Israeli Deterrence in the 21ˢᵗ Century

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Since the establishment of the state, deterrence has played a key role in Israel's security doctrine. Military deterrence was a primary component of the security doctrine, as reflected in Ze'ev Jabotinsky's 1923 essay "The Iron Wall: We and the Arabs"; the security principles espoused by David Ben-Gurion; the report of the commission formed in 2005 and headed by Dan Meridor to update these principles; and the IDF strategy document published in August 2015.[1] In recent years, deterrence was a declared key goal of military operations undertaken by Israel against the violent sub-state organizations Hezbollah and Hamas.[2]

In the West, especially the United States, the concept of deterrence has evolved in recent years as part of a debate intended to adapt global security challenges and needs to a post-Cold War world. This essay examines several major changes to the concept of deterrence and their relevance to the Israeli discourse on deterrence. It underscores the need for an extensive debate about the nature of Israel's deterrence and its adaptation to the new and emerging security challenges in a changing international arena. The essay begins with an overview of the concept of deterrence and its role in Israel's security doctrine. It then discusses some of the prominent changes in the global post-Cold War world order and three new trends that have emerged in deterrence thinking. The essay concludes by offering three conclusions about the concept of deterrence in Israel's security doctrine that may be derived from those changes.

The Concept of Deterrence

Strategically, deterrence is a policy of using threats to prevent an enemy from carrying out some action.[3] Unlike strategies of coercion designed to

stop an action from being carried out or to cause the enemy to carry out certain actions, the purpose of deterrence is to prevent a future action that the enemy is liable to carry out. The history of deterrence tactics goes back many years, but it was only during the Cold War that systematic thinking was applied to use of deterrence as a leading strategy to manage relations between the two nuclear superpowers – the United States and the Soviet Union. Over the years, deterrence thinking developed into theory and policy, and included an attempt to attribute the principles of deterrence to relations between enemies that had no military nuclear capabilities. The most prominent example is the current focus on sub-conventional deterrence toward violent non-state actors.[4] Overall, intellectual efforts have labored to adapt the theory of deterrence to the security challenges facing a nation in the 21st century, and have likewise contributed to the debate about deterrence in the context of Israel's security doctrine.

Indeed, deterrence has long been a central component in Israel's security doctrine, which has traditionally rested on three pillars: deterrence, early warning, and decision. Over the years, the pillar of defense was added, and suggestions were made regarding other components.[5] As part of Israel's security doctrine, deterrence was meant to prevent Israel's enemies from attacking the state or harming its citizens, or at least to extend the periods of calm between confrontations. Israeli intelligence was charged with warning the nation of an expected failure of Israel's deterrence and allowing the security forces to foil an attack and renew deterrence.

Deterrence in the International Arena: From a Bipolar to a Multipolar World

During the Cold War, the world was clearly divided into two main camps – the Soviet bloc and the US-led bloc. In such a world, there were few doubts about the orientation of most nations and, for that matter, about their hierarchy: there were superpowers, powers, and "rank and file" states. Intra-state and intra-regional tensions were subordinate to the dominance of the rivalry between the superpowers. A well-known example in this context was the war between North Korea, aligned with the Soviet bloc, and South Korea, supported by the United States. The conventional wars between Israel and its neighbors also bore an aspect of the superpower conflict. By contrast, in the current world order, most nations have experienced a significant process of integration. On the one hand, this phenomenon encourages greater

cooperation between rivals, such as the United States and China. On the other hand, it arouses antagonism between allies as the result of conflicts of interest. The rivalry between the United States and Saudi Arabia in the energy market is a contemporary example of this duality.

