



Why Deterrence Failed on October 7, 2023?

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“Statesmen and warriors ...pick their way through the dark.”¹

Israeli policymakers have relied on cumulative deterrence strategies to combat terrorism. However, Israel has consistently failed to deter Hamas’ attacks, not only on October 7 but also in 2008-09, 2012, 2014, and 2021. A critical yet often overlooked observation is that cumulative deterrence strategies coupled with robust denial capabilities can lead to an attrition trap, which serves as a victory strategy for weaker actors, ultimately resulting in deterrence failure rather than success. This article employs lessons from cases of both successful and failed deterrence in a longitudinal study of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It argues, firstly, that in challenging contests of resolve, actors can escape the attrition trap when they move beyond cumulative deterrence strategies and employ land maneuvers that systematically target the strategies of terrorist organizations, thus addressing the credibility problem. Secondly, such wars can potentially lead to overextension and further wars of attrition, which means defenders must know when to stop and disengage, ensuring the balance of legitimacy and resolve remains favorable to them. This paper asserts that Hamas remained undeterred throughout the conflict because Israel viewed reliance on cumulative deterrence strategies and its robust denial capability, the Iron Dome, as less costly than engaging in a war of maneuver, which was essential to resolving Israel’s credibility issue regarding its willingness to act.

Key Words: Deterrence Theory, Deterring Terrorism, Deterrence Credibility, Cumulative Deterrence, Conversion Problem, Israel, Hamas, Hezbollah, PLO/PA

The Puzzle

Why did Israeli deterrence against Hamas fail on October 7, 2023, leading to one of its most disastrous deterrence failures? Is deterrence an elusive concept, or did Israel execute a flawed

deterrence strategy, leading Hamas to imagine that it could attack and achieve a *fait accompli*, rapidly conquering territory and weakening Israel in a broader war of attrition? (Eldar, 2024b, pp. 327-331).

Such failures have always puzzled deterrence theorists, particularly given the imbalance of power between Hamas and Israel. Patrick M. Morgan observed that despite the universal character of deterrence and the great effort scholars have put into understanding it, “[w]e do not completely understand how it works.” On one of the most fundamental aspects of deterrence—credibility—Morgan commented, “[w]e are not clear about how credibility comes to be attached to deterrence threats.” According to him, “deterrence is imperfect; it doesn’t consistently work and...is not sufficiently consistent to be fully captured by our theoretical apparatus and empirical studies,” (Morgan, 2003, pp. 285, 292, 286), and therefore it is not a reliable tool of statecraft.

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Lt.-Gen. Aviv Kochavi, Israel’s previous Chief of Staff, echoed this sentiment when he argued, for example, that deterrence is “an elusive concept subject to the cruel judgment of the time,”² when wondering if the 2021 Operation Guardian of the Walls would translate into “strategic and political achievements” where “whatever was will not be” (Ahronheim, 2021b). The sense that deterrence is an elusive concept is reinforced because deterrence policies in the Arab-Israeli conflict have produced seemingly puzzling results. Winning a decisive war of maneuver led to a long period of successful deterrence after the 1956 Sinai campaign, but after the more formidable victory in the Six Day War in 1967, deterrence against Egypt held for only a very short period. Cumulative deterrence campaigns have failed to achieve strategic deterrence success against Hamas in Operation Cast Lead (2008-9), Operation

Pillar of Defense (2012), Operation Protective Edge (2014), and Operation Guardian of the Walls (2021), and against Hezbollah until 2006. In addition, offensive maneuvers failed in Operation Accountability (1993) and Operation Grapes of Wrath (1996) while producing success in the Second Lebanon War in 2006, a war many Israeli analysts argued Israel “lost.” Cumulative deterrence campaigns also failed to produce deterrence success against the PLO, but wars of maneuver led, over time, to major changes in the organization’s approach to the conflict. After the First Lebanon War in 1982, the PLO began to consider a two-state solution, and after the Second Intifada, the PA abandoned terrorism. (Lieberman, 2013, 2019).

The more recent terrorism deterrence literature does not help us to better understand these seemingly puzzling outcomes. Skeptics have long argued that terrorist organizations are not deterrable because the attrition strategies they choose empower them, while stronger defenders are constrained from using their overwhelming power to establish a credible deterrence threat. “Marginalists,” on the other hand, argue that the use of cumulative deterrence strategies, denial and punishment, could lead to deterrence successes but only against some actors, some of the crisis-bargaining time.

In the absence of a clearer theoretical framework that can explain how deterrence works, how strategic deterrence success can be achieved and how we could account for the seemingly puzzling outcomes noted above, Israeli policy-makers, disillusioned by the prospects of defeating terrorism, continue to rely on “serial deterrence,” “cumulative deterrence,” or “mowing the grass” strategies (Inbar, 2014, pp. 65-90), and continue to engage in repeated military campaigns “whose logic is deterrence.” (Bidetz and Adamsky, 2014, pp. 1-52.)

Recent scholarship began to search for theoretical answers to explain how deterrence can be achieved within limited conflicts. Shmuel

Gordon (Gordon, 2004, p. 189), Yadai and Ortal (Yadai & Ortal, 2013, p. 21), Bidatz and Adamsky (2014, p. 27), and Moni Chorev (Chorev, 2016, p. 8) urged the improvement of research on deterrence to better understand the conversion problem from military campaigns to deterrence success. This paper joins the effort to develop a theoretical framework able to explain the puzzling deterrence outcomes. It departs from earlier important work by observing that situations of extended attrition are an indication of general deterrence failure, and the use of coercive and costly signals, in the form of cumulative deterrence, are not the appropriate strategy to reestablish deterrence. A broader perspective that studies the interactions between victory in war, coercion credibility, the attrition trap, strategy, wars of resolve and wars about capability, disengagement, and diplomacy would provide the necessary framework for properly understanding the conversion process from battlefield outcomes to deterrence stability. (Adamsky, 2017, pp. 157-184). A different strategy is needed to escape extended attrition situations, which are an attrition trap and the winning strategy of Non-State-Actors (NSAs), as the events leading to the October 2023 deterrence failure against Hamas demonstrate.

In the next section, a short theoretical overview of the deterrence literature is presented (see also Lupovici, 2024, pp. 60-80). The theoretical section is followed by brief historical illustrations of deterrence puzzles in the Arab-Israeli conflict, suggesting the need for a revised model of deterrence that addresses many unresolved issues in the theory. The revised deterrence model is then examined in the Israeli-Hamas longitudinal interaction, describing the deterrence equation that developed over time between the actors and the reason why Israel was not able to successfully create strategic deterrence against Hamas, as it did, for example, in the PLO and Hezbollah cases. The conclusion argues that the failure of Israel to properly apply deterrence

in a manner that is logically consistent with the tenets of deterrence theory, combined with the political incentives to develop a conception that deterrence was working, led to the October 7 deterrence failure.

