

Toward Possible Changes in Iran's Security Concept

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Regional developments are posing challenges to Iran and the pro-Iranian axis it leads, raising doubts about the effectiveness of the main elements of its deterrence against its enemies. These elements include Iran's use of "proxies," its strategic military capabilities (missiles and drones), and its nuclear program. Recent months have revealed shortcomings in Iran's security concept, which could lead to different approaches among the Iranian leadership. This may result in limited adjustments or a more strategic shift, especially concerning its nuclear doctrine. Iran is expected to reassess its security concept at a critical juncture, as it faces escalating conflict with Israel, an ongoing regional military campaign, and the approaching end of the era of Supreme Leader Khamenei.

The significant developments in the region since Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, especially the direct military conflicts between Iran and Israel starting in April 2024, could lead to changes in Iran's security concept. While it is too early to fully assess the impact of these regional shifts, it is already clear that Iran's leadership will need to reassess its security approach—particularly its deterrence strategy—in light of Israel's military successes against the pro-Iranian axis, especially Hezbollah, and the ongoing exchanges between Iran and Israel.

Iran's security concept has undergone considerable changes since the Islamic Revolution, influenced by both internal and external developments. Domestically, these include the death of the revolution's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in 1989, and subsequent changes in Tehran's government. Regionally, key events include the end of the Iran-Iraq War (1988), the First Gulf War (1990–1991), the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Arab Spring (2010–2011), and the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq in the mid-2010s. Globally, the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991), the shift to a unipolar world order led by the United States, and subsequent efforts to establish a multipolar world order have also played significant roles. Additionally, Iran's advancement in technological and military capabilities—especially in its nuclear program, missiles, and drones—has further shaped its security approach.

The desire to ensure the regime's survival amid internal and external threats is a primary objective of the Islamic Republic and a key influence on its security concept. Iran's leader, Ali Khamenei, has repeatedly stated that Iran's enemies—primarily the United States—aim to topple the regime by supporting domestic opposition, backing regional adversaries, and exerting political, economic, and military pressure. Iran perceives itself as situated in a challenging environment, surrounded by regional rivals and foreign military presence. This sense of threat heavily influences its security strategy, which aims to prevent any significant threats to its borders, territorial integrity, sovereignty, and national security.

Iran's security considerations are deeply rooted in its historical experience. Foreign interventions and territorial losses have heightened its sense of vulnerability, and the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988) remains a national trauma embedded in the collective national memory, compelling the leadership to prevent any recurrence of such threats. While the collapse of the Soviet Union removed a significant threat, the rise of the United States as a significant adversary—especially after the 2003 invasion of Iraq—and the intensification of the conflict with Israel have pushed Iran to bolster its deterrence capabilities, particularly given its limitations in conventional warfare. Iran's air force relies on relatively outdated aircraft, and its air defenses have shown limited effectiveness against Israeli strikes. To compensate and build effective deterrence, Iran has developed four main strategies: reliance on proxy organizations, strategic military capabilities (primarily ballistic missiles and drones), terrorism, and nuclear development.

The Four Pillars of Iranian Deterrence

The use of “proxies”

Iran's network of proxy organizations is a cornerstone of its security concept and a key tool for deterring adversaries, increasing its strategic depth, and expanding its influence beyond its borders. From the Iranian leadership's perspective, this network allows Iran to pursue its strategic interests at a relatively low cost, enabling it to avoid direct confrontations with primary adversaries. Through these sub-state organizations, Iran has established significant footholds of power and influence in the Arab world, although the regional groups that align with Iran occasionally have interests and considerations that do not fully align with Tehran's objectives.

Over the past two decades, Iran has intensified efforts to expand its regional influence, reflecting a strategic view within its political and security leadership that emphasizes extending Iran's reach beyond its borders to better address external

threats. To neutralize potential threats early, Iran has, over the past decade, adopted a “forward defense” or “offensive defense” strategy. This approach—defense through offense—aims to protect Iran’s national security by confronting adversaries as far away from its borders as possible.