Prof. Joseph Nye once claimed that these changes are leading to a new era in the international system in which "networks supplement, if not fully replace, hierarchical power."[6] In other words, instead of the clear world order of the Cold War, the current world order is more dynamic and less fixed or defined. A similar description of an emerging multipolar world order was also given by US President Barack Obama, who said that the world now has many powers with varying degrees of might but no superpowers.[7] Nye maintained that in the emerging world order, enmity at the global level was actually the most stable, thanks to the existence of nuclear weapons. The regional and intra-nation systems that are no longer subordinated to the dynamics between the global powers can be expected to be a source of instability because of the growing strength of ethnic, national, and religious identities.[8]

A parallel phenomenon is the rising status and power of non-state actors.[9] If during the Cold War the "real game" was between states, over the last 15 years the power of the international conglomerates and organizations – whether violent or not – has increased. These began to command power on various levels and in geographical areas where states failed to institute order and rule. These organizations rode the wave of globalism, which allowed modernization and the accelerated rate of technological development to cross borders on the one hand, and allowed the failures of failing states to provide services to their citizens on the other. Non-state actors are characterized by markedly different organizational structures, decision making processes, and sets of considerations than those characterizing states. For example, the Islamic State and al-Qaeda in particular are not bureaucratic entities weighed down by formal sociopolitical agreements, and their strategy places no emphasis – as does the strategy of states – on civil channels of action (at least at this stage of their struggle to expand the areas under their influence and control). Therefore, confronting them, and especially their military forces, requires an adjustment of traditional principles of deterrence.

The emergent multipolar world that includes the rise of non-state players affects the relevance of the bipolar deterrence model in which one nation wants to deter another, which in turn seeks to deter the first. Currently,

messages of deterrence are simultaneously transmitted to several states and non-state actors that are presumably very different from one another. This situation presents some unique challenges to the concept of deterrence. While to some extent some of these challenges existed also in the past, the rapid impact of the new conditions could tilt the scales. Therefore, researchers of the new wave in deterrence thinking are proposing the concept of "tailored deterrence." According to this approach, it is necessary to tailor one's deterrence uniquely to each and every enemy rather than transmit global messages or principles. The IDF's strategy document has also adopted this approach.[10]

The new approach to deterrence has triggered a reassessment of the old principles of deterrence. Below are three thought processes that have developed in the context of this reassessment that are important to the Israeli discussion on confronting the Middle East reality and its many challenges related to deterrence: the potential nuclear threat from Iran, the conventional military threat from Syria and Egypt, the semi-conventional threat from Hezbollah and Hamas, and the hidden threat from small terrorist groups affiliated with the Islamic State in Syria and the Sinai Peninsula.

A Change in the Nature of Extended Deterrence

The model of extended deterrence describes a situation in which a power seeks to defend an ally by deterring that ally's enemy.[11] This model was very common during the Cold War when the United States, for example, sought to deter the Soviet Union from attacking its European allies. In this model of deterrence, the key challenge to the defending (deterring) side was to convince the other side that the message of deterrence was credible, i.e., that it was prepared to act on its threat. First, the defender must persuade the attacker (the side one is trying to deter) that the defender is prepared for an escalation in their relations, even if the attacker has a third party nation in its sights (the defender's ally). Second, the defender has to provide reliable guarantees to its ally so that the latter will trust it and not escalate its own relations with the attacker. This was always a complex challenge, but in a world clearly divided into blocs with great internal convergences of interest it was far simpler. In a multipolar world in which there is no division into neat blocs, the convergence of interests among allies is much smaller.

Conflicts of interest intensify in light of instability in the regional system. In this reality, conflicts of interest between a global power with broad

