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The Iranian–Israeli Conflict: The Deterrence Structure and the Limits of Confrontation

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Abstract

This article examines the nature of the conflict between Iran and Israel from the perspective of the deterrence structure and the limits of confrontation between the two sides in light of the Geopolitical shifts in the Middle East. The study aims to analyse the nature of the Non-reciprocal deterrence that has developed between the two sides, which relies on greater conventional military capabilities, Regional proxies and indirect operations. The study proceeds from the premise that the Iranian-Israeli conflict is not necessarily heading towards total war, but rather takes the form of a limited and controlled confrontation governed by calculations of mutual deterrence and regional balances of power.

The study employs an analytical methodology to explain the dynamics of strategic interaction between the two sides, focusing on the role of proxy warfare, limited strikes and Cyber operations in shaping the deterrence equation.

The study concludes that the existing deterrence structure between Iran and Israel has helped to reduce the likelihood of a large-scale direct confrontation, but at the same time creates a fragile security environment characterised by recurring crises and the potential for uncalculated escalation.

Keywords: Iranian conflict – Strategic deterrence – Regional security – Middle East – Proxy warfare

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Introduction:

The conflict between Iran and Israel constitutes one of the most prominent geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East in recent decades, having gradually shifted from political and ideological rivalry to a more complex pattern based on balances of indirect deterrence and Limited confrontations. Since the end of the 20th century, Iran has adopted a regional strategy based on expanding its influence through networks of non-state actors and developing advanced military and missile capabilities, whilst Israel views these moves as a direct threat to its national security, particularly in light of concerns regarding Iran's nuclear program.

In this context, a complex deterrence equation has emerged, based on a combination of conventional and non-conventional deterrence, covert operations, Proxy warfare and cyberattacks, as well as limited strikes through which each state seeks to weaken the other without sliding into a total war. This has been clearly evident in the series of reciprocal operations in Syria, cyberattacks, and precision strikes targeting military sites or strategic installations, reflecting a pattern of conflict governed by careful calculations between escalation containment.

Although there are numerous studies on the conflict between Iran and Israel, they have mostly focused on separate aspects such as the nuclear program or Proxy warfare without providing a comprehensive analysis of the deterrence structure between the two sides. Furthermore, most of the literature has addressed each side separately, thereby limiting understanding of the interactive nature of their relationship.

The research gap lies in the absence of an integrated analytical framework that combines the levels of conventional and non-conventional deterrence (Nuclear, cyber and proxy) within a single interpretative approach capable of understanding the dynamics of strategic interaction between Iran and Israel. Furthermore, the current literature falls short in explaining the gradual shift towards patterns of 'Controlled

escalation' and 'Limited confrontation', as a new form of Conflict management in a highly fluid regional environment.

This study begins with a central question: how has the deterrence structure between Iran and Israel been formed, and what factors determine the limits of confrontation between the two sides in light of current regional and international shifts?

The study posits that the relationship between the two sides is based not only on direct traditional deterrence, but on a multi-layered deterrence system encompassing Conventional military capabilities, actors and proxies, actors and proxies, and cyber capabilities, creating a pattern of controlled escalation that allows for limited confrontation without reaching total war.

This study employs an analytical methodology to understand the dynamics of the Iranian-Israeli conflict and the evolution of the deterrence structure between the two sides, through a separate analysis of each party's deterrence strategies and military capabilities, highlighting the differences in the tools and methods employed in the conduct of the conflict and the limits of escalation.

Asymmetric deterrence and the Reshaping of the Balance of Power

The Iranian-Israeli conflict represents a unique model of asymmetric confrontation, with Iran relying on a strategy of forward defence through an extensive network of Regional proxies and advanced ballistic missiles, whilst Israel relies on technological superiority and conventional military capabilities, and multi-layered air defense systems, as well as Covert operations and advanced cyber capabilities.

This conflict poses a persistent threat to regional stability in the Middle East, with far-reaching geopolitical and diplomatic implications.

The findings suggest that both sides have developed complex deterrence mechanisms aimed at preventing full-scale escalation whilst maintaining the capacity for effective retaliation.

However, recent developments, particularly in 2024 and 2025, point to a dangerous shift from indirect to direct confrontation, increasing the likelihood of a total war in the region.