The concept of “forward defense” is closely tied to “strategic depth,” a key element of Iranian strategy that helps offset its limited conventional military capabilities. While this concept is not new, its significance has grown over the past decade amid regional upheavals. The formation of the pro-Iranian axis (“axis of resistance”) has enhanced Iran’s strategic depth in the Fertile Crescent. Iran’s Supreme Leader Khamenei has emphasized the importance of expanding strategic depth as a core component of Iran’s security framework. In January 2017, during a meeting with the families of soldiers killed in Syria and Iraq, Khamenei stated that if ISIS had not been confronted outside Iran’s borders, it would have posed a direct threat within Iran, including in Tehran, Fars, Khorasan, and Isfahan.

Strategic military capabilities

In addition to its network of proxies and cyber capabilities, Iran’s acquisition of strategic military systems—such as ballistic missiles and drones—has become a key component of its “forward defense” strategy, compensating for its conventional military limitations. Iran’s diverse ballistic missile program, developed in response to lessons from the Iran–Iraq War, reflects a need for enhanced deterrence and self-reliance. Iran views the war in Ukraine as further justification for maintaining and advancing its strategic military capabilities, especially in long-range missiles. Following the Russian invasion in February 2022, Iranian media portrayed Ukraine’s limited defenses as proof of the importance of strategic assets that offer deterrence and defense. From Iran’s perspective, its ballistic missiles provide a fast, effective, and accessible means of deterring enemies, projecting power, and responding to adversaries.

The escalating conflict between Iran and Israel has further emphasized the need to develop strategic military capabilities to counter Israel’s military superiority. For years, Iran preferred to engage Israel through its proxies in the Middle East, avoiding direct military confrontation to minimize risks and deny responsibility, while attempting to weaken and encircle Israel with a “ring of fire.” This approach aimed to deter Israel and erode its resolve, all while maintaining a degree of immunity. In the past decade, the Revolutionary Guards have initiated offensive actions against Israel, including the use of drones and rockets from Syrian territory. Notable incidents include a February 2018 drone attack from Syria toward Israel, which was intercepted by the IDF, and a May 2018 rocket barrage

targeting IDF positions in the Golan Heights in retaliation for the deaths of Revolutionary Guards fighters in Israeli strikes. The most significant shift in the strategic dynamics between the two countries occurred on the night of April 13–14, 2024, when Iran launched a missile and drone attack on Israel in retaliation for the assassination of Revolutionary Guards Commander Hassan Mahdavi at the compound next to the Iranian embassy in Damascus on April 1, 2024. This attack marked the beginning of a new phase in the strategic conflict between Iran and Israel.

Terrorism

Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has used terrorism as a key tool to achieve its national objectives, alongside political, military, economic, and cultural tools. It supports a range of terrorist organizations globally and directly initiates and conducts acts of terrorism through state agencies, primarily the Revolutionary Guards and the Ministry of Intelligence. Iran's involvement in terrorism spans multiple countries and targets a variety of groups, including regime opponents abroad, American interests, and Israeli and Jewish entities, as well as Muslim and Arab targets, all aimed at deterring actions against Iranian interests.

In recent years, Iran has escalated its terrorist activities across a wide range of global arenas, including Western countries, with a particular focus on Israeli, Jewish, and American targets. This increase in terrorism is a response to the growing efforts by Israel and the United States to counter Iran's support for terrorism, as well as its nuclear efforts and military advancements. Similar to its use of proxy organizations, terrorism serves as a tool for Iran to deter and punish its adversaries while maintaining a degree of plausible deniability, which helps reduce the risk of escalation into a full-scale military conflict.

The nuclear program

Like many other elements of Iran's strategic power, the nuclear program began during the Shah's reign. After the Islamic Revolution, the nuclear program was suspended by the revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, who claimed that it conflicted with the principles of Islam. The Iran–Iraq war prompted the Iranian regime to revive its nuclear program in the mid-1980s, driven by the severe setbacks Iran faced during the war and the Iraqi regime's use of chemical weapons and missiles against it.