interests and its ally whose range of interests is narrower and focused mostly on regional considerations are more clearly visible. For example, this kind of tension emerged between Saudi Arabia and the United States when they tried to align their positions on the Syrian civil war. The Saudis' desire to act against Bashar Assad and his Shiite allies (Iran and Hezbollah) encountered US resistance, which stemmed primarily from concern about engaging in a third war against a Muslim country (after Afghanistan and Iraq). Various scholars of deterrence feel that in the next few years the key challenge to US extended deterrence will be to provide guarantees that will persuade US allies that Washington is willing to take action against threats that do not necessarily affect US security only.[12] In their view, in the current internal politics of the United States, the US public cannot be expected to support use of force that exceeds objectives clearly and directly linked to critical US interests. Therefore, it is difficult to see how the US administration can provide sufficient bilateral guarantees to its allies, which is why more voices are calling for US guarantees supporting regional security arrangements.[13] In a proposed solution, the United States would support strengthening its worldwide allies' capabilities to defend themselves. Direct US intervention would be required only in cases of severe or extreme threats to US interests as well. It seems that this model is highly relevant to the Middle East. Recent years have witnessed the first US efforts (which so far have borne no fruit) to establish such a partnership with the Sunni Gulf states.[14] This model also matches the Obama administration's goal to "pivot" toward southeast Asia.[15] The American campaign against the Islamic State as part of a wide international coalition is further evidence of the American approach.

Expanding the Deterrence Toolbox

Another challenge to the strategy of deterrence lies in the defender's capabilities. The concept of deterrence as it developed during the Cold War referred primarily to the military balance of power between the defender and the attacker, with nuclear weapons playing a central role in that equation.[16] The defending side was required to possess sufficient capabilities to cause the attacker unbearable damage, so that the attacker would be convinced it would be against its own best interests to engage in the forbidden action. This element was called deterrence by punishment. In a world divided into two blocs with virtually no interaction between them, the major means of punishment was military action. The threat of using military force is

tremendously effective psychologically, as it allows one to beat the enemy without ever having to defeat it on the battlefield.[17] But in the current world order, enemy nations maintain relationships in many non-military areas. For example, the EU's largest partner for commercial trade is Russia.[18] The United States and China are another example of rivals maintaining close commercial relations with one another.[19]

Some assert that in a multipolar world it is less common to use military levers of pressure and that they are less effective.[20] Interestingly, the combination of non-military pressure – economic sanctions, political isolation, and so on – is precisely what could generate a coalition of cooperative member states, thereby increasing the pressure on the attacker and becoming an effective persuasive tool. The use of threats is likely to create the desired psychological effect and prevent the attacker from carrying out its plan only in unique and extreme circumstances in which the threat of the use of force is perceived as credible. At present, according to this approach, in many cases a systemic strategy could be a more effective means of persuasion than the effort of a single state to affect another state directly. Military tools are ineffective in attaining this goal. Some contend that the United States is already incorporating non-military components into its strategy of deterrence, for example, in face of the threat from Iran's nuclear program and Russian policy in Eastern Europe, and that these components should be given greater weight.[21]

These conclusions indicate an adjustment in US strategy that could be no less relevant to states that are not global powers. Such states have a limited capacity for projecting a credible threat on their own. They are therefore required to develop soft power, i.e., economic and political leverage that creates cooperation, affects the dynamics of a regional system, and promotes their national interests. Based on this approach, clinging to the old, narrow concept of deterrence may be able to create a credible threat in a very limited number of cases but could preclude other opportunities of creating deterrence.

The Connection between Deterrence and Defense
A third challenge to the strategy of deterrence also concerns the defender's capabilities, especially the connection between the strategies of deterrence and defense. The understanding that the challenges of deterrence are more complex in the current international reality increases the demand for multipurpose,

versatile tools that could serve deterrence but also be capable of foiling an attack in case the deterrence fails. Such tools are more in demand when they bear no offensive characteristics and are aligned with the Western desire to reduce violence to resolve crises. The rise in demand for active defensive capabilities[22] is the most relevant example for deterrence: active defensive capabilities are non-aggressive by nature, reduce the enemy's expected profit from an attack, and thus support deterrent efforts while being capable of foiling an attack if the enemy nonetheless decides to strike. The tool most in demand in this field is anti-missile defense. Such systems provide a response to a wide gamut of threats, from the scenario of a nuclear missile strike to the threat of conventional rocket and missile attacks, whether perpetrated by states or terrorist organizations.

