the first time a rocket was fired towards Ashqelon. During Operation Cast Lead (2009), Hamas fired rockets at Yavne and Beersheva. In 2012 ("Pillar of Defense") it targeted the Tel Aviv metropolitan area and Jerusalem. Operation Protective Edge (2014) saw rockets fire at Haifa. Not only did each of these Israeli operations, perceived as restoring deterrence by demonstrating the consequences of rocket fire at civilian communities, fail to do so; Hamas actually increased the range of its rockets and the intensity of its barrages over time. Rather than restoring the status quo ante, deterrence campaigns chase after an imaginary red line that keeps moving to our disadvantage.

Rather than restoring the status quo ante, deterrence campaigns chase after an imaginary red line that keeps moving to our disadvantage.

This leads to another acute problem with this approach: it leaves Israel in a situation of symmetrical deterrence it does not want to be in.⁵⁸ The desire to maintain relative calm is liable to rein in Israel's responses so that Hamas will not launch missiles at central Israel. At the end of the day deterrence equations are equations; restraint on one side requires restraint on the other side. Relying on deterrence campaigns to set the rules of the game in fact undermines the fundamental assumption of the Israeli concept of deterrence.

Were this not enough, the conceptualization of deterrence in terms of criminological punishment effectively makes the failure of deterrence a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because the criminal theory posits that crime is inevitable, Israel is effectively accepting the "crimes" against it as a decree of fate. However, given that the goal of deterrence is prevention, it seems hard to measure its success when the starting assumption is that crime is unavoidable. Specific deterrence is judged by a clear empirical metric: the threat was successful when the enemy decided not to act. By contrast, Israeli deterrence cannot be measured; even periods when the "crime rate" drops do not attest to its success.

58 Adamsky 2016, 181–82.

Finally, the attempt to set rules by means of punitive deterrence campaigns runs up against another severe problem that is part of every criminological approach to deterrence. The criminological method is based on utilitarian thought:⁵⁹ the goal is to find the equilibrium point at which the results of punishment make the crime unproductive for a potential criminal.⁶⁰ There are many problems with this approach, however.

The formulation of policy in cost-benefit terms posits rigid background assumptions about the rationality of confirmed criminals.⁶¹ Crime is almost always irrational when subjected to a cost-benefit analysis. Even if we can go beyond this by allowing for the irrationality of confirmed criminals, the difficulty of understanding their cost-benefit considerations will work against finding the desired balance. Perhaps the criminal gives greater weight to his honor within the underworld than to his liberty? If this is true for a criminal who shares our culture and language, it holds all the more so for fundamentalist terrorist organizations that have emerged from other cultures with a different ethos. This is certainly the case when they view methods such as suicide terrorism as rational vehicles for their struggle. The October 7 assault is a painful example of this. Yihye Sinwar evidently knew that the attack would lead to unprecedented destruction in the Gaza Strip, but was not deterred because he estimated the damage as worthwhile in comparison to the goal.

Some assert that we can perhaps understand the cost-benefit analyses of criminals like this by recognizing that they come from a culture based on honor and shame. Accordingly, the solution is to devise punishments that the criminals will see as humiliating and undermine their social status as strong men. The post-October 7 war produced many examples, from the Prison Service's dressing Hamas prisoners in T-shirts emblazoned with the Star of David to the IAF flyovers of Nasrallah's funeral. The idea was that this humiliation would induce the enemy to see the situation as a loss. But the attempt to engineer a cost-benefit balance of honor and humiliation exposes us to a significant

⁵⁹ Identified historically with Cesare Beccaria's theory of criminology (1986).