Since the early 1990s, Iran's leaders have consistently emphasized the civilian nature of the country's nuclear program. For years, Iranian officials repeatedly stated that Iran is not developing nuclear weapons and would never pursue them,

citing their lack of utility and the view that nuclear weapons are prohibited by religious law, according to Iran's leader. However, Supreme Leader Khamenei has maintained the belief that achieving nuclear threshold capability is crucial for deterring Iran's enemies, seeing it as a necessary safeguard for the regime's survival. Khamenei has also continued to argue that the nuclear program is merely an excuse for the West to pressure, isolate, and weaken Iran with the ultimate goal of overthrowing the Islamic regime. Moreover, Khamenei pointed to the 2003 dismantling of Libya's nuclear program by Muammar Gaddafi, which did not prevent his overthrow by Western-backed forces, as evidence that Iran was right to resist Western demands. Additionally, Iran views the contrast between the immunity enjoyed by nuclear-armed North Korea and the fate of Saddam Hussein, who lacked nuclear weapons, as proof of the importance of nuclear weapons, along with other strategic assets, particularly its long-range missile arsenal.

Doubts Regarding the Effectiveness of Iran's Security Concept

Recent regional developments, particularly the ongoing conflict since the outbreak of the war in the Gaza Strip, are presenting growing military challenges to the Islamic Republic. These developments are raising doubts about the validity of Iran's security concept, especially the effectiveness of two key elements of its deterrence: its proxy doctrine and its strategic military capabilities.

The use of proxies

The war in the Gaza Strip presented Iran with its first significant opportunity to implement its "unification of arenas" doctrine on a larger scale, coordinating actions against Israel and the United States across multiple arenas simultaneously, without directly paying a price for doing so. However, the war also revealed the limitations of Iran's influence in managing all of the capabilities of the pro-Iranian axis in the region, particularly due to concerns about being drawn into direct military conflict with Israel and potentially with the United States. Furthermore, Iran has not been able to achieve its two primary objectives through its network of proxies: ending the fighting in Gaza to minimize the damage to Hamas, and pressuring the United States to halt its unconditional support for Israel while compelling Israel to end the war before achieving its objectives.

During the war, tensions emerged between Iran and some of its proxies due to gaps between its interests and those of the organizations it supports. These differences stemmed, in part, from changes in Iran's approach to managing its proxies in recent years, particularly after the death of Qasem Soleimani in January 2020. This event forced Iran to adopt a more decentralized management style for its networks of proxies, maintaining significant influence but not necessarily

exercising full or constant control over each of its components. Following the Iranian attack on Israel in April 2024, intelligence assessments suggested that Iran was dissatisfied with Hezbollah's response. While Hezbollah launched several barrages of rockets at military bases in the Golan Heights on the night of the attack, this action did not significantly shift the established rules of engagement between Hezbollah and Israel on the northern border since the outbreak of the war in Gaza. Additionally, the deaths of three American soldiers in Jordan in a January 2024 attack by an Iraqi Shiite militia, along with the increasing activities of the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen targeting vessels in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, risked drawing Iran into an undesirable military conflict with the United States.

Iran's use and support for the proxies, which were intended to minimize the risk of being drawn into direct military conflict, ultimately led to a direct military confrontation with Israel. After the Israeli attack on Iran on October 26, the Iranian journalist Amir Hossein Mosalla expressed his view of the failure of this strategy. In a tweet on his X account, Mosalla noted that the "axis of resistance," which had been established in Syria and Iraq at a significant expense to the Iranian budget to achieve strategic depth and keep the threat of war away from Iran's borders, had resulted in Israeli fighter jets attacking Iran via Iraq and Syria, leading to the deaths of four Iranian soldiers.

Most concerning for Iran, the war in the Gaza Strip posed a significant threat to the survival of Hamas for the first time. While Hamas is an important, albeit not central, part of the pro-Iranian axis, the war also caused serious damage to Hezbollah, Iran's most valuable strategic asset in the region. The decapitation of much of Hezbollah's leadership, including Hassan Nasrallah, and the substantial weakening of its military capabilities presented a major threat to Iran's most important regional project, which it has nurtured for decades. This also greatly diminished Iran's ability to deter or respond to Israel in the event of an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.