The link between deterrence and defensive systems, or the concept of "deterrence by denial," is far from obvious, and indeed, contradicts the US understanding of the relationship between deterrence and defense as formulated during the Cold War. For at least three decades, US policy opposed the development of significant active defenses lest these destabilize the superpower balance, which was based on the shared ability to cause the other unbearable damage.[23] Robert McNamara, the architect of the MAD (mutual assured destruction) principle, thought it was impossible to attain hermetic defenses against the Soviet nuclear threat, meaning that the only effective way to preserve the balance of power and prevent escalation and nuclear war was each power's ability to destroy the other power's assets.

In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan changed this approach by announcing the Star Wars initiative, which involved massive development of defensive capabilities against the Soviet threat. Reagan claimed that although the defenses would not be hermetic they would be able to cope with a significant portion of Soviet missiles, and that the new defensive capabilities would support deterrence when incorporated with US offensive capabilities – both first strike (in advance of a Soviet attack to damage Soviet capabilities) and second strike (as a response to a Soviet attack and to cause unbearable damage) capabilities.

The approach linking deterrence to defense is also based on the fact that a preference for defensive over offensive capabilities reduces the risk for escalation, because it provides a better response to the key security dilemma: the attempt of Nation A to improve its security is liable to damage the security of Nation B, whereupon Nation B will act to improve its security,

thereby damaging the security of Nation A. In this situation, both nations will experience insecurity and enter into an arms race. One way to deal with the dilemma is by developing defensive capabilities that will improve the security of Nation A without damaging the security of Nation B. Thus, according to the proponents of this school of thought, defense could support deterrence and help stabilize relations between enemy states. In this approach, the dilemma is more relevant now than in the past because of the multipolar nature of the international arena.

Israel's Strategy of Deterrence

The IDF strategy document spells out the army's doctrine on deterrence:

> Deterrence must be **specific and adapted to each enemy**; it must be based on an ongoing analysis of the enemy's characteristics, considerations, capabilities, identity, and decision making process. For every enemy, deterrence must be –
>
> a. Without a particular context – **general and cumulative over time**, in order to preserve the current situation and formulate "rules of the game" desirable to Israel;
>
> b. In the context of a crisis – **specific and focused** in order to force the enemy to act or avoid taking action in order to stop deterioration and prevent a war.[24]

The document also spells out the components of Israel's deterrence:

> <u>A credible threat of extreme offensive actions</u> that will take a very heavy toll in the case of an attack. This component is based on –
>
> a. **Force buildup**, some of which is clear to the enemy and demonstrates the ability and willingness to damage it.
>
> b. **Psychological acts** expressing our willingness to take risks.
>
> c. **Limited offensive actions** to signal our willingness to "deviate from the rules of the game" and take risks.
>
> **Force buildup** that demonstrates the enemy's hopelessness (e.g., defensive systems)
>
> **Foiling and impeding** capabilities.[25]

The three changes in thinking about deterrence presented above are the context for reexamining Israel's strategy of deterrence and the role it plays in Israel's security doctrine.

Extended Deterrence: The US Umbrella

The IDF strategy document indicates that the strategic relationship between Israel and the United States plays an important double role in Israeli deterrence: close cooperation with Washington increases Israel's scope for political and operational maneuvering when responding to aggression against it, and it improves Israel's operational capabilities to harm its enemies by means of enhanced force buildup as well as by means of the threat of US intervention on its behalf. However, recent years have seen changes in the nature of US security guarantees to Middle East nations, from bilateral to regional. Clearly, in this reality, the application of the model of strategic relations with the United States is very problematic for Israel, for two reasons.