First: Asymmetric deterrence as the basis for confrontation

The theory of deterrence in asymmetric contexts:

Traditional theory is based on the assumption that states can prevent attacks by threatening to impose unacceptable costs on a potential aggressor; however, in asymmetric contexts, where there are significant gaps in Conventional military capabilities, different deterrence strategies are required. (Colby et al. , 2013, pp.60-61)

In this context, Lawrence Freedman explains that deterrence is a central concept in modern strategic thought, as it allows states to prevent threats without resorting to direct war. It is not understood solely in terms of military effectiveness, but also through its political implications as a defensive tool aimed at preserving the stability of the status quo. Consequently, deterrence is viewed as a dynamic mechanism for managing threats and escalation rather than as a means of definitively ending conflict. (Freedman, 2021, p.1)

In the Iranian-Israeli conflict, asymmetric deterrence is clearly evident, with Iran seeking to compensate for its conventional military weakness through unconventional strategies, whilst Israel uses its Technological superiority to achieve multi-layered deterrence. (Malka,2008,p.09)

This disparity in capabilities creates a complex dynamic of fragile equilibrium, with each side seeking to develop capabilities that enable it to impose unacceptable costs on the other without escalating to Total war.

– **Proxy warfare as a strategy:**

Proxy warfare represents a key strategy in contemporary conflicts, where states utilise non-state actors to achieve their strategic objectives whilst minimising direct risks. (Ahmadzada,2024,p.27) In the Iranian-Israeli context, Iran has developed what is known as the 'Axis of Resistance', a complex network of regional proxies stretching from Lebanon to Yemen, granting it the ability to exert pressure on Israel from multiple fronts. The proxy strategy is characterised by several key features:

Deniability, which allows the sponsoring state to avoid direct responsibility; tactical flexibility, which enables responses to be adapted to the context; and risk distribution, which reduces the likelihood of direct escalation. (Tariq et al,2025,p.16) However, this strategy also carries risks, including the possibility of losing control over proxies and unintended escalation.

– **Military Technology and the Strategic Balance:**

Military technology plays a pivotal role in shaping the strategic balance between Iran and Israel, with Israel possessing a clear superiority in advanced military technology, including Missile defense systems, advanced combat aircraft, and offensive cyber capabilities. In contrast, Iran has focused on developing Ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) as a means of compensating for its weakness in conventional air power. (Uygur,2025,p.117)

This technological disparity creates a 'sword and shield' dynamic, whereby Iran seeks to develop offensive capabilities capable of penetrating Israeli defences, whilst Israel works to strengthen its defensive systems and develop pre-emptive offensive capabilities. (Al-Isso et al,2025,p.76) This ongoing technological context constitutes one of the main drivers of the escalation and complexity of the conflict.

Secondly: Iran's deterrence strategy

- Deterrence by punishment: Missile capabilities

Iran's deterrence strategy relies primarily on the development of extensive ballistic missile capabilities as a means of deterrence by punishment. Iran has developed a diverse missile arsenal, including the Shahab-3 with a range exceeding 1,000 kilometres, and the solid-fueled Sobh-2 with a range exceeding 2,000 kilometres, giving it the capability to target any location in Israel. (Reardon,2012,pp.116-117)

These capabilities form the backbone of Iran's strategic deterrence strategies in several respects: firstly, a focus on quantity and diversity rather than high precision, aimed at overwhelming Israeli Missile defense systems through complex attacks; secondly, the development of solid-fuel missiles characterised by rapid launch and difficulty in early detection; thirdly, the deployment of missiles in multiple, fortified locations to ensure the ability to respond even after sustaining an initial strike. (Al-Dessouki,2025,p.23)

These characteristics reflect a deep understanding of the challenges Iran faces in the face of Israeli regional superiority.

- Deterrence by denial: The Forward Defence Strategy

Iran adopts a forward defence strategy. This strategy aims to convince Israel that any military attack would be costly and unsuccessful by creating multiple layers of defence extending beyond Iran's borders. (Eisenstadt,2015,p.11)

This strategy is embodied in the construction of a broad network of regional proxies capable of responding to any Israeli attack from multiple axes, thereby raising the potential cost of any Israeli military action.

The Iranian retaliatory strike in April 2024 demonstrated a practical application of this strategy, as Iran used a combination of Ballistic missiles, Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and Cruise missiles to target sites in Israel, demonstrating its ability to strike Israeli military bases and research centres despite multi-layered air defence systems. (Dolatabadi,2025,p.23)

Although the attack had limited material impact, it achieved an important strategic objective by demonstrating Iran's ability to penetrate Israeli defences and impose costs on Israel.