Strategic military capabilities

Iranian authorities presented the two attacks on Israel—on April 13–14 ("True Promise 1") and on October 1 ("True Promise 2")—as significant achievements, despite Israel's success in intercepting most of the projectiles launched toward it. The *Kayhan* newspaper, affiliated with Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei, described the April attack as the most serious military response against Israel since the 1973 Yom Kippur War, claiming that Iran had managed to penetrate Israel's multilayered defense system and inflict damage, even though the attack

was neither a secret nor unexpected. The second attack, in early October, was met with even greater satisfaction in Iran, due to apparent improvements over the first. The day after the attack, the Tasnim News Agency, linked to the Revolutionary Guards, reported that the Guards had waited several weeks before “punishing the Zionist terrorists” to refine and develop new technologies that gave Iran “total superiority over the Zionists.” Reflecting the leadership’s satisfaction with the outcome, on October 6, Khamenei awarded the highest military decoration in Iran to Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards’ air force.

Nevertheless, even before it becomes clear how the ongoing exchange of blows between Iran and Israel will unfold, it can be assumed that doubts persist within the Iranian leadership regarding its ability to effectively counter Israel’s air and intelligence superiority. Iran may also struggle to impose a new deterrence equation that would prevent Israel from continuing its actions against Iran and the pro-Iranian axis. These doubts were further amplified following the Israeli attack on Iran on October 26, which caused considerable damage to Iran’s air defense system and its ballistic missile production capabilities.

Toward a Possible Shift in Iran’s Security Concept

Given these developments and the shortcomings that have emerged over the past year in Iran’s ability to effectively deter its adversaries with its current security concept, the Iranian leadership will need to reassess the concept’s principles and adapt them to the evolving reality and lessons learned from the multi-arena campaign. In this process, Tehran may adopt one or a combination of three main approaches.

An “Iran first” approach

According to this approach, championed by figures such as President Masoud Pezeshkian and circles aligned with Iran’s pragmatic and reformist faction, Iran should prioritize addressing internal challenges, particularly the economic crisis, to strengthen its long-term ability to tackle security issues. This approach advocates seeking a resolution with the West on the nuclear issue, potentially leading to sanctions relief. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of continuing to ease tensions with Iran’s Arab neighbors, focusing on economic rehabilitation and development, and bridging the growing gaps between the regime and the general public.

This approach has been reflected in commentary articles published in recent months in media outlets affiliated with the pragmatic-reformist faction in Iran. These commentators argue that Iran should avoid falling into the “trap” set by

Israel, which seeks to provoke Iran into a full-scale military conflict. Instead, they advocate for focusing on rehabilitating and enhancing Iran's military, defensive, security, and intelligence capabilities, while also strengthening internal cohesion, stabilizing the economy, and addressing social challenges. This approach, they believe, will better position Iran to cope with the Israeli threat. Following the Israeli attack on Iran, journalist Majid Rezaeian argued in an interview with the reformist newspaper *Shargh* that, having demonstrated its military strength, Iran should now prioritize diplomatic efforts. According to him, the current negative international sentiment towards Israel offers Iran an opportunity to pursue a political arrangement.

It is important to note that even after Pezeshkian's election as president, the influence of the more moderate circles on decision-making in Iran remains limited. This is due to the growing strength of conservatives and hardliners within state institutions in recent years, including in the Supreme National Security Council. However, the ongoing regional changes and the security challenges Iran is currently facing may temporarily amplify the voices within the Iranian leadership advocating for a more pragmatic approach. This shift could be a move to focus on rehabilitating Iran's own capabilities, as well as those of the pro-Iranian axis, which have been weakened during the regional war.

Regardless of whether the more moderate circles succeed in advancing their worldview, which emphasizes the need for political-diplomatic arrangements and economic stabilization to address Iran's challenges, this would probably not result in a fundamental shift in the Iranian security concept. Pezeshkian himself has expressed support for its core elements on multiple occasions. Shortly after his election as president, Pezeshkian delivered clear messages to senior members in the pro-Iranian axis, reaffirming his government's commitment to continue supporting the "axis of resistance" as a central pillar of the Islamic Republic's policy. In a speech on November 4, 2024, the president emphasized the importance of Iran's strategic military capabilities for deterrence, stating that Iran's missile program is intended to prevent its enemies from daring to attack, as Israel is doing in the Gaza Strip.