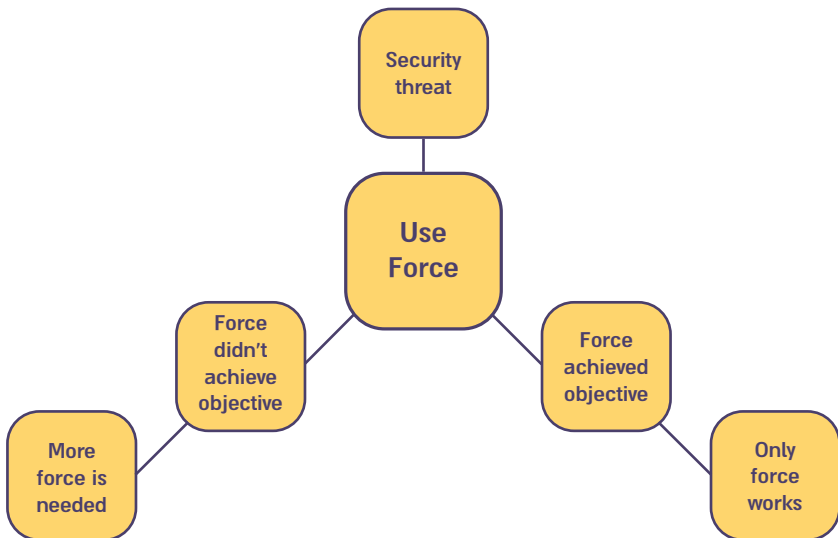
⁶⁰ These are calculated by multiplying the probability of detection and by the severity of the punishment. For example, the death penalty for parking in a no-parking zone would not be effective if not enforced. On the other hand, perfect enforcement is not effective if the sanction is minor.

⁶¹ See, e.g., Stein 2009.

knowledge gap: we have to understand what that culture views as dishonorable or shameful. The videos of Sinwar's last moments exemplify this problem. Israel thought they showed him as helpless, alone, and attempting to fight off a drone with a piece of wood. In the Arab world, however, he was seen as strong and brave, fighting against a stronger opponent to his last drop of blood. This is a gulf that will be hard to bridge even if the IDF Intelligence Directorate opens an anthropology unit.

Punitive deterrence is so clearly unsuited to Israel's situation that it is hard to understand why the security establishment and politicians have been so strongly addicted to it for so many years.

2. The second failure: Military deterrence is not a substitute for diplomacy



As stated, Israeli deterrence is chained to the use of force, which is located at the Decisive Victory vertex of the security triangle. Deterrence is perceived as a reservoir; when it is drained and the Arabs' "fear" disappears, heavy military action must be employed to refill it.

Deterrence and Decisive Victory are essential aspects of the Iron Wall doctrine, that has long since ceased to satisfy rational criteria. The efficacy of employing force cannot be confirmed or refuted by reality; there is no event that can cause those who hold this concept to reconsider it. Every event leads to a nonrational thought process, like this:

In the context of deterrence, the process plays out as follows: Deterrence failed and we were attacked, so we must land harsh blows on our enemies until deterrence is restored. When they attack again, we will conclude that our deterrence had weakened so we must strike even harder against them until deterrence is restored. The cycle is endless. The possibility that delivering painful blows to the enemy does not create the desired effect is simply not taken into account. If quiet is preserved it means the enemy is deterred; if the calm is shattered we need to strike again until the enemy is deterred. Even though the Gaza war demonstrated that Israeli deterrence has a rickety basis and cannot by itself dissuade our enemies from attacking us, serious and critical commentators continue to repeat the mantra that we need to keep striking until deterrence is restored.⁶²

The possibility that delivering painful blows to the enemy does not create the desired effect is simply not taken into account. If quiet is preserved it means the enemy is deterred; if the calm is shattered we need to strike again until the enemy is deterred.

What is more, the primacy of punitive deterrence in the Israeli security paradigm gradually dilutes the importance of other means, political and military, as ways to achieve our objectives. If the most important thing is intimidation, every

⁶² See, e.g., Nadav Eyal, "Will the Wave of Liquidations Restore our Lost Deterrence?" *Yedioth Ahronoth*, Aug. 2, 2024 [Hebrew].

action that does not directly and concretely produce fear is incorrect and undermines the basis of our doctrine. This was particularly evident with regard to the saga of humanitarian aid to Gaza. Humanitarian aid was impermissible for the Israeli public and many members of the Knesset, because the war's objective was to punish the people of Gaza and cause them to suffer. In this situation there is no room for moral concerns or for utilitarian considerations of gaining diplomatic breathing space for Israel. Note that such assistance could actually be a more effective form of pressure than military deterrence.⁶³