- **Cyber deterrence and covert operations**

Iran has developed offensive cyber capabilities as an additional dimension to its asymmetric deterrence strategy. Iran uses cyber operations to achieve multiple objectives, including psychological manipulation and technical sabotage, employing psychological operations based on AI-generated content. (Tariq et al,2025,p.20)

Iran has launched numerous cyberattacks against companies and critical infrastructure in Israel, constituting an additional deterrent and a means of responding to Israeli operations without escalating to direct military confrontation. (Conell,2024,p.13-14)

Iran's cyber strategy is characterised by a focus on clear targets such as critical infrastructure, aiming to impose economic costs and disrupt Israel without reaching the threshold of conventional war. This approach reflects an evolution in the capabilities of Cyber warfare as a tool for deterrence and coercion in the digital age. (Cimbala,2017,p.3-4)

Thirdly: Israeli nuclear deterrence strategies

Israel's nuclear deterrence strategy relies on a combination of undeclared nuclear capabilities and conventional military superiority. Israel pursues a policy of neither confirming nor denying the possession of such nuclear weapons, thereby creating a state of uncertainty—strategic nuclear ambiguity—among its adversaries.

This policy aims to achieve effective nuclear deterrence without bearing the political and diplomatic costs associated with explicitly declaring possession of nuclear weapons. In addition to its presumed nuclear capability, Israel possesses superior Conventional military capabilities, including an advanced air force comprising **(F-35, F-15, F-16)** aircraft designed for deep-strike missions, and air-to-air refuelling capabilities that enable it to reach distant targets. (Rentschler,2016,pp.21-23)

These capabilities form the basis of Israel's deterrence strategy, which aims to convince Iran that any major attack will be met with a devastating retaliatory response.

- **Deterrence by denial: Multi-layered defence systems**

Israel has developed a multi-layered defence system that is one of the most advanced Missile defence systems in the world. This system consists of three main components: (Armstrong,2014,p.10-16)

1. **Iron Dome:** to intercept short-range missiles (4–70 km) with a success rate exceeding 90%.

2. **David's Sling:** to intercept medium-range missiles (40–300 km) and various Cruise missiles.

3. **Arrow 2 and Arrow 3 systems:** advanced systems designed to intercept long-range Ballistic missiles.

This multi-layered system aims to achieve deterrence by convincing Iran that its missile attacks will not achieve their military objectives. These systems have proven their effectiveness against missile threats from Hezbollah and Hamas, thereby bolstering Israeli confidence in its ability to repel a large-scale Iranian missile attack. (Armstrong,2014,p.2)

However, the effectiveness of these systems against a Saturation attack employing hundreds of Ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) simultaneously remains in question.

- **Covert operations and Cyber operations**

Covert operations and Cyber operations form a central element of Israeli strategy, based on what is known as the **"Begin Doctrine"**, which stipulates that Israel will not allow any hostile state to possess nuclear weapons. (Reardon,2012,p.93) This doctrine was evident in the bombing of Iraq's Osirak reactor in 1981 and the (alleged) Al-Kibar reactor in Syria in 2007. With regard to the Iranian Nuclear program, Israeli efforts have focused on disruption.

Israel, in cooperation with the United States, has used Cyber operations as a key tool to disrupt the Iranian Nuclear program. The Iranian nuclear facility at Natanz in 2009–2010 is a prominent example of this

approach, where the **"Stuxnet"** virus succeeded in disabling Centrifuges and significantly delaying Iran's uranium enrichment program. (Lindsay,2013,p.366) This operation demonstrated the potential of Cyber warfare as an alternative to conventional military strikes, providing a strategic option that reduces the risk of full-scale escalation.

In addition to Cyber operations, Israel carried out a series of assassinations targeting Iranian nuclear scientists and key officials in the nuclear program, with the aim of slowing down Iranian progress and increasing the cost of the program. (Tariq et al,2025,p.19)

Iranian and Israeli strategic deterrence strategies reveal fundamental differences in capabilities and objectives, as they seek to create a strategic network. Iran relies on a strategy of **"deterrence through complexity"**, seeking to create a complex network of multi-pronged threats that make it difficult for Israel to neutralise the Iranian threat with a single strike. (Dehnavi et al,2024,p.5) In contrast, Israel adopts a strategy of **"deterrence through superiority"**, based on its technological superiority and military superiority to achieve effective deterrence. These differences manifest in several key dimensions:

Firstly: the geographical dimension; Iran benefits from its vast territory and distance from Israel, making it difficult for Israel to launch a comprehensive military strike, whilst Israel suffers from limited Strategic depth, making it more vulnerable to missile attacks. (Raine et al,2024)

Second: the technological dimension; Israel possesses clear superiority in advanced military technology, whilst Iran compensates for this shortfall through quantity and diversity.