Current Models of Deterrence

Deterrence theory contains a clear set of propositions with an explanatory framework that specifies the requirements for deterrence success and failure (Jervis 1979, Lupovici 2010, Knopf, 2012). At its core, deterrence is an influence strategy that uses threats to convince an adversary that the cost of a particular action would outweigh the benefits. Deterrence works only if the threat to punish is coupled with the promise to refrain from such action if the potential challenger does not attack (Jervis, 2009, p. 136). Deterrence succeeds when the adversary, realizing that the costs outweigh the benefits, refrains from action (Achen & Snidal, 1989). Success depends on how credible the threat is (Kilgour & Zagare, 1991), which in turn depends on the defender's capability, interest, and reputation for toughness or resolve (Kaufmann, 1954, p. 19).

If deterrence has failed, then a defender attempts to compel the adversary, through acts of denial (Snyder, 1959) and punishment, to stop the undertaken challenge and change a course of action (Bowen, 2004, p. 58). Successful coercion requires the use of military force to accentuate threats and to induce desired behavior (Schelling, 1980, p. 9; Wilner, 2015, pp. 17-18).

Some advocate that coercion be severe in magnitude (Steinberg, 2001, pp. 1-6), cultivating, among other things, a reputation for being able to go "crazy," introducing an element of unpredictability (Malka, 2008, p. 17), while others argue that the certainty of punishment is more critical than its magnitude (Bar, 2008, p. 40). Some argue that coercion should only include the "use of limited military force...for manipulative or demonstrative purposes..." (Wilner, 2015, p. 17) to unsettle the challenger's

decision-making calculus (Mueller, 1998, p. 184). Compellence succeeds when the challenger stops his attack in response to the deterrer's coercive measures.

Two frameworks in the new terrorism deterrence literature, the skeptics and the marginalists, attempt to understand how deterrence theory applies to terrorist groups and NSAs that employ terrorism. Skeptics argue that in asymmetric deterrence situations, NSAs are not deterrable. Marginalists argue that some deterrence success could be achieved at the "fringes" of terrorist behavior (Payne, Scheber, Guthe, & Storer, 2012).

Hans Delbruck, one of the first modern military historians, captured the essence of the asymmetric deterrence relationship between the state and the NSA by observing that the weaker side chooses attrition, leading to exhaustion over many battles rather than defeat in one, and it is empowered by this strategy. The stronger side, on the other hand, is unable to choose annihilation, its preferred strategy, undermining its ability to establish a credible deterrence threat (Craig, 1986, pp. 341-342).

According to skeptics, NSAs win the war by designing attrition strategies that create a fight over the staying power of the state and not the state's military power, entangling the state in a contest of resolve (Toft, 2009, p. 209; Paul, Morgan & Wirtz, 2009). Terrorist organizations blur the distinction between their military organization and the civilian population within which they are embedded; they disappear from the battlefield and their warfighting strategy leads to large civilian casualties. This, in turn, undermines the state's legitimacy to use its overwhelming power when the state retaliates (Adler, 2009, pp. 85-86).

Marginalists, on the other hand, argue that the use of cumulative deterrence (Almog, 2004), "resolve plus bombs" (Bowen, Knopf & Moran, 2020), and denial strategies (Wilner & Wegner, 2021; Smith, 2012) lead to tactical successes which at some point, convert to strategic success (Wenger & Wilner, 2012). Terrorist organizations

learn they cannot win and eventually give up on being able to achieve their goals (Freedman, 2004, pp. 39, 123-24). According to marginalists, denial has become the cornerstone of deterring terrorism, trumping punishment, and, according to Alex Wilner, "deterrence is increasingly about practicing denial" (Wilner, 2021, p. 43).

The causal mechanism responsible for the conversion from acts of denial and punishment to deterrence success in the marginalist literature, is the concept of cumulative deterrence. The state uses continuous tit-for-tat engagements through the coercive phase of the intra-war deterrence interaction—punishment, targeted killing, retaliation, and disproportionate escalation, as well as serial acts of denial—developing specific infrastructure defenses and restricting easy access to soft targets, to convince the NSAs of the futility of its behavior (Bar, 2012, p. 207).

These models, as we shall see, contain many unresolved issues. For example, they do not employ a longitudinal research design and thereby fail to find empirical support for cases of strategic deterrence success. They also fail to properly identify what solves the credibility problem and what leads to a successful conversion from military engagements to deterrence stability. And, they cannot offer solutions for how a defender could escape the attrition trap, which defenders enter, ironically, because of the current model's recommendations on how to create deterrence—the use of cumulative deterrence strategies.

Israel's Deterrence and Coercion Practices: A Brief Historical Review of Cases of Success and Failure

The Arab-Israeli conflict contains many cases of deterrence failures and successes, and an abridged scrutiny of some of the cases suggests some general patterns that can form the building blocks of a theoretical framework to address many of the issues in the current deterrence literature. The crisis-bargaining case between Israel and Egypt, leading to the 1956

War, illustrates the credibility problem and the nature of costly signals necessary to reestablish deterrence not only between states but, as we shall see, between states and NSAs as well. In the period leading to the 1956 Sinai war, Egypt challenged Israel with a blockade, low-level warfare and border crossings, and Israel responded with public threats, deployment of forces, retaliation, and escalation, culminating in the famous Gaza Raid in February 1955. Israeli retaliatory acts demonstrated Israel's superior military capability; the Gaza Raid was a humiliating defeat for Nasser, and the escalation increased Egypt's political and military costs. Israeli retaliation had a profound impact on the Egyptian leadership because it undermined the domestic and international standing of the Egyptian regime. Yet, the Egyptian challenge did not rescind. Nasser did not believe the Israeli threat that it would not tolerate continued infiltrations and would eventually escalate and cross the brink of outright war.

In the absence of shared knowledge about capability and will, Nasser believed that the balance of power at the time, between the end of the 1948 war and the Egyptian–Czech and Israeli–French arms deal in late 1955, was equal. Given the perceived parity, Egypt interpreted the Israeli signals as an attempt to bluff by projecting power and did not believe that Israel had the capability or the resolve to go over the brink. Towards the end of 1956, the Israeli defense establishment realized the limits of both denial and punishment and concluded that the “chapter of night-time reprisal operations” was at its end (Handel, 1973, p. 24). Israel had to go to war in 1956 to teach Egypt about its capability and resolve, to stop the infiltrations. As a result of the war, deterrence held for eleven years, until 1967, even though Nasser came under tremendous pressure to challenge Israel during this period. He refrained, admitting publicly that he could not do so: “It will be no shame if we come out and say that we cannot today use force” (Kerr, 1971, pp. 99-100). Land manoeuvre was a significant element of this deterrence

success. When Nasser did challenge deterrence, as was the case in the Rotem Crisis in 1960 (Bar-Joseph, 1996, pp. 547-566), a symbolic coercive Israeli mobilization reestablished deterrence.