This dilution of means also dilutes the objectives; when punishment meant to intimidate becomes the supreme objective it pushes other objectives out of the picture. War, as memorably noted by Clausewitz, is a means to obtain political objectives. Deterrence, by contrast, is a military device, not a political tool. However, the fantasy that it might be possible to deter any enemy in any situation thrusts aside political objectives and turns deterrence from a means to an end in itself. If it is possible to avoid war by means of deterrence, why try other ways, such as diplomacy? Pertinent here is the observation of the foremost Israeli theoretician of strategy, the late Yehoshafat Harkabi:

Political thinking and military thinking differ in their paths and direction. Operational thinking deals with an event, the operation, and is more limited; whereas political thinking deals with a process, the flow of history and historical outcomes. In political thinking the adversary is an object to be overcome and the approach is manipulative. In political thinking the adversary is an object with which one must ultimately conclude a peace agreement; consequently one must know it for its own sake and negotiate with it – the thinking is more a matter of communication. In military thinking the enemy is a collection of targets to be attacked; in political

63 During the Second World War there were fears that Spain would become an active member of the Axis and declare war on the Allies. The British correctly understood Spain's fundamental need for humanitarian assistance after the ravages of its civil war and consequently employed humanitarian assistance as an incentive for Spain to remain neutral even at the peak of the Germans' military successes. See Ben-Ami 2003.

thinking the enemy is a human political entity that must be persuaded and placated. In military thinking we are indifferent to the adversary's suffering; on the contrary, we want to increase it. In political thinking we must feel its pain. [...] Military thinking is one-sided; political thinking has many sides.⁶⁴

This dilution of political thinking is manifested in a clear failure of deterrence. Deterrence requires that the enemy have channels of activity that do not involve violence.⁶⁵ If the enemy does not believe it has other courses of action that do not rely on force, deterrence must necessarily fail. When Israel stifles other means for expressing opposition to its rule over the Palestinians (such as demonstrations or activity in international institutions) and refuses to recognize nonviolent political actors as negotiating partners, it pushes the Palestinians to employ force. In the absence of other ways for the Palestinians to resist Israeli control, the real goal of deterrence is not to dissuade them from resorting to violence but from engaging in any form of opposition to the status quo imposed on them by Israel. The problem, from Israel's perspective, is that these peaceful channels increase the feasibility of diplomatic solutions that Israel's current leadership is not interested in. Israel is employing its might not to prevent violence, but to prevent any progress towards a settlement. In this situation, Israel's use of force, ostensibly meant to bolster its deterrence, actually empties it of content.

When Israel stifles other means for expressing opposition to its rule over the Palestinians (such as demonstrations or activity in international institutions) and refuses to recognize nonviolent political actors as negotiating partners, it pushes the Palestinians to employ force.

⁶⁴ Harkabi 1990, 511.

⁶⁵ Harkabi 1964, 24.

3. The third failure: Intelligence evaluations are not exercises in mind reading

When it comes to the threat of nuclear war, we are quite certain that the other side is deterred from attacking us because we know that the punishment – total annihilation – is so extreme that no rational party would risk it. This certainty has nothing to do with being able to read the enemy's mind but merely draws on a basic assumption about human behavior. By contrast, shaping conventional deterrence with a punitive approach is problematic because it is hard to know what punishment the other side will see as a strong deterrent. Consequently, deterrence by denial makes more sense in conventional settings, because the certainty threshold is lower: the side employing deterrence needs to know what capacities it has to prevent aggression, but not how the other side perceives the cost-benefit ratio of the use of force.