Thirdly: the strategic dimension; Iran relies on an indirect strategy utilising proxies and Covert operations, whilst Israel retains the capability for direct and decisive strikes.

However, recent developments, particularly the shift towards direct confrontation, suggest that this strategic balance has become more fragile than ever before.

Section Two: Specific Military Capabilities

First: Israeli Air defence systems

Iron Dome:

The Iron Dome is the cornerstone of Israel's multi-layered air defence system and was specifically designed to intercept short-range missiles and rocket projectiles with a range of between 4 and 70 kilometres. (Al-Dessouki,2025,p.24) The Iron Dome was developed in collaboration between the Israeli company Rafael and the United States, and entered service in 2011; since then, it has demonstrated remarkable effectiveness in countering missile threats from the Gaza Strip and Lebanon.

The Iron Dome system relies on advanced detection, tracking and interception technology, using sophisticated radars to detect missiles, then calculating the trajectories of **(Tamir)** interceptor missiles and launching them to destroy the incoming missiles in mid-air. The Iron Dome is distinguished by its ability to distinguish between rockets that pose a real threat to populated areas and those that will fall in open areas, thereby improving the efficiency of interceptor missile use and reducing costs. (Armstrong,2014,pp.1-2)

The Iron Dome has demonstrated high efficiency in recent operations, with reports indicating an interception rate of between 85% and 90% against short-range rockets. (Armstrong,2014) This high effectiveness has led Israel to rely heavily on the Missile defence strategy, bolstering Israeli confidence in its ability to counter various rocket threats.

2. David's Sling:

The David's Sling system forms the mid-tier of Israel's air defence system and is designed to intercept medium-range missiles (40–300 km), Cruise missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles. (Samaan,2007,p.18) This system was developed in collaboration between the Israeli firm Rafael and the American firm Raytheon, and entered service in 2017 to bridge the gap between the Iron Dome and the Arrow system.

David's Sling uses advanced interceptor missiles known as **"Stunner"** or **"SkyCeptor"**, which are characterised by their high manoeuvrability and targeting accuracy. The system relies on advanced radars and sophisticated command and control systems that enable it to handle multiple threats simultaneously. (Al-Dessouki,2025,p.24) The importance of the 'David's Sling' lies in its ability to counter the most advanced missile arsenals, including short-range Ballistic missiles and Cruise missiles, which form a significant part of the missile arsenals of Hezbollah and Iran.

3. The Arrow system

The Arrow system represents the top tier of Israel's air defence systems and was specifically designed to intercept long-range ballistic missiles outside the atmosphere. The system was developed in collaboration between Israel and the United States and consists of two main versions: Arrow, which intercepts missiles within the atmosphere, and Arrow 3, which intercepts missiles outside the atmosphere at altitudes of up to 100 km. The **Arrow 3** system is distinguished by its ability to intercept Ballistic missiles at an early stage of their trajectory, thereby reducing the likelihood of missile debris falling on populated areas. The system uses **"direct hit"** technology, whereby the enemy missile is destroyed through direct collision rather than the use of an explosive warhead. (Samaan,2007,pp.9-13) This technology requires extremely high precision in tracking and guidance, and reflects the significant technological advancement Israel has achieved in the field of Missile defence.

The system has demonstrated its ability to intercept Ballistic missiles in several successful tests, including the interception of Iranian Ballistic missiles during the Iranian attack in **April 2024** (Uygur,2025,p.116). However, the system's effectiveness against a saturation attack using dozens or hundreds of Ballistic missiles simultaneously remains in question, particularly as Iran develops more advanced and manoeuvrable Ballistic missiles.