When Malcolm Kerr says, in discussing Nasser's dilemma during the 1964 Cairo Summit, that “almost worse than military defeat would be the shame of doing nothing to help Syria or Jordan. Nothing could so delight the Ba'ath as to see Nasser deflated” (Kerr, 1971, p. 98), he provides evidence that Nasser, at that meeting as well as throughout the 1950s and 1960s, was under great pressure to challenge Israel in order to avoid losing face in the Arab world. Yet Nasser chose not to challenge deterrence despite the high costs of inaction. In his many public speeches Nasser admits publicly that he could not challenge Israel due to its credible threat. Thus, evidence for deterrence success exists even when behavioral traces, non-attack, are absent.

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A theoretical observation that emerges from this example is that the credibility problem is the crux of the deterrence problem and that its resolution cannot be obtained through coercion or the use of cumulative deterrence, in the absence of a prior military victory. Thus, credibility, defined as the likelihood that Israel would follow through on its threat to use force, if necessary, was lacking before the 1956 war. According to Lebow, making threats credible depends on the defender having the capability, the interest, and the reputation for resolve (Lebow & Stein, 2007, p. 123). But, as Wilner correctly points out, “deterrence does not just happen” (Wilner, 2015, p. 9). The Sinai campaign of 1956 made it happen and suggests the need to examine which one of the causal mechanisms

that theoretically lead to the resolution of the credibility problem is more important: coercion or land maneuver.

The leaders here were unaware of, or miscalculated, the balance of interests and resolve, and so this case illustrates the need for war to resolve the credibility problem and achieve deterrence. Despite Janice Stein's (Stein, 2012, p. 64) claim that the purpose of force is war and not deterrence, the evidence in this case suggests that even cumulative deterrence strategies—costlier signals than ultimatums, troop mobilization and troop movement—were not sufficient to resolve the credibility problem and maneuver was necessary. Defeat in war not only negated the fighting ability of the adversary,³ but it also resolved the credibility problem with respect to capabilities or resolve. Thomas Schelling makes a similar observation about the credibility of coercion before and after defeat in war. Schelling argued that credibility must be demonstrated. Coercion, according to him, occurs after the use of brute force and defeat (Schelling, 1966, pp. 1-34). War is thus logically within the scope of deterrence theory because it serves an important integral function to deterrence—it solves the credibility problem. Observed longitudinally, strategic learning about credibility becomes one of the causal mechanisms that explains how a deterrence interaction evolves and changes over time.

Further evidence exists for the argument that cumulative deterrence strategies in the form of denial and punishment against the PLO in Egypt, Syria, Jordan or Lebanon, also did not lead to deterrence stability. While many lower-level denial and punishment strategies were used in pursuit of direct and indirect deterrence, only major dramatic escalations involving maneuvers that targeted the PLO's strategy of attrition enabled Israel to undermine the PLO/PA and convince it to abandon its approach. What was critical to success was the use of maneuver on the battlefield, targeting and defeating the various Palestinian strategies employed over the years (Honig & Yahel, 2019). These included:

The Vietnamese and Algerian models of popular insurgency in the 1950s and 1960s culminating in the strategy of entanglement of Arab states in the conflict in 1967; the state-within-state strategy of using terrorism from neighboring countries, first in Jordan in the 1970s and later in Lebanon in 1982;⁴ and finally the strategy of popular uprising in the two Intifadas ending the Second Intifada only after Operation Defensive Shield ensued. In the Second Intifada, for example, Ariel Sharon realized that a strategy based on cumulative deterrence was not sufficient (Ganor, 2021, pp. 200, 215-16). In 2002, Sharon concluded that a major offensive was necessary to target terrorist infrastructure, and this necessitated a reoccupation of PA territory. Operation Defensive Shield was approved, Israel demonstrated its capability and willingness to fight in the refugee camps, and it changed the rules of the game, enabling a transformation in the PA's strategy as well as that of Hamas.

It is important to explain the theoretical logic behind the reason that land maneuver is a significant element in deterrence success. In difficult contests of resolve in asymmetric deterrence situations, the challenger is highly motivated to challenge, as demonstrated by the general deterrence failure. The defender's credibility fails to deter. Cumulative deterrence strategies in the form of degradation of the enemy's capabilities and its physical assets do not solve the credibility problem, leaving the state in an attrition trap. According to James Fearon, even if the defender's costly signals to resist with force might be credible during the crisis phase of the interaction, they are least likely to have an effect. In his analysis of the interaction between general and immediate deterrence, Fearon argues that a failure of general deterrence suggests that the challenger is highly motivated and is willing to assume the risks of the challenge even if the defender's threat is credible. According to his analysis, "defenders' immediate deterrence threats will tend to be most credible indicators of intentions in cases where they are most likely

to fail” (Fearon, 2002, p. 15). If general deterrence failed, coercive acts by the defender during the crisis phase of the interaction are unlikely to have an effect.

A decisive victory through maneuver, on the other hand, undermines the challengers’ strategy. The state forces the terrorist organization to fight a different kind of war where the logic of the war favors the state’s objectives, enabling the state to undermine the terrorist organization’s goals and strategy. Land maneuver forces the terrorist organization out of its hiding places to confront the state’s power (Tira, 2008). Identifying the terrorist organization’s critical centers of gravity and attacking them with massive ground forces would overwhelm the organization and force it to lose many of an NSA’s advantages, such as tactics of evasion and disappearance from the battlefield by embedding itself within the civilian population. By forcing the terrorist organization to fight a ground war, the state can impose its logic of the war on the contest and win it. The state changes the structure of the deterrence equation from a situation where cumulative deterrence strategies target the cost calculus of the challenger to a situation where maneuver targets the attrition strategy of the challenger.

A similar pattern can be found with respect to Hezbollah. In the 1990s, Hezbollah managed to impose a set of “rules of the game” on Israel, where limitations were placed on Israel’s ability to employ its military advantage. The “rules of the game” were the product of the balance of resolve and the introduction of Katyusha rockets (Sobelman, 2019). As long as Israel was an occupying power in Lebanon, investing in denial, the balance of resolve favored Hezbollah. It could use the legitimacy of “liberating Lebanon” to sustain its resilience and impose limits on Israeli escalation by threatening retaliation against Israeli civilians in Northern Israel. Thus, Hezbollah was able to limit Israel’s ability to dominate the escalation ladder, which was necessary for the reestablishment of deterrence.

