

Thoughts on Deterrence: Lessons from Israel's Wars since 1967

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The Six Day War, the War of Attrition, and the Yom Kippur War led to a new understanding of deterrence and its place in Israel's defense policy. Deterrence has been one of the main components in Israel's defense policy since its independence. The nascent state emerged from the War of Independence understanding that it was only the first stage in the Arab world's attempts to destroy it. The humiliating defeat of the Arab coalition in the War of Independence and the Arab countries' recognition of a clear asymmetry between them and Israel, which lacked in territory, population, resources, military forces, and diplomatic power, clearly would lead to additional rounds of war led by the Arabs. Israel assumed that these wars were inevitable and therefore the goal of deterrence was to increase the time between them until—in the spirit of Jabotinsky's idea of an “iron wall”—the Arabs would give up trying to destroy Israel by military means or, in the language of deterrence, until Israel's deterrence would convince the Arab world to seek negotiated solutions.

In the Israeli perception, the Six Day War broke out supposedly due to a failure in deterrence. Operation Kadesh in 1956 and the defeat of the Egyptian army in Sinai had strengthened Israeli deterrence, after Israel demonstrated its ability to defeat the Egyptian army within one week of fighting and the effectiveness of integrating the maneuvering of its ground forces with its air force. Britain and France's participation in the fighting in the area around the Suez Canal, however, reduced the effect of Israel's deterrence since the

Arab side attributed Israel's success partly to the involvement of the two superpowers. In any case, that war resulted in an eleven-year period of quiet on the Egyptian front, due to both the Israeli deterrence and the negotiated understandings that led to the stationing of UN forces in Sinai.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to view the Six Day War as a total and unambiguous failure of Israeli deterrence. There is no proof of an Arab initiative to start a war against Israel or even to provoke it until several weeks before the Six Day War started. Although neither side wanted it, the Six Day War essentially was the result of escalation and miscalculation by both sides as well as by the international community. It began with an escalation on the Syrian front after a long period of border incidents resulting from differing interpretations of the armistice agreement and the "war over water." It continued with the Egyptian aim (partly the result of exaggerated Soviet intelligence reports) to pressure Israel in order to reduce the burden on Syria. This was in addition to the misguided decision of the UN Secretary to remove the UN forces from Sinai, which resulted in Egypt's leaders' euphoria leading to deployment of its military forces in the peninsula in violation of post-1956 war arrangements and then the blocking of the Straits of Tiran.

In the end, Israel was the one that launched the war, which, from its perspective, was both a preventative war and a preemptive strike.¹ It was a preventative war because Israel sought to thwart any continued attacks against it as a result of the growing sense of power in Egypt and the Arab world and to open the Straits of Tiran, in addition to being concerned about the price of continuing to hold its military forces in the state of high alert and the need for an ongoing high level of preparedness due to the deployment of Egyptian forces in Sinai. It was a preemptive strike because Israel increasingly felt that an existential threat was taking shape and feared that it had undermined the deterrence vis-à-vis Egypt because it had failed to respond to the Egyptian moves. Israel was also concerned that Egypt would exploit its improved strategic position following the deployment of its forces in Sinai, its military coordination with Syria and Jordan, and its growing confidence in its military power to launch a war against Israel. In retrospect, even after Israel's military victory, no evidence was found of any concrete Egyptian intention to do so.

1 Michael Oren, *Six Days of War* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 2004), pp. 79–211 [Hebrew].

Lessons from the Six Day War

The direct lesson learned from the Six Day War is that even when credible Israeli deterrence exists, a new strategic situation could emerge and increase the Arab side's motivation to act against Israel. Even if the deterrence is sufficiently strong to prevent the other side from launching an all-out war, it may not prevent actions that are below the threshold of war; such actions can escalate to war since they create an intolerable situation for Israel.