Because the Israeli approach combines a punitive approach with conventional deterrence, it has become essential to understand how the other side understands the threat and when the threat loses its power and we must prepare for war. Intelligence evaluations are the main device for determining whether the enemy is deterred.⁶⁶ But here we run into a serious problem, since we cannot usually know for certain when the enemy is truly deterred; and even if it is deterred, it is hard to know which of the means we employed did the trick. For this reason, the massive efforts invested in harvesting intelligence about the enemy's sense of deterrence are by definition ineffective. All the pre–October 7 intelligence analyses that Hamas was deterred indicate this clearly. Not only does IDF intelligence not have the power to peer into the minds of Hamas's leaders and estimate their intentions; even when there are indications it is not clear how we can distinguish a true intention from attempts at deception. *Accordingly, the evaluation that the enemy is "deterred" is incomplete at best and meaningless at worst.*

⁶⁶ This dependence could already be found in Ben-Gurion's foundational document on Israel's security doctrine known as the "18 Points": "The main question is, of course: (1) whether we can expect a war; (2) and whether we can hold out and win. The first question depends on the mood and political ambitions of the Arab rulers and their military strength. To answer this question I am wholly dependent on the reports and opinions of our military intelligence, which is, incidentally, perhaps the most sophisticated and talented branch of all our services" (see David Ben-Gurion, *Military and State*, Maarchot 279–280, June 1981 [1953]).

In the absence of certainty about the other side's thought processes and ideas,⁶⁷ we are forced to infer the existence or nonexistence of deterrence from outside events and especially from the correlation between quiet and deterrence. This sets up the mistaken equation that quiet equals deterrence.⁶⁸ Here too we can quote Harkabi: "The non-occurrence of war does not mean that stability has been achieved. Peace is not a mark of stability; peace, or the absence of war, is a complex phenomenon that cannot be attributed solely to deterrent preparedness."⁶⁹

The enemy's decision not to attack may stem from a host of reasons that are not related to its fear of the punishment it will suffer in the war. The enemy may be caught up in another arena, internal disagreements about strategy, processes of reorganization, and so on. Or – the most worrisome alternative – the enemy may simply decide to prepare for battle and try to create strategic deception. So there is no reason to conclude from the mere existence of quiet that it was caused by fear of the Israeli reaction. Quiet is not evidence of effective deterrence; at best it is extremely weak evidence. The fact that the enemy is keeping things quiet may equally support the conjecture that it is deterred and the conjecture that it is not deterred and is waiting for an opportune moment.

there is no reason to conclude from the mere existence of quiet that it was caused by fear of the Israeli reaction.

The fact that an organization like Hamas is willing to maintain a calm border with Israel is a phenomenon that requires an explanation. Israel explained that situation as resulting from the positive and negative incentives it created for Hamas via repeated rounds of fighting on the one hand and via incentives such as money from Qatar or an increased quota of workers allowed into Israel on

⁶⁷ Even if we imagine that the other side lays out all its reasoning processes in documents, and we manage to put our hands on them, it would still not suffice for us to understand how it weighs costs and benefits. Assume the enemy writes, "it would be worthwhile to break the cease-fire only if it serves the protection of the holy places." The meaning of "serves" is unclear if we do not understand the enemy's perceptions. For it, religious escalation might for example serve the protection of the holy places even if in the short term it causes damage to them. In the jargon of philosophy, we could write that we can interpret reasoning processes if we have good knowledge of the thin and thick concepts employed by the enemy. But acquiring such knowledge is a complex matter, as anyone who has experienced migration can attest.

⁶⁸ See Adamsky 2016, 180, and the quotations there.

⁶⁹ Harkabi 1964, 106.

the other hand. Every day that a murderous organization such as Hamas agreed to hold its fire, Israel perceived it as deterred. The longer the calm lasted, the stronger this conclusion became. Every round of fighting that ended with a limited agreement for a ceasefire was perceived as evidence that Hamas was deterred by the cost of the conflict. The thesis of deterrence grew and grew. But no evidence could refute the alternative hypothesis that Hamas's behavior was actually motivated by a quite different set of intentions, that is, it was merely waiting for the time to be ripe.

Every day that a murderous organization such as Hamas agreed to hold its fire, Israel perceived it as deterred. The longer the calm lasted, the stronger this conclusion became.