The land maneuvers in Operation Accountability in 1993 and Operation Grapes of Wrath in 1996 did not lead to stability. Once Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000, the balance of resolve changed in Israel’s favor, creating the conditions for the establishment of deterrence stability by freeing it from the limits on escalation (Lieberman, 2008, pp. 317-355).

Nassrallah understood the strategic implications of the Israeli withdrawal. It was a major turning point, which changed the deterrence equation by recalibrating the balance of resolve: Israelis were now fighting to defend their homeland, and Hezbollah fighters were no longer fighting to liberate Lebanon. The number of attacks on Israeli forces dropped drastically, and Hezbollah’s continued attacks were limited to the disputed Shebaa Farms area (Zisser, 2009).

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The pattern where maneuver leads to deterrence success must be modified, then, by the need to balance victory in war with overextension. When the state engages in a war to address its credibility problem, the state must be mindful of the fact that such wars could lead to overextension and further wars of attrition, which are the winning war strategy of NSAs. States, then, need to know when to stop and disengage. Proceeding beyond the point of initial successes leads to a greater risk of friction because capturing or holding on to territory leads to a different balance of resolve, enabling the defeated party to resort to a war of liberation and resistance.

After the successful war against the PLO in 1982, Israel continued to hold on to Lebanese territory, creating a deterrence trap from which it could not easily extricate itself. R. R. Palmer

observed that Frederick the Great understood the importance of a balance between aggressive military action, manifested in quick, decisive victories, tempered by constraint and inactivity. Frederick the Great was mindful of the issue of resolve, and he advocated quick, short wars that do not extend beyond the reach of the nation's frontiers (Palmer, 1986, p. 96).

Once the state finds itself in an overextended situation, Raymond Aron advised leaders to “[g]ive voluntarily what one finally must concede” (Aron, 2002, pp. 427-28). This supports the logic of Israel's unilateral withdrawal in 2000, where, according to Aron, if a state disengages voluntarily and not under the pressure of terrorism, it will feel it has won and was not defeated. Disengagement changes the nature of the conflict from a contest of resolve back to a contest of capability, enabling an easier resolution of the credibility problem. Disengagement undermines the NSA's strategy and enables the defending state to escape the attrition trap. Disengagement affects the NSAs' ability to fight a war whose character is attrition, where they hold the upper hand.

The Second Lebanon War in 2006, a war of maneuver which many argued Israel lost by not winning (Malka, 2008), solidified the deterrence equation created by the 2000 unilateral withdrawal and erased the reputation of irresolution developed in the 2000-2006 period. In the 2006 war, Israel re-established its credibility by demonstrating its resolve to escalate and respond disproportionately to Hezbollah's challenges while also fighting against Hamas. Nasrallah himself admitted that deterrence can be established and sustained but that containment undermined deterrence, in his famous statement: “We did not think, even one percent, that the capture would lead to a war at this time and of this magnitude. You ask me, if I had known on July 11 ... that the operation would lead to such a war, would I do it? I say no, absolutely not.” (CBS News, 2006). This case also sheds light on the nature of victory. Victory must not be decisive but must resolve

the problem of credibility, whether of capability or will. Deterrence held on the Lebanese border for 17 years.

The issue of over-extension and the impact this has on the nature of war can also be observed in the Israeli victories against Egypt in 1956 as opposed to 1967. The victory against Egypt in 1956 led to 11 years of deterrence stability, while a more formidable defeat in 1967 led to only a few months of success. Victory leads to stability when the defender does not overextend, as was the case in the Sinai campaign in 1956, and it changes the nature of war from a contest of capability to a contest of resolve when the defender does not withdraw, as was the case after the Six Day War in 1967, leading to a different set of credibility requirements to be resolved.

Alexander L. George's and Richard Smoke's (George & Smoke, 1974, pp. 400-403) argument that challengers learn to design around the defender's threat, to get around the defender's deterrence, leading to further deterrence failures, does not prove that deterrence is elusive but actually the opposite—that it is having an effect, that the opponent is learning from being deterred and reacting to it, and therefore further deterrence efforts will likely be effective too, narrowing the range of available winning strategies for the challenger. Defeating the “design around” strategies of Egypt in the all-out war in 1967, the War of Attrition in 1969, and the limited-aims-strategy in the 1973 war, created strategic deterrence stability and the shift to a solution of the conflict through diplomacy.

Further evidence that strategic learning about credibility becomes one of the causal mechanisms that explains deterrence success, can be gleaned from a rare audio recording featuring Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, and other Arab leaders, in which Nasser acknowledged that the Arab world lacked the military capability to confront Israel. (Shuster, 2025). As we noted above, a similar pattern exists in the PLO/PA case.

Another empirical observation to emerge from these cases is that challengers, states and NSAs alike, can erode the defender's reputation for capability or resolve through less costly trials, salami tactics and attrition, while the reestablishment of a reputation for capability and will to solve the credibility problem requires a disproportionate response that may be costly and lacks international and/or domestic legitimacy. This was the case in the period after Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, when Israel did not capitalize on the new deterrence equation and used a policy of containment between 2000-2006, developing a reputation for weakness within a strategy of cumulative deterrence. The same pattern repeated itself against Hezbollah and Hamas in the period leading to the 2023 war. Pre-emptive maintenance of reputation for capability and will are the "security dilemma's" imperative (Herz, 1950). During these periods when Israel used a strategy of containment, it did not follow one of the classic imperatives of survival in an anarchic world. The security dilemma tells us that even when two status quo powers arm themselves, at some point, the actors become suspicious of each other's intentions, and preemptive considerations take over. Adversary's intentions are difficult to discern, and so were Hamas' and Hezbollah's, and the buildup of their forces should have been a fallback indicator for intentions.

Lastly, investment in denial mechanisms in isolation from other strategies leads not to deterrence success but to further failure. In the Hezbollah case, we saw that an investment in denial, the security zone, backfired, creating an attrition trap that undermined Israel's ability to resolve its credibility problem. In the Hamas case, we find that the Iron Dome also led to deterrence failure because, paradoxically, its military success enabled Israel to tolerate the less costly rounds of warfare. Successful denial undermined the need to contemplate costlier methods to reestablish deterrence.

These brief historical illustrations from an earlier study of deterrence between states and NSAs in the Arab-Israeli conflict illustrate the mistakes Israel has made in its application of deterrence, as well as the shortcomings of the main theoretical frameworks in the terrorism deterrence literature. First, conventional deterrence success, against states and terrorist organizations alike, can be achieved once the credibility problem of capability and will is solved through land manoeuvres that serially target the strategy of the NSA. Cumulative deterrence strategies, on the other hand, lead to an attrition trap, which is the winning strategy of the NSA. Coercion works only after victory. And denial strategies lead, paradoxically, not to deterrence success but to failure. Second, because land maneuver could lead to costly overextension and an attrition trap—which is the winning war strategy of a weak challenger state and NSA—the defender needs to know when to stop and disengage. These revised theoretical perspectives will be examined next in the Israeli-Hamas case, leading to the 2023 deterrence failure.