Seemingly, the spectacular Israeli victory in the Six Day War against three Arab countries and additional expeditionary forces should have strengthened Israel's deterrence and—according to the then prevalent defense strategy—should have ensured quiet and extended the duration between the rounds of fighting. It is no wonder that then Interior Minister Moshe Haim Shapira stated at the government meeting on June 7, 1967 that, “We have defeated them and now they will think a hundred times whether it is worthwhile renewing the struggles against us in the coming years.”² In actuality, the opposite occurred. Israel's victory shortened the time between the next rounds of fighting. While eleven years separated the Sinai campaign from the Six Day War, less than two years passed between the Six Day War and the War of Attrition in 1969—and even during this period, numerous shooting incidents occurred—and only six years ensued until the Yom Kippur War in 1973. In contrast, the Yom Kippur War was the last war with Egypt, since it led to a series of negotiated interim agreements and finally to a peace treaty signed between the two countries.

Between the Defense Policy and Reality

How can the difference between reality and the basic assumptions of Israel's defense policy be explained? Deterrence is an effort to persuade one side to not take action against the other by threatening that the price paid is much higher than the benefit gained. The tendency is to focus on the threat and to try to increase both the price paid and the credibility of the threat in order to achieve greater deterrence. But deterrence is a complicated equation made up of two parameters: On one side is the threat, namely the price the adversary will pay, and on the other side is the adversary's motivation to take action; that is, the benefit expected from that action. The goal of the

2 Shimon Shiffer and Yoav Keren, “50 Years since the Six Day War—the Secret Transcripts are Revealed,” *Yedioth Ahronoth*, May 18, 2017 [Hebrew].

adversary is usually to change the status quo. If the adversary finds the status quo intolerable, the benefit from altering the status quo is almost infinite. It is difficult to create a threat whose price is sufficiently high enough for creating effective deterrence. Therefore, in order to create deterrence, both sides of the equation must be dealt with: making a strong and credible threat, while also reducing the adversary's motivation.

In a similar context, the difficult present situation in the Gaza Strip—one that could reach a point where Israel's deterrence of Hamas will collapse when Hamas considers the situation to be intolerable—has been the focus of discussion in Israel and it is understood that this situation was the reason for the round of violence that broke out between Israel and Hamas in 2014 (Operation Protective Edge), contributing also to its long duration and the difficulty in ending it. A similar situation occurred during May–July 2018 ending a period of almost total quiet and stability since “Protective Edge.” Once again the connection between the new flare-up and the intolerable situation in the Gaza Strip was evident.

The Six Day War was a spectacular victory for Israel and a humiliating defeat for Egypt and Syria. Apart from the damage done to their military forces, which was reparable, they also lost important territorial assets. Egypt lost control of Sinai and also the ability to operate the Suez Canal and the maritime oil fields adjacent to Sinai, while Syria lost the Golan Heights, putting Israel in close enough proximity to Damascus to pose a threat to the Syrian capital. Therefore, the Israeli victory actually strengthened the motivation of these two countries to seek to recover these territories and restore their honor through the use of force. And indeed, already in 1969, Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser declared: “What was taken by force will be returned by force.”³

In this situation, any Israeli threat, whatever it may be, could not have deterred Egypt and Syria. On the contrary, instead of refraining from actions against Israel, they sought to bypass the sources of Israel's military strength and concluded that they must launch a war with limited objectives in which they would pay a much lower price. Egypt did this by means of a well-considered operational plan that aimed for partial military achievements that

3 Ktziah Avieli-Tabibian, “Time Travels: Building a State in the Middle East,” (Tel Aviv: Center for Technological Education, 2009), p. 188 [Hebrew], <https://bit.ly/2ud6Zvk>.

would lead to a political process in which Egypt would achieve its goals. Syria sufficed with a plan to capture the Golan Heights without penetrating into Israel's territory. To this end, the two countries built an air defense system, anti-tank capabilities, and a force of ballistic missiles, and finally launched a surprise attack against Israel. All this enabled them to blunt the IDF's main capabilities and to reach partial achievements.