Even more serious was Hamas's realization that we misunderstood it. According to an investigative report by Ronen Bergman, published in the *New York Times*, documents uncovered in the Gaza Strip reveal that Hamas made active use of the formula "quiet equals deterrence" in order to fool Israel. According to Bergman, the top leadership of Hamas thought it essential for the success of its plan that Israel be led to believe that Hamas in Gaza was interested in calm and was focused on achieving economic prosperity.⁷⁰ Hamas understood that Israel misread the signals received from it and identified with deterrence, and also that it must be perceived as reacting to positive incentives, thereby fueling our failure.

This line of thought led Israel to a profound failure. *We conceived of Hamas as a behaviorist machine to be deterred via incentives and disincentives, while we thought of ourselves as employing complex cognitive maneuvers. On October 7 it turned out that it was Hamas that had been employing a sophisticated strategy of deception and waiting for the appropriate moment, while we were the party it incentivized to keep the peace for its needs.* Not only was the concept of punitive deterrence we adopted a total failure, it also planted the seeds of the catastrophe.

⁷⁰ See Ronen Bergman, "The Objective Hamas Set Itself: Crushing the State of Israel," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, Oct. 13, 2024 [Hebrew].

The Israeli concept of deterrence is problematic because it leads us to a faulty process of estimating psychological deterrence when in fact we have no access to such information. This lesson would have been clear had Israel recognized the superiority of deterrence by denial. But the ideological emphasis on deterrence by punishment created a need for the security system to try to square the circle and read minds in the Arab world.

Conclusion: How Did We Become Addicted to Deterrence?

In light of the many failures associated with the concept of deterrence, we should ask why the Israeli security establishment became addicted to the idea.

A security doctrine is a paradigm, a collection of axioms, theories, and ideas that provide us with a framework for understanding reality and for solving the problems we encounter in it.⁷¹ Paradigms do not merely help us understand the world; they also help us act in it. Their security doctrine provides those who hold it with underlying norms, that is, a set of justifications for their choice to deal with a problem in a certain way. In this sense, the doctrine has an ideological function.⁷² The moment we formulate and adopt a certain doctrine of security we determine how we choose to solve the problems that the geopolitical situation will bring to our doorstep. However, a security doctrine is formulated in light of a particular security situation; when that changes it must change accordingly, or the paradigm disintegrates and loses its tie to reality. The role of the concept of deterrence in Israel's present security doctrine is a classic example of this.

When the state of Israel was born, the security paradigm formulated was designed to deal with the problems that the young state had to cope with. In addition to the security triangle (Deterrence, Early Warning, Decisive Victory), it comprised political elements that were a function of Israel's relations with its neighbors, with the Great Powers, with the Third World, with Jews abroad, and so on. The security triangle is a means, but *the goal was cumulative deterrence: getting the Arab world to accept the existence of Israel. The security*

71 "Security doctrine" is a slippery term that shares a semantic field with: security policy, security concept, security theory, grand strategy, national strategy, and more. It is commonly understood as the core of the broad security policy and the concise summary of the principles that guide the policy in pursuit of national security (Harkabi 1990, 532)—itself a difficult term to pin down. Whether we should see the security doctrine as something chiefly military and of limited scope, or as broader and closer to a national strategy which is not relevant here. No matter how it is conceived of, Israel's security doctrine has long since gone bankrupt.

72 For the ideological component of the security doctrine, see Taran 2011.

establishment acted in the light of this goal and could plan its actions and estimate its successes and failures.

In the Six-Day War, the "iron wall" proved its mettle: Israel effectively won an Arab willingness to recognize it and reach peace agreements with it. That willingness stemmed from the fact that the Arab states reached two conclusions: they could not annihilate Israel by force; and they could live in a stable Middle East even if Israel was part of it. Deterrence did play an important role in the Arabs' change of heart, but it was chiefly deterrence by denial. The Arab states were not afraid of Israel's might but recognized their inability to eliminate it. The battlefield victory was translated into cumulative deterrence but did not make the Arabs afraid of a renewal of combat with Israel, as we learned in October 1973.