Israel-Hamas: The Failure of Deterrence Campaigns, 2006-2023

The earlier periods in the Israeli-Hamas interaction, 1978 to 2006, from the time the Israeli authorities sanctioned Sheikh Yassin's organization *al-Mujama al-Islami* to the year when Hamas won the election after Israel unilaterally withdrew from Gaza, are less relevant to our current analysis. This period was marred by deterrence failures throughout the al-Aqsa intifada and ended with the Israeli Defensive Shield offensive campaign, which led to a major change in the deterrence equation. In this period, Hamas did not yet have control over territory and population, making the achievement of deterrence difficult, as skeptics predict. Hamas' goal was to establish itself as a major contender for the leadership position within the Palestinian national movement, and

it used terror to undermine Fatah's credibility and solidify its own. The terror attacks enabled Hamas to build its resistance credentials in the popular imagination by cleansing itself from the initial period of cooperation with Israel.

Hamas' goal was to use force to replace Israel with a Palestinian state, which enabled it to undermine the PLO's efforts to create a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza through diplomatic means. Israel's use of cumulative deterrence empowered Hamas and weakened the PLO, which was not able to stop the terror attacks. This, in turn, undermined the Israeli public's support for a peace process. Thus, retaliatory acts by Israel only served to strengthen the organization and undermine deterrence as skeptics would predict. Only after Operation Defensive Shield in 2002, the building of the separation wall between Israel and the West Bank, and a series of targeted killings aimed at the Hamas leadership, did the violence subside. The PA abandoned terrorism altogether (Ganor, 2021, pp. 226-230), and Hamas agreed to abandon the use of suicide bombings in return for the cessation of targeted killings by Israel after the assassination of Ahmed Yasin (Eldar, 2024b, p. 140).

Hamas holds an extreme religious ideology whose aim is the destruction of the state of Israel. This goal is to be achieved through a long-term war of attrition, allowing for setbacks in the process.

After Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 and Hamas' victory in the 2006 Palestinian legislative election, Hamas took over Gaza and became the dominant force in the strip, changing the nature of the deterrence equation for Israel. Hamas holds an extreme religious ideology whose aim is the destruction of the state of Israel. This goal is to be achieved through a long-term war of attrition, allowing for setbacks in the process. Improving the economic conditions in Gaza to improve Hamas' governing legitimacy were secondary goals and

included demands for enlarged fishing zones, open border crossings, access to funds to pay government officials, demands that Hamas felt legitimized short military campaigns to force Israel's hand. Hamas' military losses in these campaigns were presented as temporary setbacks, which demonstrated the willingness of the leadership and the people to make sacrifices in pursuit of the goal.

Hamas used its advantages as a terrorist organization by following the skeptic's school model skillfully, turning its weaknesses into powerful components of its military strength. It organized its troops in small military groups that could fight independently, thus depriving Israel of the ability to bring about an easy collapse of Hamas's center of gravity. Hamas also concentrated its troops in built-up areas and embedded itself in the civilian population, making it difficult for Israel to identify Hamas' military forces. When Israel was able to target these forces, civilian casualties undermined Israel's standing in the international community, putting pressure on Israel's ability to use force. Hamas' military performed a classic disappearing act from the battlefield, making it difficult for Israeli troops to destroy them.

To compensate for Israel's superior airpower capabilities, Hamas built a network of tunnels that protected it from the Israeli attacks. The tunnels also provided opportunities to enable offensive plans or to signal a costly defense in case Israeli troops invaded the strip. Hamas' asymmetric war strategy was, in the case of an Israeli invasion, to use guerrilla warfare to inflict heavy casualties on Israeli forces. The strategic goals were to inflict pain and, should such an invasion occur, undermine the Israeli will to remain in the strip.

High-trajectory weapons, such as Kassam missiles, served to hold the Israeli population hostage. This component of capability was augmented by special forces that could infiltrate into Israel and capture or kill soldiers and civilians. Thus, Hamas adopted a classic strategy of asymmetric warfare where it refrained from

meeting the Israeli forces on the battlefield and forced the IDF to fight a different kind of war, which was a contest of resolve instead of a contest of capabilities, in which Israel would have the upper hand. Hamas controlled the nature of the war—a war of attrition on the resolve of the state (Tira, 2008).

Some changes took place during this period, shedding light on whether Hamas could be considered a deterrable organization. Hamas' initial grand strategy in the first period, 1978-2006, was to maintain a balance of terror against Israel, using suicide bombings and later missiles, always being mindful of not crossing the brink. Self-preservation was important. Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela argued that Hamas treaded carefully between its religious and political aspirations and was mindful of its need to survive. Ahmed Yasin advocated for controlled violence tempered by restraint so as not to imperil the organization's survival (Mishal & Sela, 1999).

After the end of the al-Aqsa Intifada, the political wing used back channels to ascertain the extent to which Israel would be willing to consider a long-term Hudna. Khaled Mashal and Ahmed Jabari toyed with a draft proposal for a long-term ceasefire with Israel (Eldar, 2024b, p. 22). However, the balance of power between the political and military wings shifted in the second period to the military wing. Ahmed Jabari's kidnapping of Gilad Shalit and the negotiations for his release were the first act in this direction. By 2017, the military wing under Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Deif had taken over the leadership of Hamas.

Sinwar and Deif developed a new military doctrine that called for a transition from defense to offense, and in the case of an Israeli invasion of Gaza, the tactic of defeating Israeli forces entering the strip through a war of attrition. It also created the Nukhba forces, a commando-style force for special operations. The strategy relied on attrition, creating an attrition trap that would cause Israel to disintegrate over time from within. While this shift suggests that

Hamas became less deterrable over time, the question remains whether a different Israeli strategy could have enabled the creation of a more stable deterrence.

While Hamas became stronger militarily during this period, Israel became weaker in some respects. In response to the enormous military buildup of forces, which took place after the 1973 war, leading to the "lost decade" in the Israeli economy in the 1970s and 1980s, Israel adjusted its military strategy, placing greater emphasis on intelligence, air force, and technology. The Israeli army was molded into a small, lean, and deadly machine, which could engage and destroy its adversaries from afar (Harel, 2024a). The ground forces, on the other hand, were cut back. The military budget fell throughout the 2000s, and many tank and artillery divisions were cut. In addition, and most importantly, the Israeli war strategy shifted from placing high priority on quick, decisive offensive victories to the defense, engaging enemy forces from a distance. The "war between wars" became a middle-range strategy that used offensive elements of warfare but was defensive (Finkel, 2024, p. 6). This strategy of containment, as we shall see, did not produce decisive military outcomes. These changes were aligned with Israeli society's aversion to casualties. Thus, Israel undermined its ability to resolve its credibility problem.