One, as long as there is no drastic improvement in official relations between Israel and the region's nations, there is very little chance of a regional deterrence system with Israel. Two, any US attempt to support the existence of a regional defense system is liable to erode the principle of Israel's qualitative military edge (QME). According to the QME standard, the United States is committed to maintain Israel's technological arms advantage and strengthen Israel's deterrence. Furthermore, in a multipolar world, there are increased chances for conflicts of interest between the United States as a superpower and Israel, which is liable to damage the political space Israel needs to manifest its capabilities in real time. The US desire to enlist Iran in the battle against the Islamic State is an example of friction between the US interest in stabilizing the regional system and the Israeli interest to keep Iran, a regional enemy, from growing even stronger than it already is. Reliance on the old model of deterrence without considering the limitations of the emergent reality in the Middle East is liable to bring Israeli disagreements with the United States into sharper relief and lead to mutual disappointments in real time when Israel's deterrence is put to the test.

This challenge requires the establishment of Israeli and US analysts to map the challenges of deterrence liable to develop in the region and clarify principles for the nations' cooperation while defining the areas of agreement and disagreement. As for the disagreements: it may be that for these Israel will have to generate its own military and political solutions,

e.g., a clarification of the various issues that may point to Israel's need to develop an independent military response to a possible Iranian breakout to nuclear weapons if there is US opposition to a military move of this sort.

Expanding the Toolbox: Soft Regional Leverage

As would be expected, the IDF's strategy document speaks mainly of military leverage as the dominant component in Israel's deterrence strategy. Even outside of the military, Israeli thinking focuses its policy debate on the military level. This approach is quite distinct from the global trend, which is to promote the expansion of the deterrence toolbox and stress the ability to affect regional systems with non-military tools.

While military capabilities must indeed remain the foundation for Israel's deterrence, at the same time Israel should develop soft tools that will allow it to affect regional dynamics, especially intelligence capabilities to identify the potential for ad hoc alliances in order to deter a common enemy, and political capabilities to leverage these opportunities in practice. Cooperation with Saudi Arabia against the Iranian nuclear program is an example of such policy. It is clear that at present, conditions are not yet ripe for public cooperation between Israel and the nations of the region, and secret cooperation against common enemies is the more realistic option (notwithstanding that even if a covert joint venture allows certain achievements, the aspect of secrecy detracts from its deterrent nature).

Another channel of action could be indirect action designed to prompt other actors to deter Israel's enemy. For example, it may be possible to pressure Egypt or Jordan to act against Palestinian terrorism from the Sinai Peninsula or the West Bank, even if this is not a direct Egyptian or Jordanian interest. Israel's leveraging of its new water and energy resources could prove to be effective in this context. New energy discoveries could, for instance, provide for the basic needs of Israel's neighbors for available energy sources at attractive prices. This channel should be explored not only for its economic viability but also for its potential as soft power and capacity for promoting Israel's national interests. Plans would have to include an analysis of various regional escalation scenarios and the limits of this sort of leverage under extreme circumstances.

In order to enhance its soft power, Israel would have to establish channels of communication with its neighbors. Seclusion reduces one's potential for influence in general, and for influence in the regional reality in particular.

Therefore, Israel would do well to establish effective official channels of communication with its neighbors for use in crises. For nations with which it is impossible to arrive at sufficient official communication, one could exploit social media options for communicating with the relevant public. Even if limited in its effectiveness, this channel could be critical in a crisis, because it could allow Israel to clarify its positions and intentions and understand the positions and inclinations of the other players in the system. So, for example, it would be possible to take a steep public toll of Hamas in the case of escalation in Gaza or from Hezbollah in a similar scenario on the northern border.

The Connection between Deterrence and Active Defense

Israel has great potential for leading the global discourse on the link between deterrence and active defense. The IDF strategy explicitly links Israel's defensive capabilities with its deterrent capabilities.[26] Israel leads the R&D of defense systems against rockets, ballistic missiles, and anti-tank missiles. Cooperation with the United States in the field of active defense has made it possible for Israel to build a triple-layered anti-missile defense system – from rockets to intercontinental missiles armed with nonconventional warheads. Israel has even started to sell these systems to other nations.