Despite the high effectiveness demonstrated by Israeli air defence systems in countering missile threats, they face several major challenges:

- **Firstly: The economic challenge:** Each missile in the Iron Dome, David's Sling and Arrow systems costs millions of dollars, making Missile defence against intensive missile attacks extremely costly. (Dolatabadi,2025,pp.21-22)
- **Secondly: The technical challenge:** Despite high success rates, any defence system can be overwhelmed by a Saturation attack using large numbers of missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) simultaneously.
- **Third: The geographical challenge:** Air defence systems cannot provide complete coverage of all areas in Israel, leaving some regions vulnerable to attack. The Iranian attack in April 2024 clearly highlighted these challenges, as some Iranian missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) succeeded in penetrating Israeli defences and striking military targets, although most of the missiles were intercepted. (Dolatabadi,2025,p.23)

Secondly: Iran's missile capabilities

1. Development of the missile arsenal:

Iran has developed one of the largest and most diverse ballistic missile arsenals in the Middle East, as part of its strategy of asymmetric deterrence and in response to Israeli and American air superiority (Bahget et al,2021,p.118).

The Iranian Missile arsenal consists of several main categories: (Bahget et al,2021,pp.116-117)

- **Short-range missiles:** such as the Shahab-1 and Shahab-2 (with a range of 300–500 km).
- **Medium-range missiles:** such as the Shahab-3 (with a range exceeding 1,000 km).
- **Long-range missiles:** such as the Sejjil (with a range exceeding 2,000 km)

Iran's missile strategy is characterised by key features: (Samaan,2007,pp.11-13)

- **Firstly:** Iran is demonstrating a trend towards developing more flexible missile systems, including a gradual shift towards more advanced technologies in certain systems, such as improving launch readiness and reducing preparation time, which enhances Operational capability.

- **Secondly:** Diversifying and expanding the Missile arsenal contributes to strengthening deterrence capabilities and increasing the level of complexity for interception systems.

- **Thirdly:** Gradually increasing the accuracy of some of its missile systems, thereby reducing the need for intensive firing to achieve the desired operational effect.

In recent years, Iran has claimed to have developed hypersonic missiles capable of manoeuvring in flight, making them more difficult to intercept (Sulistyawati et Hanggarini,2024). Although the technical details of these missiles remain unclear, their development poses a significant challenge to Israeli missile defence systems, which were primarily designed to intercept Ballistic missiles following predictable trajectories.

The Iranian attack in April 2024 demonstrated Iran's use of a diverse mix of Ballistic missiles, Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and Cruise missiles, reflecting a **"Saturation attack"** strategy aimed at overwhelming air defence systems by targeting them with different types of threats simultaneously (Mahmoudian,2024,p.5). This approach reflects a sophisticated understanding of the challenges facing Missile defence systems and indicates that Iran has developed advanced tactical and operational capabilities in the field of missile warfare.

Despite significant advancements in Iran's missile capabilities, they face several major limitations:

– **Firstly, limited accuracy:** Despite recent improvements, most Iranian missiles still lack the high precision of Israeli and American missiles, reducing their effectiveness against small, fortified military targets. (Rentschler,2016,p.21)

– **Second: Reliance on quantity:** Iran's strategy relies on the use of large numbers of missiles to achieve a strategic impact, making it vulnerable to Preemptive strikes targeting missile launch sites and ammunition depots.

– **Third: Logistical challenges:** Maintaining a large and diverse Missile arsenal requires significant financial and technical resources, which places a burden on the Iranian economy, already weighed down by sanctions.

Third: Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)

1- Iran's capabilities in unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs):

Iran has developed advanced capabilities in the field of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which have become a key component of its asymmetric military strategy (Al-Isso et al,2025,p.77). Iran possesses a diverse arsenal of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), ranging from small surveillance UAVs to large aircraft capable of carrying weapons and carrying out Precision strikes. Notable Iranian UAVs include the 'Shahed' series in its various versions, which have been widely used in regional conflicts, including the war in Ukraine.

Iranian Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are characterised by several features:

- **Firstly:** their relatively low cost, which allows them to be produced in large numbers and used in Saturation attacks.

- **Secondly:** their ability to fly long distances, enabling them to reach distant targets.

- **Third:** Difficulty in detection due to their small size and low speed, making them a challenge for conventional air defence systems (Al-Isso et al,2025,pp.76-77).

These characteristics have made Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) an effective tool in Iran's deterrence strategy, as they provide the capability for precision strikes at low cost and with limited risk.