The changes were reflected in the military campaigns between Israel and Hamas. Israel tried to undermine Hamas' strategy of attrition using deterrence operations or rounds of warfare. This was a classic marginalist school causal mechanism—cumulative deterrence or "resolve plus bombs" (Chorev, 2016, p. 38; Laish, 2019; Ortal, 2024, p. 12). This pattern could be seen in 2009, when, in response to rocket attacks by Hamas, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert launched Operation Cast Lead; in November 2012, when Netanyahu embarked on Operation Pillar of Defense; and in 2014 and 2021 when he launched Operation Protective Edge and Operation Guardian of the Walls respectively.

The goal of these operations was to restore deterrence by using “cumulative deterrence,” denial and punishment, strategies that hit Hamas forces hard. Israel targeted Hamas military infrastructure as well as fighters and commanders, hoping that the cost would alter Hamas’ cost-benefit calculus and encourage it to agree to a ceasefire. Ground operations were a threat held in reserve in case Hamas continued fighting.

The dilemma Israel encountered in these deterrence operations was that Hamas continued to fight, forcing Israel to consider a ground invasion. The threat to engage in ground invasions lacked credibility because, short of confronting Hamas in urban areas or the tunnels, they had little military effect. Hamas fighters withdrew to urban areas and into the tunnels and continued to harass Israeli forces on the ground, raising the risk of high Israeli casualties. Furthermore, Israeli attacks in urban areas triggered international resistance to the war and put pressure on Israel to either limit the amount of force used or to stop the campaign altogether.

Thus, in Operation Cast Lead, for example, Israeli soldiers were sent into Gaza to continue the military pressure. But short of engaging Hamas fighters embedded in built-up areas, a costly engagement, they were unable to find valuable targets and had to withdraw to avoid losses. The same was the case in Operation Pillar of Defense and in Operation Protective Edge.

Operation Protective Edge illustrated the Israeli reluctance to use its ground forces, signaling a weakness of will, which undermined its ability to resolve the credibility problem. The operation’s goals were like other operations: to restore deterrence by hitting Hamas’ military capabilities hard. Israel used massive firepower to target Hamas’ military installations and infrastructure, and at the same time, it prepared its ground forces for a ground maneuver in case deterrence was not established using firepower only. Ground troops were not used.

In the most recent serious major round of fighting, the 2021 Operation Guardian of the Walls, the Israeli victory wasn’t decisive either, since structural elements remained unchanged despite changes in the display of force and tactics used by both sides. Israel denied Hamas and Jihad missile and rocket production capabilities, it undermined their subterranean domain, and destroyed air and naval capabilities. Israel also killed many of Hamas’ military leaders, and most of their attacks were thwarted before they were carried out. The Iron Dome had a 90% success interception rate, denying Hamas any meaningful military success (BBC, 2023). Hamas, nevertheless, remained undeterred and continued to use the threat of renewed warfare to force Israel to comply with its demands.

In all these operations, the Israeli leadership tried to achieve a better deterrence outcome by tinkering with tactical elements within these deterrence operations. It tried to attack hard and rapidly, early in the campaign, as it did in Operation Pillars of Defense and Operation Guardian of the Walls. Israel also engaged in a graduated escalation that used unilateral ceasefires, as in Operation Protective Edge. It also tried the use of ground forces, as in Operation Cast Lead (Chorev, 2016, pp. 38-45). But Israel was never able to resolve the conversion problem in deterrence, finding the military mechanisms that would lead to strategic deterrence stability. Cumulative deterrence strategies did not enable Israel to convert its military campaigns into longer-term strategic deterrence stability. The marginalist school prediction fails to explain why cumulative deterrence did not produce more than tactical, temporary periods of stability.

The idea of using limited ground operations was discussed in Israeli military circles. Recall that this is one of the recommendations arising from the theoretical insights, for the solution of the credibility problem and the achievement of deterrence success. During Operation Cast Lead, for example, there was a plan to capture Rafah,

cutting off the strip from the Sinai. Another plan entertained the idea of capturing Gaza City and threatening Hamas rule in the strip (Harel, 2024b). But these plans were never adopted because of concerns about high Israeli casualties eroding domestic legitimacy and high civilian casualties in Gaza causing a loss of international legitimacy. The credibility problem regarding resolve remained unsolved, and deterrence continued to be elusive. Using Morgan's and Fearon's distinction between general and immediate deterrence (Morgan, 2003, Ch. 3; Fearon, 2002), we find in these cases that Hamas challenged general deterrence not because Israel's threat was credible, but because Israel's threat during the crisis stage lacked credibility: Israel was unwilling to escalate and seek victory through maneuver. Cumulative costly signals during the crisis phase were not costly enough to deter further immediate deterrence failures.

The reluctance to use ground forces can be seen most glaringly in the May 2021 operation. One of the plans for that round was to initiate a ground maneuver that would push Hamas fighters to seek shelter in the tunnels and then strike those tunnels and kill many Hamas fighters. Israel did not send in the ground troops; Hamas fighters did not go underground, and the operational goals were not achieved (Azulay, 2023).

When Israel became aware that Hamas' goals were not just continued rounds of warfare but a costly invasion that would lead to high civilian casualties and the kidnapping of hostages, Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman advocated a preventive attack in December 2016 (Weitz, 2024; Harel, 2024b). Israeli Prime Minister at the time, Benjamin Netanyahu, would not accept his suggestion, and Lieberman resigned from the government. Under the new national doctrine, Israel preferred to use intelligence, technology, and firepower to engage the enemy from afar, causing massive damage without risking major casualties.

Israel's attempt to use cumulative deterrence strategies played into Hamas' strategy of attrition and were undermined by Hamas' concept of resistance and the power of weakness mechanism—international legitimacy. Israel intended to impose costs on Hamas by targeting the civilian population's will to fight, putting pressure on its leadership to stop such rounds and forcing the leadership to choose governing over resistance. But the civilian population in Gaza was indoctrinated into an ideology of sacrifice and had little in terms of economic conditions to lose.

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Furthermore, the power of weakness mechanism—international legitimacy—was triggered by such Israeli pressure and set limits on Israel's ability to use massive firepower that risked the lives of innocent civilians. Hamas' use of its civilian population as human shields set limits on Israel's ability to use power, forcing it to use tactics such as "knock on the roof," distribution of flyers, calls for the evacuation of civilians, and calibrated use of munitions on targets. All these diminished Israel's ability to use one of the more effective means to achieve deterrence, the threat that the state might "go crazy."