Linking deterrence to defense and the tremendous investment in developing technologies for active defense systems is not above controversy. Some argue that this investment is liable to erode Israel's offensive capabilities, which are more important than its deterrence.[27] However, this line of thought is not aligned with current thinking about deterrence, particularly concerning non-nuclear threats. Accordingly, enhancing the components of deterrence by denial may play a positive role in stabilizing the regional system and increasing Israel's sense of security without damaging its neighbors' sense of security. It could also reduce any incentive to engage in a regional arms race. Moreover, the double-sided nature of the system makes it possible to strengthen deterrent capabilities without damaging the ability to foil attacks in case deterrence fails. So, for example, defensive systems reduce damage and save civilian lives. At the same time, they reduce the pressure exerted on decision makers to respond during escalations and extend the time available to the political leadership to decide on the nature of Israel's response to attack, thereby enhancing the nation's ability to prevent uncontrolled escalation.

This is of pivotal importance when considering deterring terrorist organizations, which represent a tougher challenge for deterrence than nations because they are free of state-informed political and strategic considerations. For example, during the round of fighting with Hamas in the summer of 2014, the Iron Dome system gave Israel's decision makers breathing room to try to prevent escalation on the southern front as Hamas's political leadership sought a ceasefire (whereas the military leadership sought to escalate the situation) without sacrificing preparations for a military response to defend Israeli civilians against Hamas's rocket and missile attacks.

The key criticism of Israel's policy in the summer of 2014 was that in practice, reliance on defensive capabilities damaged the nation's deterrence and provided Hamas with time to dig in and fortify itself against Israel's counterattacks, thereby reducing Israel's ability to damage the organization's strategic assets. Indeed, the objective of deterrence is to buy time. The political-security establishment in Israel ought to promote a conceptual line of thinking about the connection between deterrence and defense in order to maximize defensive capabilities in the field of deterrence against different threats in a changing environment. The IDF strategy document, which links deterrence to defense, must serve as the foundation for systematic thinking that relates to the various threats Israel might have to face in years to come: the relatively established organizations, such as Hezbollah and Hamas; the less established organizations, such as the Islamic State and various jihadist factions; and different types of states – fully sovereign, such as Iran; states with vast hinterlands, such as Egypt; or failing states, such as Syria. It is necessary to consider the limits of the connection between defense and deterrence with regard to each one of these scenarios and the ways to maximize that connection.

Conclusion

This essay has examined changes in Western thought about the strategy of deterrence and shown that in recent years, the US strategy of deterrence, as consolidated during the Cold War, has lost some of its urgency, mostly because it no longer applies to the security challenges that have emerged due to changes to the global system. Three trends in adapting the concept of deterrence to the 21st century have already matured in US policy: changing the nature of the US commitment as part of the model of extended deterrence,

expanding the concept of deterrence to include non-military tools in the strategy, and strengthening the connection between defense and deterrence.

The case of Israel differs from that of the United States. Israel is a regional military power that does not seek to expand its influence on other countries in the Middle East. Therefore, Israel's policy must examine the changes in US thought in light of its own particular needs. This essay has presented three relevant lessons to the efforts to update Israel's security doctrine relative to the new security challenges, and also to the efforts to update the role of deterrence as part of a comprehensive approach to security. The analysis shows the need to reexamine the limits of the US umbrella, and stresses the need to develop soft tools to allow Israel to affect regional dynamics in order to preserve its own interests. Finally, the essay demonstrates that Israel is ahead of the curve when it comes to developing active defensive capabilities. It is necessary to complete the technological development and the related conceptual discourse about the connection between deterrence and defense, given the wide gamut of threats Israel must confront. This connection must retain the balance between the active defense systems and tools of deterrence by punishment at Israel's disposal.

These recommendations, representing only some preliminary thinking about the topic, indicate the need for a broader discussion designed to adapt Israel's strategy of deterrence to the 21st century. A reexamination of the basic assumptions of the strategy of deterrence is critical, because adhering to the old strategy of deterrence risks forfeiting opportunities to preserve deterrent capabilities and prevent future crises.

Notes

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