2- Israeli capabilities in unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs):

Israel possesses one of the most advanced UAV industries in the world, and these UAVs are widely used in Surveillance and reconnaissance, as well as in Precision strikes (Conrad, 2012, p. 77). Notable Israeli drones include the Heron, Eitan and Hermes, which are characterised by advanced capabilities in long-range surveillance and the execution of Precision strikes.

Israel uses unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to achieve several strategic objectives:

- **Firstly:** Gathering intelligence on Iranian targets and their proxies.
- **Secondly:** Carrying out targeted assassinations of military commanders and nuclear scientists.
- **Third:** Border surveillance and early threat detection (Al-Isso et al, 2025, p. 77). These capabilities grant Israel a significant strategic advantage in the conflict with Iran, as they enable Precision strikes without putting pilots at risk.

3- The strategic impact of Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs):

Unmanned aerial vehicles have revolutionised military tactics in the Middle East and have become a pivotal element in the Iranian-Israeli conflict (Koserawski et al, 2022, p. 88). These aircraft allow both sides to carry out military operations at low cost and with limited risk, thereby lowering the threshold for the use of military force. However, the proliferation of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) also raises concerns about the possibility of unintended escalation, as drone strikes could trigger retaliatory responses that escalate into a broader confrontation.

The Iranian attack in April 2024 demonstrated the pivotal role of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in Iranian military strategy, with dozens of UAVs used alongside ballistic and Cruise missiles in a coordinated attack on Israeli targets (Mahmoudian, 2024, p. 5). This integrated use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and missiles reflects an evolution in Iranian military tactics and suggests that UAVs will continue to play a pivotal role in future conflict.

Fourth: Cyber and Nuclear Capabilities

1- Cyber warfare:

Cyber warfare has become a central dimension of the Iranian-Israeli conflict, with both sides employing cyber capabilities to achieve multiple strategic objectives (Lindsai, 2013, p. 371). Israel possesses advanced offensive cyber capabilities, as demonstrated by Operation 'Stuxnet', which targeted Iran's nuclear program. Israel uses cyber operations to achieve several objectives: disrupting Iran's critical infrastructure, stealing sensitive intelligence, and hindering Iran's nuclear program.

In contrast, Iran has developed significant offensive cyber capabilities, albeit less advanced than those of Israel. Iran uses Cyber operations to target critical Israeli infrastructure, including water and electricity systems and financial institutions (Reardon, 2012, p.). Iran also uses Cyber operations for psychological purposes, including spreading misinformation and causing panic among the Israeli population.

2- The Nuclear Dimension:

Iran's nuclear program is one of the most contentious issues in the Iranian-Israeli conflict. Israel views the possibility of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons as an Existential threat and has repeatedly declared that it will not allow Iran to possess a nuclear weapon (Hendel, 2012, p. 32). In contrast, Iran insists that its nuclear program is peaceful and intended for energy generation and medical purposes.

Under a policy of ambiguity, Israel possesses an undeclared nuclear capability consisting of nuclear warheads and the capacity to deliver them by land, sea and air. This nuclear capability forms the basis of Israel's nuclear deterrence strategy, which aims to convince Iran that any existential attack on Israel would be met with a devastating nuclear retaliation (Reardon, 2012, pp. 63–64). However, Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity creates a state of strategic uncertainty, as adversaries cannot ascertain Israel's actual nuclear capabilities or the circumstances under which Israel might use its nuclear weapons.

The nuclear dimension poses a complex challenge to strategic stability in the region. On the one hand, nuclear deterrence can provide stability by raising the cost of Total war to a level unacceptable to both sides. On the other hand, Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapon could lead to a regional nuclear arms race, with the possibility that other states in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey, might develop their own nuclear programs (Nader 2013, p21)

The qualitative military capabilities of Iran and Israel reveal significant disparities in strengths and weaknesses. Israel possesses a clear technological superiority in advanced military technology, including Air defence systems, combat aircraft, cyber capabilities and precision-guided munitions (Uyger 2025, pp 115–116). This technological superiority grants Israel a significant strategic advantage in any direct military confrontation.

In contrast, Iran compensates for its technological weakness through quantity and diversity, having developed a large missile arsenal and a network of regional proxies (Bahgat et al, 2021, pp. 111–200). This approach enables Iran to impose significant costs on Israel even if it is unable to achieve a decisive military victory. Furthermore, Iran's Strategic depth and distance from Israel make it difficult for Israel to launch a comprehensive military strike that would completely destroy Iran's military capabilities.