An additional reason for Israel's inability to solve its credibility problem was, paradoxically, its successful denial capabilities, creating the denial-deter paradox. Israel's strong denial capabilities, the Iron Dome missile defense system, kept Israeli casualties low, which in turn

undermined its resolve to escalate and engage in a costly ground campaign of maneuver. The costs of invasion were assumed to be greater than the costs of inaction, and as Herman Kahn reminds us (Kahn, 1961, 1962), offensive threats that can be destructive to oneself, lack credibility. This case reveals an interesting dynamic captured by the tension that exists between strong denial capabilities and deterrence, leading to an inability by the state to address the credibility problem of resolve. We find that denial, which is supposed to trump punishment in the marginalist school of the terrorism deterrence literature, undermined deterrence.

We see then that the classic use of cumulative deterrence, the use of denial and punishment to degrade capabilities, was not sufficient to lead to strategic deterrence success. Israel was unable to use traditional tools of deterrence, such as escalation and maneuver, to create long-term strategic stability. Two months after Operation Guardian of the Walls ended, Hamas fired yet more rockets into Israel, and Israel responded with airstrikes. In a mood of resignation, the Israeli senior brass had reconciled themselves to living with further rounds of conflict (Ahronheim, 2021a). The Israeli establishment's promise that "[w]hat was, no longer is," remained an empty promise. Short of a demonstrative ground invasion, a costly engagement, and potentially the only method to force Hamas to reevaluate its attrition strategy, Israel has resigned itself to further rounds of warfare. Coercion in the absence of victory failed to create deterrence.

Political considerations enforced deterrence dynamics. Israel's goals under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu were to preserve the status quo regarding the Palestinian cause and avoid having to make concessions leading to the creation of a Palestinian state. Thus, for Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu, Hamas became an asset (Schneider, 2023) supported by Qatari money, because the rounds of warfare enabled him to argue that one cannot make concessions to an entity that continues to attack Israel every

few years. The PA, on the other hand, was a liability that was also an asset, in the sense that if the PA was weak and unable to take control of the Palestinian cause, it also was unable to be a true partner for peace. The conception that Hamas was deterrable and the PA was weak served Netanyahu's interests well as long as Hamas adhered to its limited strategy of rounds of warfare, which were tolerable to Israel. According to Shlomo Brom, Deputy National Security adviser, Netanyahu believed that preventing a two-state solution could be achieved by separating Gaza from the West Bank, enabling him to continue to argue that he has no partner for peace (Mazzetti & Bergman, 2023). The deny-deter paradox, the Israeli robust denial capability, enabled this strategy and led to failure rather than success.

Causes of the October 7, 2023 Failure

Why was Hamas undeterred from escalating beyond rounds of warfare by embarking on an offensive strategy that manifested an immediate deterrence failure? And did Hamas miscalculate Israel's capability and resolve to respond so devastatingly to such a challenge? Hamas' political motivations to change the rules of the game and embark on a costly attack that could potentially bring about its destruction are complicated, because we must try and understand the rationality of the attack given the imbalance of power between Israel and Hamas. Most deterrence analysts who challenge the idea that deterrence is a predictable conflict management tool contest the assumption of rationality, especially in cases where weak actors attack much more powerful opponents.

Hamas' goals for the attack can be arranged on a spectrum from rational, nationalist and political, to irrational, messianic and religious (Abusada, 2024). While the nationalist and political goals could have been deterred had Israel had a credible deterrent threat, the religious goals could not. Experts on Hamas are not in agreement on exactly what Sinwar tried to achieve with his October 7 attack. Some

argue that a main goal was derailing the United States-led peace process between Israel and Saudi Arabia, as well as enabling the release of Palestinian prisoners held in Israel (Shani, 2024). A different interpretation of Hamas' goals relies not on its secular-nationalist short-term goals but on its long-term religious beliefs enshrined in the 1988 founding covenant, as well as the 2017 revised charter (Nüsse, 2012; Paz, 1998).⁵ In it, Hamas' religious goals are the destruction of the state of Israel. The attack on October 7, within this interpretation, was another step in a long process of weakening Israel and bringing about its demise, accelerating a process Hamas observed was occurring internally in Israel because of the conflicts over judicial reform.

The attack's main goal was to draw Iran and Hezbollah into a war of attrition against Israel. The goal of weakening Israel seemed rational despite the imbalance of power between Israel and Hamas because Hamas' leaders may have believed, or were led to believe, that the attack would lead to a war of attrition involving additional actors such as Hezbollah, Palestinians in the West Bank, and Iran and its proxies (Yehoshua, 2024). The attack on Israel would have then created a new balance of power as the war progressed. Under these assumptions, Hamas anticipated achieving its goals at the cost of a replay of cumulative deterrence strategies ending in a ceasefire. Israel's weak credibility was not a deterrent.

Michael Milshtein argues that Hamas was less concerned with governing and was guided by its Jihadist tendencies, and Shlomi Eldar argues that Hamas's entire leadership became captive to Sinwar's belief that Hamas could engage Israel in an all-out battle that would bring Israel down. These perspectives are more difficult to reconcile with a rational decision to attack. "The last promise" was a preparation for a battle against Israel that would bring a Palestinian victory over the state of Israel (Milshtein, 2023; Eldar, 2024a).⁶

To deter such an attack, Israel would have had to have a credible threat that, should

such an attack occur, it would have gone on the offensive in a costly war of maneuver. Or to undermine the *fait accompli* attempt, Israel should have had a large defensive force structure on the border.⁷ Neither of these elements of deterrence existed in the period leading to the October 7 attack.

The IDF, while investing heavily in air force, intelligence, and technological prowess, neglected the capabilities needed for land warfare. An army indoctrinated into fighting wars that led to quick, decisive victories became an army that relied on defense and was reluctant to use its ground force. And a small army found it difficult to address the growing demands of other fronts, as was the case in the West Bank at the time, without leaving the southern front exposed. This lesson was not lost on Hamas, and it was one of the reasons that led to the ground attack on October 7, 2023.

The reliance on defensive/denial measures also proved costly. The Iron Dome created a false sense of security as it prevented major casualties in each round of warfare. The highly advanced technological fence also created a false sense of security. While it prevented an underground attack, it failed to prevent an overground attack. Historically, denial mechanisms never provide the solution to a stable deterrence, the Bar-Lev line being just one such example. Defensive mechanisms and the reliance on denial have shortcomings. The absence of full-proof intelligence and a much larger troop configuration to defend against a large-scale attack led to failure against a fast-moving adversary who used new technologies, such as drones, to blind the Israeli area command.