In contrast to the Six Day War, the Yom Kippur War did not end in a spectacular and decisive victory for Israel; Israel paid a heavy price in the war while Egypt and Syria had important achievements at the first stage of fighting and throughout the war posed serious challenges to the Israeli Defense Forces. Egypt and Syria's launching of the war restored the Arabs' honor and thus created an opportunity for Egypt and Syria to use diplomatic means and US mediation to recover territories they had lost in 1967. The results of the war also affected their motivation to start new wars, making a diplomatic process possible, which culminated in a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt and a separation of forces agreement between Israel and Syria, leading to stability and quiet on the Golan Heights that has lasted until today, despite the recent undermining of the foundations of the Syrian state.

Between Decisive Victory and Deterrence

The lessons learned from this analysis is that an overly decisive victory does not necessarily contribute to overall deterrence and sometimes even achieves the opposite result. Therefore, it is important to make the other side aware of the price of launching a war, while at the same time not creating any new motivations that could undermine the effect of the threat. One way of doing so is to initiate a serious negotiating process in the wake of the military confrontation.

At the end of the Six Day War, Israel refrained from embarking on a negotiating process and sufficed with "waiting for a telephone call from the Arab side."⁴ The Arab leaders gave three negative responses in August 1967 in Khartoum, Sudan—no to peace with Israel, no to recognizing Israel, and no to negotiating with Israel. A speculative analysis of events that did not happen is difficult to carry out and back up; nevertheless, a determined Israeli initiative to launch a peace process with Egypt, Syria,

4 Yitzhak Rabin, "Gentlemen, the Arabs' Telephone is Ringing," speech at the Knesset, October 3, 1994 [Hebrew], <http://www.rabincenter.org.il/Items/01842/14k.pdf>.

and Jordan—with the support of the interested superpowers and with their mediation—presumably could have changed the course of history. However, Israel quickly fell in love with the occupied territories, which prevented such initiatives and neutralized those of others, even when it became apparent after the Khartoum decisions that there would not be any phone call from the Arabs, as they were focused instead on their feelings of humiliation and wish of retribution.

Strategic Deterrence and Its Implications

Although one might conclude from the above discussion that the Six Day War did not achieve any results in terms of contribution to strategic deterrence, on the contrary, it can be argued that the limited Arab goals in the Yom Kippur War were the result of the two components of Israeli deterrence: Israel's capabilities in a conventional war—as proven in the Six Day War—and the belief that Israel had nuclear weapons. The Arab side abandoned the goal of destroying Israel—at least in the planning for the 1973 war—and sufficed with the goal of recovering the territories captured in 1967, although Israel did not understand this in real time during the 1973 war, causing Israel to interpret the war as an existential threat. In addition, the peace process that developed with Egypt after 1973 reflected Sadat's strategic decision to accept Israel's existence, which was only possible after Egypt had restored its honor and could recover the territories that it had lost. The Arab world as a whole reached this decision only in the 1990s, during the Madrid and Oslo processes as manifested by the Arab peace initiative in 2002, which expressed a pan-Arab willingness (at the government level) to accept the existence of the State of Israel in complete contrast to the Khartoum declarations.

Another one of Israel's achievements in terms of deterrence, as a result of its success in the Six Day War (and the effect of the War of Attrition), was the decision of Egypt to refrain from specific military actions out of the fear that the price paid would be too high. Thus, during the Yom Kippur War, Egypt chose not to strike deep inside Israel's territory with ballistic missiles and its air force, recognizing that the Israeli air force could retaliate and cause extensive damage within Egyptian territory, as it did during the War of Attrition. Instead, Egypt chose the path of mutual deterrence. It armed itself with Scud missiles that could reach deep inside Israel's territory and would deter Israel from attacking strategic non-military targets within Egypt. This mutual deterrence was indeed successful. Even Syria refrained from

attacking non-military targets in Israel, and when Syrian Frog-7 missiles landed in Migdal Haemek, it was only because of its proximity to the Ramat David airbase and the limited precision of the Frog missile. The conclusion is that even in situations when it is impossible to realistically deter the other side from taking aggressive actions, it is possible to use deterrence to limit those actions and to influence their character.