Recent developments, particularly the Iranian attack in **April 2024** and the Israeli response in **June 2024**, indicate that both sides have developed significant qualitative military capabilities capable of imposing unacceptable costs on the other (Dolatabadi 2005, pp 28–33). This balance in the capacity to inflict harm, despite the asymmetry in capabilities, creates a state of **"complex mutual deterrence"**, where each side realises that Total war would be extremely costly, yet the likelihood of unintended escalation remains high.

The Third Axis: Regional Proxies in Iran's Strategy

The Axis of Resistance represents one of the most important strategic tools developed by Iran to bolster its regional influence and counter Israel and the United States. This axis consists of a complex network of Regional alliances comprising the Islamic Republic of Iran and its key allies: Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Palestinian Islamic groups (Hamas and Islamic Jihad), pro-Iranian Militias in Iraq (particularly the Popular Mobilisation Forces), and the Houthis in Yemen (Soage 2020, p. 97).

The Axis of Resistance is based on several ideological and strategic pillars. Ideologically, the axis relies on a shared hostility towards Israel and Western intervention in the Middle East, with a focus on the 'liberation of Jerusalem' as a unifying strategic goal. The Axis aims to provide political legitimacy and asymmetric deterrence to the Iranian and Syrian regimes, whilst member non-state actors benefit from funding, weapons and training (Soage 2020)

First: Hezbollah, the Prototypical Proxy

1/ Historical Development and Relationship with Iran:

Hezbollah is considered the quintessential Iranian proxy, having evolved from a small Militia in the early 1980s into a major military and political force in Lebanon and the region. Hezbollah was founded in 1982 with direct support from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and its primary objective was to resist the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. Since then, the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah has evolved into a deep strategic alliance (Soage, 2020, p. 111).

Iran provides Hezbollah with comprehensive support, including funding (estimated at hundreds of millions of dollars annually), weapons (including advanced missiles and Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)), military training (through the Revolutionary Guards), and political and diplomatic support. In return, Hezbollah provides Iran with the ability to exert pressure on Israel from the northern border and serves as a strategic deterrent against any Israeli or American attack on Iran.

2/ Military and strategic capabilities:

Hezbollah has developed advanced military capabilities that make it more than just a Militia; rather, it is a hybrid military force combining Guerrilla tactics with semi-conventional military capabilities.

Hezbollah's military capabilities include a large missile arsenal estimated at tens of thousands of missiles, including precision-guided missiles capable of striking specific targets deep within Israel; advanced tunnel warfare capabilities that were used effectively in the 2006 war; and Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for reconnaissance and attack.

Hezbollah pursues a **"dual-use strategy"**, combining military activities with the provision of social, educational and health services to the Shia community in Lebanon. This strategy grants Hezbollah broad popular legitimacy and enables it to integrate into the Lebanese political and social fabric, making it difficult for Israel or any other power to eliminate it militarily without incurring significant political and humanitarian costs.

3/ Role in the Iranian-Israeli conflict:

Hezbollah plays a pivotal role in Iran's deterrence strategy against Israel. Hezbollah is viewed as Iran's **"front line of defence"**, capable of responding to any Israeli attack on Iran by launching large-scale missile strikes against Israel. This capability acts as a powerful deterrent to Israel, which realises that any strike against Iran would lead to a retaliatory response from Hezbollah that could paralyse civilian life in northern Israel and impose significant human and material costs.

The 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah demonstrated the group's resilience in the face of superior Israeli military power, as it succeeded in firing thousands of rockets at Israel and inflicting heavy losses on the Israeli army. (Hussein, 2010, p. 808).

This war reinforced Hezbollah's status as an effective deterrent and demonstrated that Iran's strategy of using proxies can achieve significant strategic results even in the face of substantial conventional military superiority.

Secondly: Palestinian proxies

1. Hamas and Islamic Jihad:

Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad form an important part of the Iranian-backed 'Axis of Resistance', although their relationship with Iran is more complex than that of Hezbollah with Tehran. Iran provides these two movements with substantial financial and military support, including funding amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars, and supplies them with weapons and technical expertise for the development of missiles and tunnels (Rojo et al, n.d)

Iran uses Hamas and Islamic Jihad to achieve strategic objectives, including maintaining constant pressure on Israel from the southern front, thereby forcing Israel to spread its forces and resources across multiple fronts. It also aims to undermine the Israeli-Palestinian peace process by supporting groups that refuse to recognise Israel and are committed to armed resistance, as well as to bolster Iran's legitimacy in the Islamic world through its support for the Palestinian cause (Soage, 2020).