To prevent an attack, Israel would have had to re-establish its reputation for resolve and capability during the many earlier military rounds and deterrence campaigns. Decisively defeating Hamas on the battlefield, even in a limited area in the strip, would have signaled to Hamas that Israel would no longer rely on rounds of warfare and short-term ceasefire agreements and would have the will and capability to

invade Gaza and inflict unacceptable costs on Hamas should Hamas continue to attack. A costly offensive would have forced Hamas to recalculate its approach to deterrence.

Disappearing from the battlefield, embedding itself in the civilian population, and turning the world's public opinion against Israel, set limits on how much power and for how long Israel can use its power to ultimately change the nature of the conflict, playing into Hamas' strategy.

But the years of reliance on defense and the reluctance to use ground forces created an Israeli army that, even after the October attack, was unaware whether its ground forces could reach Hamas command centers in Gaza and how to do it.⁸ Benjamin Netanyahu, on the eve of the Gaza invasion, worried about thousands of Israeli casualties, and some Israeli generals warned him that the IDF would not be able to complete the mission (Ben-Yishai, 2024). Israel's reputation for weakness in this situation was not lost on Hamas' leaders, who were surprised by the Israeli invasion once it began. Hamas expected a replay of Israel's use of cumulative deterrence, imposing high costs through denial and punishment strategies aimed at degradation of capabilities and the continuation of a war of attrition, which is Hamas's winning strategy.

Thus, the Hamas leadership believed that the fundamental strategic deterrence equation described so well by skeptics of deterrence, where Israel, the more powerful actor, could not use its overwhelming power and Hamas, the weaker actor, could change the deterrence equation to its favor by using many power-of-weakness mechanisms, remained unchanged and ensured the success of the attack. Disappearing from the battlefield, embedding itself in the civilian population, and turning the world's public opinion against Israel, set limits on how much power and for how long Israel can use its power to ultimately change the nature

of the conflict, playing into Hamas' strategy. Even losing territory and inviting invasion play into its strategy of attrition.

In some sense, Hamas solved Israel's credibility problem on will and forced its hand to embark on a different strategic response. The high costs Hamas inflicted on Israel on October 7 forced Israel to abandon the failed deterrence equation of cumulative deterrence, which had failed to provide stability. The denial capabilities of the Iron Dome and the security fence, cumulative denial, had also failed. After the October 7 attack, Israel had to invade Gaza and incur major casualties to change the deterrence equation that had been created. As a result of the October 7 attack, and due to the tremendous losses Israel suffered, Israel's resolve to go on the offensive rose. In the war that ensued, Israel managed to destroy Hamas' capabilities, which would make it difficult for Hamas to attack Israel again. But most importantly, Israel taught Hamas, should the organization remain in power after the war, that Israel has the resolve to undermine Hamas' strategy of attrition against Israel and, in new rounds of warfare, Israel would not be deterred from entering Gaza and engaging in a ground war. Hamas' strategy was finally defeated, and our model would predict that deterrence would, if properly maintained, finally be established after the war ends, as it was with the PLO and Hezbollah. Like Nasser and Nasrallah before him, Abu Marzouk admitted that had Hamas known what to expect, it would not have attacked. "If it was expected that what happened would happen, there wouldn't have been October 7" (Rasgon, 2025).

In conclusion, the Israeli-Hamas case, studied longitudinally, suggests that Israel did not manage to establish a credible deterrence threat against Hamas before the October 7 2023 assault, because it did not at any point embark on a war of maneuver, which would have addressed its credibility problem on resolve and transformed the conflict through decisive victory from a war of attrition to a war about

capability. Israel's use of containment and cumulative deterrence, denial and punishment strategies, led to only temporary periods of ceasefire between many rounds of warfare. Unilateral withdrawal, while legitimizing Israeli responses to Hamas' attacks, failed to create the conditions for strategic deterrence due to the absence of an offensive campaign. Paradoxically, Israel's denial capability was a major cause not of deterrence success, as the most recent literature on deterring terrorism suggests, but of continuous deterrence failures. The present argument, which suggests that "deterrence is increasingly about practicing denial," ought to be replaced by the argument that deterrence is about moving from cumulative deterrence, relying on tactical denial and punishment that targets the cost calculus of the challenger, to the use of force that targets the adversary's winning strategies. In the difficult contests of resolve, victory through war demonstrates to the challenger that the scope of available winning strategies is narrowing. The causal mechanism—maneuver—that led to substantial periods of strategic deterrence success in the PLO/PA and Hezbollah cases, was absent in the Hamas case.

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Notes

- 1 Donald M. Schurman, Julian S. Corbett, 1854-1922 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1981), p. 54, cited in Freedman, *Strategy*, p. 118.
- 2 IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kohavi at a conference commemorating former IDF chief of Staff Amnon Lipkin-Shahak at the military's college north of Tel Aviv on June 9, 2021.
- 3 This concept is sometimes referred to as a time-buying mechanism, where the defender achieves temporary deterrence success because the defeated challenger, while still able to attack and with the motivation to do so, refrains from an attack because it was temporarily weekend. Shlomo Brom, senior research associate at the Institute for National Security Studies, Interview, February 2016.
- 4 After the First Lebanon War the PLO readjusted its aspirational goals and motivations and started to entertain the idea of a two-state solution. The PLO case demonstrate that credible threats have an impact on the challenger's motivation. In the period leading to the 2023 conflict with Hezbollah a similar pattern can be observed. Israel used a defensive/containment policy which undermined its credibility for resolve. Israel's cumulative deterrence strategies of denial and punishment during the war did not lead to deterrence stability and only after Israel used a land maneuver did Hezbollah agree to negotiate a ceasefire and deterrence stability has been created.
- 5 "The Avalon Project: Hamas Charter 1988," Yale University Law School, article 11-12. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp
- 6 For the conference plans see, "Hamas Conference Plans For State After Israel 'Disappears,'" *MEMRI The Middle East Media Research Institute*, Special Dispatch No. 9575, (June 10, 2024).
- 7 When Israel did go on alert before Oct 7, 2023, it deterred a Hamas attack. See Yaniv Kubovich in Haaretz from March 21, 2024 <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-03-21/ty-article-magazine/.premium/idf-braced-for-a-yom-kippur-attack-a-month-later-hamas-found-a-defenseless-gaza-border/0000018e-6225-d507-a1cf-62f7f0a10000>. A similar event took place during the Passover holiday, 2023. See: <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/military/Article-1049996>. A strong Israeli presence on the border could have led to deterrence stability but given the pressures on other fronts, like the West Bank, a more likely outcome would have been a repeat of the "blue-white" state of alert that was declared in the spring of 1973 against Egypt before the October War, leading to the "cry wolf" syndrome.
- 8 Brig. Gen. (res.) Guy Hazut describes in Amos Harel, "How Israel's army sowed the seeds of its October 7 disaster," how the Israeli military command was unsure of itself before the ground operations begun in Gaza.