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Israel should have looked for a new security doctrine right after the Six-Day War. But alongside the military achievement, the war's outcome created a new political situation in which Israel was incapable of thinking about its security objectives and especially the future of the "spoils" of that war. Israel refused to exploit the fruits of its greatest achievement in order to stabilize and solidify its place in the Middle East, because this would have required a decision about the status of the occupied territories and the settlement project there.

Since then, Israel has continued to employ force without a clear objective. Cumulative deterrence became a double-edged sword. Israel's military superiority increased, but the cumulative deterrence, having already achieved its goal, did not get stronger. The price that the Arab world demands for full recognition of Israel remains as it was: a Palestinian state in the 1967 borders.

In the absence of a political decision about the future of the territories and Israel's relations with the Arab world, the security establishment became the agent charged with preserving a status quo that persists as the default in the

absence of a willingness to deal with the political question. But preserving the status quo is not realistic. The situation in which Israel holds on to the territories, tightens its control of them, and prevents any realization of Palestinian self-determination is not acceptable for the Palestinians and consequently not for the Arab world. The Israeli right wing believes that the continued use of force will eventually get the Arab world to come to terms with Israeli control of the West Bank, but the justifications for this belief are drawn from the religious and messianic realms and not the geopolitical reality.⁷³ In practice, the attempt to get the

Arab world to accept Israel's aspirations for territorial expansion by employing force – referred to as "deterrence" – paradoxically reinforces precisely those elements in the Arab world that oppose accepting Israel's existence, because it proves that Israel stubbornly insists on entrenching a status quo they cannot accept. Or, in other words, that it is Israel that understands only force.

The process of the impoverishment and distortion of the Israeli security doctrine and especially of the idea of deterrence that underlies it emerged because it has been many years since it was possible to conduct a rational discussion of the fundamental questions that are the bone of ideological disagreement. The security establishment sees itself as outside this debate, because it is obligated to implement the policy of elected governments; but the adoption of deterrence as the cornerstone of the security doctrine shows just how unrealistic this idea is. Deterrence is a policy whose goal is preserving the status quo; its adoption as a fundamental security strategy is based on assumptions about the extent to which the existing situation is worthwhile and the price

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73 The clearest spokesperson of this position is none other than Benjamin Netanyahu. For decades he has insisted that the 1967 lines would become the official borders of the Land of Israel if Israel stood its ground. For him, the iron wall has migrated from recognition of Israel to territorial expansion. There is no need for a "peace based on agreements" but only a "peace based on deterrence." On this see his book, *A Place among the Nations* (Bantam 1993).

we should pay to maintain it. In practice, the security establishment has signed onto the vain promise to the Israeli public that it can safeguard security and stability even in conditions of a perpetual conflict.

The former head of the National Security Council, Uzi Arad, explained the poverty of the strategic thinking in government staff agencies as follows: "Because the important issues on the Israeli agenda are a matter

of ideological disagreement, which makes it difficult to engage in first-class thinking about grand strategy, the vigorous political competition, combined with ideological rifts, causes politicians to evade cold strategic thinking and also removes "delicate" issues from the purview of professional agencies."⁷⁴ Arad minimizes the severity of the phenomenon because he assumes that there is political competition. Even if there used to be political disagreement about the future of the territories, today the matter is considered to have been "settled." Consequently, while the political echelons avoid an overt decision about the future of the territories (because they do not want to deal with the demographic and diplomatic implications of annexation), the security system operates, willingly or without choice, as if its goal is to serve a status quo about which there has never been a true decision and which Israeli society and the political system are probably unable to accept at present.

The settlements have made Israeli control of the West Bank an issue that must not be finalized but must also not be discussed. As the settlements dragged Israel into a true strategic dead-end, deterrence became anchored as the security paradigm that could serve a policy of preserving a status quo whose true cost (granting citizenship to millions of Palestinians) Israel refuses to accept while equally refusing to give up. But because Israel is the only actor in the region that wants to preserve this status quo, the power of deterrence has been inadequate to the task. Israeli deterrence will continue to be eroded, because

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⁷⁴ Arad 2015, 37.