The limited adjustments approach

This approach suggests that, although the significant damage to Hezbollah's and Hamas's capabilities and the challenges in Iran's ability to effectively deter Israel from acting against it and its regional axis indicate a need for certain adjustments in Iran's security concept to strengthen its deterrence, these do not necessarily call for sweeping changes to the core elements of the concept. There is no doubt

that the recent blows to Iran and Hezbollah have caused concern in Tehran. Nonetheless, part of the Iranian leadership seems to believe that despite the IDF's depletion of Iran and its proxies' capabilities, Israel lacks the ability to achieve a decisive victory in the multi-arena campaign. According to this view, if Israel becomes drawn into a prolonged war of attrition in Gaza, Lebanon, and potentially against Iran itself, Iran's ongoing pursuit of a military nuclear threshold, military buildup, and continued reliance on Russia and China will eventually shift the strategic balance of power in favor of Iran and the pro-Iranian axis.

Despite significant regional developments, Iran's hardliners remain steadfast in their belief that Israel's operative achievements do not shift the balance of power in its favor. Therefore, they see no need for strategic reassessment, particularly regarding the use of proxies or missile and drone capabilities. Supreme Leader Khamenei and other high-ranking officials continued to project confidence in Iran's ability to counter Israel effectively. On October 23, 2024, Khamenei asserted that "the Zionists" have failed to dismantle the "resistance" groups. He said that Hamas, the Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, and the rest of these groups continue to fight, even though Israel has killed over 50,000 innocent civilians and several leaders of the "axis of resistance," and despite the continued American support it enjoys. On October 31, a few days after the Israeli strike on Iran, Khamenei reiterated that the "axis of resistance" would ultimately prevail over the "front of evil" standing behind Israel, and that the "resistance groups" are continuing to fight against Israel with the same strength and determination. Similarly, Revolutionary Guards Commander Hossein Salami demonstrated a sense of confidence. After the Israeli strike, Salami declared that Israel believes it has the ability to change history by launching a few missiles but has actually reached the stage of its collapse. While these statements may seem like mere rhetoric or boastful words to obscure Iran's vulnerabilities, they likely reflect a genuine belief within the Iranian leadership that the balance of power still favors Iran and its allies.

Circles identified with the pragmatic-reformist camp in Iran have also not challenged the country's security concept. After Israel's attack, Hassan Beheshtipour, a commentator and international relations expert from the University of Tehran, expressed support for the doctrine of "forward defense" through proxy organizations. In a commentary article published in the reformist newspaper *Etemad*, he argued that the Israeli attack underscores the necessity of maintaining an Iranian presence and involvement near Israel's borders, which would offer Iran a better opportunity to strike from a closer range.

This does not imply that proponents of this approach believe no adjustments are needed in Iran's security concept in light of lessons from the past year's campaign. Instead, they believe these adjustments can occur within the existing framework by addressing shortcomings in Iran's deterrent capabilities. Suggested solutions could include efforts to further wear down Israel in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon, accelerating attempts to establish terrorist infrastructure in Judea and Samaria (as a potential alternative to Gaza), increasing terrorist activities within Israeli territory, offsetting the reduction in Hezbollah's military strength by at least partially restoring its capabilities, deepening Iranian involvement in managing the organization's affairs, bolstering support for Shiite militias in Iraq, and rehabilitating and upgrading missile systems and air defense damaged in the Israeli attack.

Changing the nuclear doctrine

Another possible approach to modifying Iran's security concept suggests that enhancing deterrence should involve not only strengthening Iran's missile capabilities and restoring the capabilities of Hezbollah and the pro-Iranian axis but also reconsidering the nuclear doctrine and exploring the possibility of a nuclear breakout, which could serve as the ultimate "insurance policy" against Israel and the United States.