2/ Capabilities and Tactics:

Hamas and Islamic Jihad have developed significant military capabilities, particularly in the fields of rockets and tunnel warfare. Hamas possesses a diverse Missile arsenal comprising both locally manufactured missiles and those imported from Iran via complex smuggling networks. Hamas has also developed an extensive network of tunnels beneath the Gaza Strip, which are used to store weapons, train fighters and carry out attacks on Israel (Eisenstadt, 2015).

Israel has responded to these threats by developing advanced capabilities to detect and destroy tunnels, in addition to the Iron Dome system, which has successfully intercepted most of the rockets fired from Gaza (Ahmedzada, 2024) Nevertheless, the ongoing conflict with Hamas and Islamic Jihad imposes significant costs on Israel, both in terms of military resources and the impact on civilian life in the southern regions.

3/ Complexities in the relationship with Iran

Despite substantial Iranian support, the relationship between Iran and Hamas is fraught with significant complications. As a Sunni movement belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas differs ideologically from Shi'ite Iran – and the relationship has seen considerable tensions, particularly due to Hamas's stance on the Syrian civil war (Husseini, 2010). Nevertheless, their shared hostility towards Israel and their mutual need for support have kept the relationship alive, albeit at a shallower level than Iran's relationship with Hezbollah.

Third: Proxies in Iraq and Yemen

First: The Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq

The Popular Mobilisation Forces represent one of Iran's most important proxies in the region, comprising dozens of Shia Militias that have received significant support from Iran (Soage, 2020). The Popular Mobilisation Forces were formed in 2014 to confront the Islamic State and played a pivotal role in the organisation's defeat. However, many of the PMF's factions retain strong loyalty to Iran and act as tools to bolster Iranian influence in Iraq.

Iran uses the PMF to achieve several strategic objectives in Iraq. Firstly, to maintain§ political and military influence in Iraq, which grants Iran Strategic depth and allows it to influence Iraqi politics. Secondly, to establish a land corridor linking Iran to Syria and Lebanon, facilitating the transfer of weapons and fighters to Hezbollah. Thirdly, to target US forces and Israeli interests in Iraq and the region (Soage, 2020).

The Houthis in Yemen are one of the latest additions to Iran's 'Axis of Resistance', with Iran providing the Houthis with military and logistical support, including training, the supply of weapons, and the development of missile and drone capabilities (Ahmedzada, 2024).

The Houthis represent a key actor in Iran's regional strategy, with the literature highlighting their role in bolstering Iranian influence in the Arabian Peninsula, as well as their ability to influence strategic maritime routes in the Red Sea, including vital shipping lanes linked to international trade, within the framework of the Proxy warfare strategy adopted by Iran to expand the scope of its regional deterrence (Ahmedzada, 2024)

Operations carried out by the Houthis in the Red Sea during the period 2023 – 2024, in the context of their solidarity with Gaza, the growing role of non-state actors in influencing the security of vital maritime corridors, as these attacks contributed to increased shipping costs and disruptions in Global supply chains (Raine et al, 2024). This reflects the significant strategic influence that Iranian proxies can exert in regions far from Iran.

Conclusion:

This study concludes that the conflict between Iran and Israel is characterised by a complex deterrence structure combining conventional and non-conventional deterrence, alongside the tools of Proxy warfare and cyber capabilities, which has given rise to a pattern of Strategic interaction based on de-escalation rather than all-out confrontation.

The findings also show that this conflict is not moving towards stability, but rather towards a fragile equilibrium based on measured reactions governed by the national security considerations of both sides, particularly in light of the development of military capabilities and the expansion of theatres of indirect confrontation in the region.

The study further indicates that understanding the dynamics of this conflict requires a comprehensive approach that takes into account the interplay of different levels of deterrence, thereby allowing for a more accurate interpretation of recent shifts towards Limited confrontation and Controlled escalation in the Middle Eastern regional environment.

The study recommends the need to strengthen research into strategic interactions between regional powers, with a focus on the impact of non-state actors in reshaping the security and deterrence equations in the region.

Against this backdrop, the international community faces the challenge of preventing escalation into a total war; understanding the deterrence tools and confrontation tactics of both sides is therefore essential for developing effective strategies for conflict management and to prevent the conflict from turning into a regional or global crisis.

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