

Lines in the sand: the use and misuse of red lines

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In: Defense & Security Analysis

To cite this article: Yoel Guzansky (2015): Lines in the sand: the use and misuse of red lines,
Defense & Security Analysis, DOI: 10.1080/14751798.2015.1014158

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2015.1014158

This article explores series of “red lines” issued over the years by the USA and Israel toward Iran and Syria. It argues that the effectiveness of inflexible “red lines” in an environment that is given to rapid change is doubtful. They provide an adversary with the ability to determine when the deterring party will act and when they will not, a situation that is often undesirable. Moreover, their inflexible nature on the one hand opens the doors for circumvention while technically staying within their parameters. On the other hand, a strategy of more ambiguous “red lines” that allow flexibility in choosing the time, intensity, and nature of the response could also achieve a considerable deterrent effect, provided that they do not remain mere bluffs.