Deterring Non-State Organizations

The Six Day War, followed by the Yom Kippur War, and the subsequent peace processes significantly reduced the threat of countries in the region launching a war against Israel. Israel is now in a situation where the main threat to it originates from non-state organizations or hybrid organizations (organizations with non-state characteristics that control territory and population and therefore also have some of the characteristics of a state). Deterrence of non-state organizations is more complex than that of states, which Israel put to the test in the Six Day War, the War of Attrition, and the Yom Kippur War. This situation raises the question whether the lessons learned in deterring states are relevant against the threats facing Israel in the twenty-first century.

It is commonly assumed that deterrence is a more effective measure as long as the violent actions to be deterred are more extreme, thus justifying communicating an even more severe threat in order to dissuade the other side. Thus, for example, when the goal is to deter an enemy with nuclear capability, which by nature poses an existential threat, the counter-threat is more effective when the message is that even if the adversary successfully carries out his existential threat, the other side will still have second-strike capability, which will cause existential damage to him as well. In contrast, in the case of a lower level threat, the deterrent threat must be proportionate in order to be credible. For example, no one will believe that the United States would drop an atomic bomb on Yemen in response to a terror attack by the al-Qaeda branch in Yemen, even if the United States should make such a declaration. The analysis shows that the violent actions at a low threshold—for example, terror attacks—are more difficult to deter.

In the past, it was commonly assumed in Israel that terror organizations could not be deterred⁵ and that it was only possible to strike at them and limit

5 See, for example, Hanan Alon, "Can Terrorism be Deterred? Some Thoughts and Doubts," in *Contemporary Trends in World Terrorism*, ed. Anat Kurz (New York: Praeger, 1987), pp. 125–130.

their ability to carry out terror attacks. The development of the understanding of Israeli deterrence, which began even before the Six Day War, reveals that the subject is more complex and more ambiguous and that even terror organizations can be deterred in certain situations. First, it is possible to limit their means. Thus, for example, even though there is the possibility of terror organizations using weapons of mass destruction, especially chemical and biological weapons, such attacks have almost not occurred; these organizations may understand that the response would be severe relative to the expected benefit of using this type of weapon. This understanding is dependent, of course, also on the character of the organization. An organization such as al-Qaeda is less likely to be deterred because it does not have any territorial assets that can be threatened by a similar response. However, a terror organization, which has acquired tangible assets that could be harmed, could be greatly deterred from executing terrorist acts, at least for a limited time.

Second, a terror organization is, in most cases, the military arm of a political movement. Such a movement needs public support, and if it believes that its acts of terror and a subsequent response will harm its support, it will refrain from undertaking them. Furthermore, usually terror organizations have a centralized decision-making mechanism, making it easier to decide to desist from terror activities.

This understanding can be used to calibrate tools of deterrence and to make them more efficient. This is all the more so in the case of hybrid organizations that control territory and population and administer them at least as a *de facto* government. In this case, threats to their assets—especially if such threats cause them to lose public support among the population under their control and from other supporters—could deter them from launching terror attacks.

The relations between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip illustrate this well. The takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007 was a major achievement for Hamas, and it now possesses tangible assets and relies on the public support in the territory under its control. In the past decade, Israel deterred Hamas from carrying out terror attacks against Israel for significant periods of time because Israel threatened to harm its assets. This deterrence collapsed when the two sides could not control the escalation as a result of internal political considerations or when the socioeconomic situation inside the Gaza Strip became intolerable, and Hamas felt that it could not function as a government

and therefore would anyway lose public support. When Hamas lost its assets that could be threatened, the deterrence collapsed.

Conclusion

The fifty years since the Six Day War have taught us that deterrence is a highly effective tool for various levels of warfare, including conventional war and terror and guerilla war. However, the effectiveness of deterrence is conditional on understanding the complexity of this tool and the correct analysis of the two sides of the equation: On one side is the threat and the way it is used against the assets of the other party, and how it is perceived; on the other side is the motivation of the party to be deterred and the recognition that deterrence is impossible in a situation where there is nothing to lose. Accordingly, when a threat has been credible and impressive, but at the same time its past realization increased the other side's motivation to undermine the status quo, that same threat does not necessarily serve the purpose of mutual deterrence.