Israel expects its addiction to the use of force in the service of deterrence to bring about outcomes that deterrence alone simply cannot provide.⁷⁵

In other words, "deterrence" is merely a military euphemism for the conflict management policy that has seized hold of the Israeli political imagination since Netanyahu returned as prime minister in 2009; but its roots go much deeper. When Israeli leaders and generals talk about strengthening deterrence, they are effectively proposing to preserve the military grip on the territories and continue the civilian expansion there, while ignoring the willingness of key elements in the Arab world to conclude stable peace agreements with Israel.

This policy, which led to the massacre of October 7, works to Israel's strategic disadvantage today and kept it from bringing the war to a favorable conclusion — or any conclusion, for that matter. Israel's use of military force has created an unprecedented opportunity to reshape the region. Israel faces a historical opportunity for normalization with the strongest country in the Arab world — Saudi Arabia — along with a regional alliance in partnership with other forces. This alliance, as was made clear by Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi, would lead to full recognition

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75 There seems to have been some movement in the Israeli Right's position, as well as that of the security establishment, about this. As of the date of writing this document, Israel is no longer a status-quo state but is maintaining military forces in Lebanon for an undefined period. The Nagel Commission to Examine the Defense Budget and Force Buildup, appointed by Netanyahu, which included senior members of the right-wing security circle, such as Yaakov Nagel, Yaakov Amidror, and Effi Eitam, indicates some change in the Right's paradigm. On the one hand, it recognizes that there is an epistemic problem in knowing when one has effectively produced conventional deterrence (p. 18); on the other hand, it recommends increasing "the element of deterrence, while also building a new and updated model of deterrence" (p. 4). It seems that this deterrence will be a direct result of the decisive victory and aggressive attack approach (p. 37). The commission also recommends adopting a policy of "initial depth" through the creation of buffer zones outside the country's borders (p. 27). Henceforth, Israel will adopt "an uncompromising offensive approach" (p. 35). All this comes against the background of various proposals to choose a new "magic word" as the basis of Israel's security doctrine: instead of deterrence, decisive victory or coercion. These are just as empty as the security doctrine that made deterrence the objective.

of Israel by dozens of Arab and Muslim states. But the way there passes through Ramallah. The leaders of the Israeli opposition do not discuss this plan openly because that would require them to state the case plainly: advance towards an agreement with the Palestinians is a vital need, but one that must come at the expense of the settlement project.

The security establishment does not have the privilege enjoyed by political leaders of devoting their time and energy to empty words, because it must execute real-world missions, including the guarantee of current security. In the meantime, it has internalized the notion that its job is to buy time, until the politicians resolve the big issues. But the politicians prefer not to set clear objectives for the security forces or formulate long-range plans for the country. With a few exceptions, this outlook pushed the security establishment to pay more attention to military questions of how rather than to security questions of why and where to. In this situation, deterrence has acquired supreme importance as the element that permits Israel to manage the conflict rather than finding a way to end it; or alternatively until the arrival of the Messiah. Not making a decision is totally consistent with the right wing's political ideology: the absence of a decision is a decision and conflict management entrenches it.

Whenever political and military leaders repeat the rhetoric of "landing painful blows" without making clear what these blows are supposed to achieve, other than refilling the imaginary reservoirs of deterrence, we have returned to the land of conflict management. As we have seen, the inability to achieve a decisive victory has pushed military thinking towards deterrence campaigns. The "mowing the grass" campaigns supported by parts of the right wing are the mirror image of this concept of managing or reducing the conflict.⁷⁶

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⁷⁶ Raz 2024, 85–90.

The remedy for the right-wing government established in 2022, the events of October 7, and the war that followed must include a new security paradigm with political objectives. This paradigm must be revolutionary in the sense that it discards many assumptions taken as axioms but never proven. The clear conclusion from the arguments in this document is that the concept of deterrence should not play a central role in the new security doctrine that Israel must adopt. The events of October 7 make it plain that deterrence alone cannot guarantee stability; Israel must choose between continuing a policy of endless warfare (a forever war) or making a sharp turn towards resolving the conflict.

The clear conclusion from the arguments in this document is that the concept of deterrence should not play a central role in the new security doctrine that Israel must adopt.

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