Amid Iran's ongoing efforts to reach the nuclear threshold and potentially take steps to shorten its nuclear breakout time, calls have increased over the past year to reassess Iran's nuclear strategy and go beyond its current threshold status. For instance, during the escalation between Israel and Iran in April 2024, Ahmad Haq Taleb, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards unit tasked with protecting the nuclear facilities, cautioned that any Israeli attempt to strike these facilities might prompt Tehran to reconsider its nuclear doctrine. Shortly after, Javad Karimi-Ghodousi, a member of the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission, claimed that Iran could conduct a nuclear test within a week of receiving authorization from Supreme Leader Khamenei. Additionally, Mahmoud Reza Aghamiri, the president of Shahid Beheshti University and a nuclear scientist, stated in an April 7, 2024 interview on Iranian television that Khamenei could modify his Islamic legal ruling (fatwa) prohibiting nuclear weapons, and that Iran would have the capability to produce them if his ruling were changed.

In recent weeks, such declarations have intensified. In October 2024, dozens of Iranian parliamentarians sent a formal letter to the Supreme National Security Council, urging a revision of the Islamic Republic's defense doctrine regarding its

nuclear program. On October 26, Kamal Kharazi, chairman of the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations, stated that Tehran might consider extending the range of its ballistic missiles and that revising the nuclear doctrine remains on the agenda should Iran face an existential threat. He underscored that Iran possesses the technical capacity to produce nuclear weapons, with the supreme leader's stance being the only thing preventing this. A recent article published in *Defense Policy*, a journal published by Imam Hossein University, which operates in cooperation with the Iranian Ministry of Defense and the Revolutionary Guards, also implied a need to reassess Iran's nuclear doctrine. The article on Iran's nuclear deterrence strategy noted that while maintaining nuclear threshold capability has effectively deterred an all-out military assault, this strategy's efficacy is diminishing amid evolving military dynamics and rising threats, particularly Israel's threats to take military action against Iran's nuclear program.

At this stage, there is no evidence that Iran's leadership, under Khamenei, has decided to alter its nuclear strategy or pursue nuclear breakout. However, the growing public support within Iran for reevaluating the nuclear strategy suggests that this issue may be under discussion in Tehran's corridors of power. Iran's position as a nuclear threshold state, coupled with the ongoing military conflict with Israel and challenges in maintaining effective deterrence through missile and drone capabilities, as well as the weakened pro-Iranian axis, could amplify calls within the leadership to pursue a nuclear breakout to better address the escalating threats to Iran's national security.

Conclusion—Toward the End of Khamenei's Era and the Day After

Iran is currently at a significant crossroads. The escalating conflict with Israel, lessons learned from the regional campaign, and the impending end of Supreme Leader Khamenei's era are compelling the country to reassess its strategic balance, its regional and global policies, and its security concept.

Ultimately, decisions regarding significant changes in Iran's security concept rest with the supreme leader and the Supreme National Security Council. At this stage, it seems unlikely that there will be far-reaching changes to Iran's security concept as long as Khamenei remains in power. Furthermore, Iran currently lacks new and significantly different options beyond those already adopted, aside from possibly altering its nuclear doctrine—a move that could carry substantial risks, including the possibility of a military attack by Israel or even the United States. Since his appointment as supreme leader in the summer of 1989, Khamenei has generally followed a cautious approach, particularly in foreign affairs, to ensure the survival of his regime. However, the end of his rule could prompt him to take one of two

opposing directions. His advanced age may lead him to avoid major policy shifts or risks that could jeopardize his country's national security in the final years of his leadership. Conversely, he may conclude that this is precisely the moment to strengthen the Islamic Republic's defenses against growing military challenges, particularly from Israel, and against internal threats to the regime's stability—even at the cost of taking controlled risks that he previously avoided.

In the coming weeks and months, the Iranian leadership will need to reassess its fundamental security concepts. This process is unfolding while most of the state's institutions are under the control of conservatives and hardliners, with increasing influence from the Revolutionary Guards, which often adopts a hawkish, ultranationalist, and defiant stance toward the West, expressing growing confidence in Iran's capabilities and a willingness to take greater risks to advance Iran's national security objectives. Their influence could play a significant role in updating Iran's security concept, both in the period leading up to the end of Khamenei's rule and especially in the era following his death.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen