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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.

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.

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.

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.”

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).

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.

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.



From the Militias Serving the State to the State Serving the Militias: What Has Happened to Iraq?

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An umbrella organization of dozens of primarily pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) has been operating in Iraq since 2014. This article focuses on the relations that have emerged between the PMF and the government. It analyzes why the state has anchored the organization's status in law and strengthened it, even though the PMF's leading militias are undermining Iraq's sovereignty. It reviews the background causes, manifestations, and consequences of this phenomenon, and then assesses two possible hypotheses. The first hypothesis attributes the state's attitude to its need for a military response to the emergency created by the rise of ISIS and the failure of the Iraqi army to halt it in 2014. The second hypothesis involves the network of connections that have developed between Iran, the Shi'ite militias, and the Iraqi government over the years, which has followed a patron-client arrangement. These connections have enabled Iran to intervene and exert its influence in order to strengthen the status of the Iranian-supported PMF. This analysis also addresses the significance of these relations for Israel, which became a target of attacks by these militias in Iraq during the Swords of Iron War.

Key words: Iraq, Shi'ite militias, Popular Mobilization, PMF, Iran, state-society relations, patron-client relations, the Shi'ite axis, Israel.

Introduction

What makes a country attach to its security forces militias that do not respect its sovereignty, and even provide them with government subsidies when they violate its laws and policy? The theoretical and empirical research literature on relations between states and violent non-state players devotes a great deal of attention to hybrid situations in which the government security forces and militias of various types

operate simultaneously and in tandem, even though there is no clear hierarchy between them (Husken, 2018; Staniland, 2021). One fairly common situation in civil wars occurs when the army splits up into militias acting with no connection to the central government. When the government stabilizes, it reintegrates the militias into the army or dismantles them (Nelson & Petrova, 2023).

This study concerns a different situation in which a state possessing a functioning army allows militias—operating as independent players not subject to its authority—to exist at its expense, even though their activity detracts from the country’s sovereignty and even destabilizes it, as has been the case in Iraq in recent years. This seems paradoxical and is certainly atypical. At the same time, there is little discussion of such a phenomenon in the research literature. The purpose of this study is therefore to explain the conditions leading to this situation in which the state serves the militias, rather than the militias serving state.

This study analyzes the background and consequences of this phenomenon in Iraq, while looking at the government’s relations with the mostly pro-Iranian Shi’ite militias that have banded together into the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) umbrella organization since 2014. It will examine changes in Iraq and the challenges it faced following the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime, which resulted in a gap between what was planned and the actual facts on the ground in the democratic federal regime constituted under US sponsorship. From the very beginning, the central government experienced difficulty in enforcing its sovereignty equally in all parts of the country and among all sections of the population, while terrorist attacks mounted and dozens of militias identified with various population groups were formed.

Considering this background, two hypotheses are presented for the state’s policy towards the PMF and what led to the current state of relations between them. The first focuses on the solution to the state’s current needs provided by the PMF, as a link between the state and the armed communities in Iraqi society, when ISIS began its campaign of conquest. The military solution furnished by the militias following the Iraqi army’s failure to contain ISIS added to their extensive deployment (even beyond Iraq’s borders), and led the Iraqi government to accept assistance from the PMF and accord these militias a special legal status, even though

they refused to respect the government’s sovereignty. The second explanation concerns Iran’s involvement and influence on the Shi’ite militias and the government in Baghdad. It explores the possibility that a patron-client relationship developed between Iran and the relevant players in Iraq as a result of the establishment of the PMF and decisions reached in Baghdad, and that the status of the PMF is attributable to Iran’s involvement and influence. These relations are based on a network of connections formed by the Iranian regime over the years with political parties, organizations, and Shi’ite militias in Iraq. The process of political consolidation and military force-building by these players is accordingly related to their close affiliation with the Iranian regime, particularly the Revolutionary Guards Quds force, which has been financing and arming the main Shi’ite militias even before their PMF umbrella organization was created. Finally, the explanatory power of each hypothesis is evaluated in the context of the Swords of Iron War and the situation and status of the Shi’ite militias in Iraq is compared with the state of Hezbollah in Lebanon. The summary and conclusions highlight the significance of the events being examined for Israel, which became a target for attacks by the Iraqi militias during the Swords of Iron War.

The new Iraq—The accelerated democratization process fostered by the US and the gap between what was planned and the actual results

The abrupt collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003, shortly after Operation Iraqi Freedom began under American military leadership, inaugurated a change of regime in Baghdad. The American administration cooperated in this task with allied Iraqi political groups that had previously opposed the regime. The main governmental institutions were rearranged—government ministries, the Iraqi army, and internal security agencies—according to a democratic constitution formulated by

a provisional ruling council with the help of advisors from the American government. The US military forces remained in Iraq and advised the new government and its security forces in the initial years, before withdrawing in 2009-2011.

With the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime, Iraq received sizeable aid from the U.S. from the beginning of this process. American advisors and military forces took part in planning the establishment of a new administration and the training of the Iraqi army. Free parliamentary elections were held for the first time in January 2005, with politicians from a variety of ethnic groups and religious sects combining in lists to compete in these elections. Great hopes were placed on the project of replacing the Iraqi dictatorship with the world's first Arab democracy, based on power sharing—facilitating representation for the various ethnic and other groups comprising Iraqi society through the allocation of seats in parliament and positions according to an ethnic blueprint across the parliament, government and its ministries, and the security forces (Younis, 2013).

The plan of the architects of the new political order was to create fair, multi-ethnic representation, ease inter-ethnic tensions, and reinforce consensus and stability. From the very beginning, however, the minorities, especially the Sunni minority, complained about the tyranny of the Shi'ite majority. The new security problems that soon arose complicated the plans, particularly attacks by terrorist organizations seeking to upset the new order. New militias identified with ethnic groups or tribes were established in response to these security problems. These developments highlighted the difficulty of satisfying all parts of Iraqi society in the framework of the new governmental arrangements. Terrorist groups formed, especially among Sunni supporters of the old regime, and some of them joined jihad terrorist organizations. Groups arose, including among the Shi'ite political parties, and organized their own militias in response to

these threats, giving rise to concern that a civil war would ensue (Zeidel, 2008, p. 46; Dodge, 2013, p. 249).

What enabled the flourishing of terrorist organizations and the proliferation of militias in Iraq was the security vacuum—the absence of effective control by the ad hoc interim government established in Iraq after the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime. In the security realm in particular, the early days following the collapse exemplified the lack of plans to maintain order and prevent looting, as well as the absence of alternative means of control to those of the former regime. Members of the Ba'ath regime, including officers from the security forces and the army, went underground and became the nucleus for the development of terrorism against the coalition and its efforts to stabilize Iraq and establish a regime that would lead it toward democracy (Hughes, 2010, p. 159).

This poor starting point in the rebuilding process primarily reflected the difficulty in achieving a broad internal consensus in Iraq on the appropriate replacement for the former regime. The efforts to undermine the new order consisted of an accelerating pace of terrorist attacks during the first decade of the new government. The most deadly and traumatic of these attacks, which were conducted by the Sunni terrorist organizations that joined forces with extremist Islamic Sunni organizations headed by Al Qaeda, were aimed mostly at the government and the Shi'ite population. At the same time, Shi'ite organizations also conducted terrorist attacks. Among these were militias such as Kata'ib Hezbollah (Hezbollah Brigades)—a pro-Iranian Shi'ite militia formed a few years after the change of regime in Baghdad. The Iranian regime, which sought to use these militias against the American presence in Iraq and in responding to Sunni terrorism, was deeply involved in them. Such terrorist attacks detracted from the legitimacy of the government, which faced the challenge of unifying the different parts of the heterogeneous Iraqi society and was also forced to cope with

constant waves of terrorism in the early years of its existence (Hashim, 2006, p. 19; Azzam, 2013, p. 23).

Iraq's security problems worsened as terrorist attacks became more frequent, especially on the part of the Sunni minority, including members of the defunct Baath Party who had been driven out of power. They joined the new terrorist frameworks: the Islamic Army, Al Qaeda, and a decade after the new regime's formation, the Islamic State of Iraq (later ISIS).

After the withdrawal of American forces in 2011, it was apparent to all parties that the Iraqi army was finding it difficult to counter the scale of mounting terrorism. The most prominent example was the army's failure against ISIS when the latter took control of Mosul, followed by further conquests and terrorist attacks, which gave ISIS control of large areas of Iraq starting in the summer of 2014. This collapse highlighted the trend towards internal conflict and violence and the difficulty of integrating the security elements in the country belonging to groups on different sides of the political and ideological spectrum in the inter-ethnic conflicts: Sunni, Shi'ite, Kurds, and others. These problems arose from the first year of the new political order, but the American administration did not reassess the situation. In summing up the period, diplomat Robert Ford, political counsellor to the US embassy in Baghdad in 2004-2006, commented, "American security forces could deal with security problems, but that didn't

give us unlimited political power. Bremer and his team... developed political plans and a temporary constitution that were excellent intellectual achievements inappropriate for Iraq's circumstances" (Ford, 2023).

The most prominent symptom of the security weakness of the new Iraq's central government, army, and security agencies was the ongoing terrorism: suicide terrorist attacks, rocket fire, and explosive devices against the American forces in Iraq—a series of security shocks at a time when the government was trying to achieve stability. The new militias that had been formed in Iraq after Saddam Hussein's regime collapsed were not an entirely new phenomenon in the country; ethnically, tribal, or religiously-based militias had operated there for decades, especially Shi'ite militias that had been formed during Saddam Hussein's rule in opposition to the regime (the leading such militia was the Badr Brigade, founded as a Shi'ite opposition organization under Iranian sponsorship in the 1980s). Even after these organizations became political parties in the new Iraq starting in 2003, some of them continued to maintain independent militias free of state supervision, enforcement, or involvement. About ten of these joined the PMF. At that stage, these militias had thousands or even tens of thousands of armed members (Cole, 2007, p. 111). In place of Saddam Hussein's regular army, which numbered approximately 400,000 soldiers in the last decade of his regime (Malovany, 2009; Post & Baram, 2002, p. 24), a smaller army of about 200,000 soldiers was formed, supported primarily by training and arms supplied by the US and other countries (Dodge, 2013, p. 256).

Nevertheless, the Iraqi state security forces had difficulty winning legitimacy among the range of ethnic groups in Iraqi society or to be seen as protectors of all members of the public, even in their new democratic format set forth in the constitution approved by referendum in 2005. Among the Sunni minority, there was opposition to cooperation with the security

Among the Sunni minority, there was opposition to cooperation with the security forces of a regime founded by the U.S., which had deprived the Sunnis of the leading role they had played in Saddam Hussein's regime. Among the Kurdish minority, the change in regime was regarded as an opportunity to attain broader autonomy while maintaining its local security force—the Peshmerga. The Shi'ite majority was split among various political parties

forces of a regime founded by the U.S., which had deprived the Sunnis of the leading role they had played in Saddam Hussein's regime. Among the Kurdish minority, the change in regime was regarded as an opportunity to attain broader autonomy while maintaining its local security force—the Peshmerga. The Shi'ite majority was split among various political parties holding different ideologies and political incentives, which moved the Shi'ites towards dividing security responsibility, instead of unifying it, through the founding of new militias for new political movements (Salehyan, 2020, p. 103).

The removal of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship and the creation of a democratic order were not the sole factors creating internal political incentives for the founding of militias that gave each group an answer to potential threats inside Iraq and the ability to withstand their enemies. The Iraqi army's disappointing performance in countering the security chaos prevailing in large parts of the country and the increase in terrorist activity by organizations espousing an extreme Sunni Islamic ideology, among them Al Qaeda, contributed to this trend and aggravated it. The government's repressive measures (especially Shi'ite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki) against the Sunni minority in the framework of anti-terrorism legislation also played a role. In terms of military capability, despite large-scale aid and training from the US army, the Iraqi army proved unable to prevent terrorism by the Sunni extreme Islamic organizations at the beginning of the second decade following the change of regime in Baghdad. Sunni Islamic terrorism further gained momentum in 2009-2011, especially after the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq (Strachan, 2017, pp. 4-5).

Concurrent to this process among Sunni organizations, new Shi'ite militias also arose in Iraq in 2003-2014 with the encouragement and aid of the Iranian regime. The largest and most prominent of these is Kata'ib Hezbollah (Hezbollah Brigades). From the very beginning of its activity in 2007, Iranian Revolutionary Guards

Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani was directly involved in this organization, which received training and financing from the Iranian regime (Gulmohamad, 2020, p. 276). The defection of the Al Qaeda branch in Iraq from that organization's central leadership and the founding of Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014 marked a new stage in the internal conflict in Iraq. This conflict escalated in line with the stepped-up militarization of ethnic and tribal groups in Iraqi society, combined with the inability of the Iraqi army and state institutions in general to cope with the mounting ISIS offensive.

Despite the arms and training provided by the US, the Iraqi army had not trained properly for years. It was obvious that political corruption had penetrated its ranks and made it a tool for the promotion of cronies and the harassment of opponents, instead of the fulfillment of its professional duty—preparing for war, including the war against terrorism (Strachan, 2017, p. 6). This provided a golden opportunity for a multitude of Iraqi militias, particularly the Shi'ite militias, to take the lead in a campaign in which the Iraqi army was failing—the campaign against ISIS.

A landmark for the Shi'ite militias— An umbrella organization

The founding of an umbrella organization for the Shi'ite militias operating in Iraq when ISIS took control of Mosul was the result of a combination of circumstances requiring an immediate response to the mounting security crisis threatening both Iraq and Syria, whose border ISIS broke through soon afterwards, as well as neighboring Iran. The rapid advance of ISIS in its bloody campaign of conquest demanded an immediate response, including a division of the war effort into several areas in which ISIS had consolidated itself. In this sense, the organization of militias that had previously acted separately under Iranian sponsorship against their common enemy was a matter of necessity for the purpose of stopping and later defeating ISIS.

The establishment of the PMF was therefore a combination of a decision by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki following the defeat suffered by Iraq's army, backed by a fatwa issued by Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, regarded as the leading Shi'ite religious authority there. He called on anyone in Iraq capable of bearing arms to fight against the terrorists or even to join the security forces in order to achieve the holy goal. The first groups to fulfill al-Sistani's fatwa were the pro-Iranian militias (Moore & Ganzeveld, 2024).

The main Iranian force involved in organizing the PMF was the Quds Force under the command of Qasem Soleimani. The PMF's core consisted of the Iraqi militias trained and armed by Soleimani, which were joined by other Shi'ite militias with less pronounced links to Iran. All of them answered Ayatollah al-Sistani's call and took part in the joint effort to defeat ISIS. The dozens of militias in the PMF can be divided by loyalty into three groups:

- A large group of militias loyal to the Iranian regime, including Kata'ib Hezbollah, the Badr Brigade, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous), Harakat al-Nujaba (The Noble Ones).
- A group loyal to al-Sistani.
- A group loyal to Shi'ite leader Muqtada al-Sadr, who took issue with the pro-Iranian camp among Shi'ites in Iraq.

In addition to these groups, tribal Sunni militias and other minorities took part in the war effort against ISIS (Mansour & Jabar, 2017).

For the PMF, the military operation against Islamic State, which began in 2014, was an opportunity for these militias to rebrand themselves as a force acting in defense of Iraq and other countries in the region, against the threat of ISIS, which was expanding territorially, and to participate in a joint international effort by the Iranian-Russian axis and an ad hoc coalition led by the US. At the same time, while Iran and its Axis of Resistance partners regarded the pro-Iranian militias as legitimate partners of great military value, the terrorist attacks conducted

by them against American soldiers made the U.S. classify them as terrorist organizations and impose sanctions against them and their leaders (Moore & Ganzeveld, 2024).

In Iraq, some militia leaders pushed for their inclusion in the Iraqi state frameworks in order to harness them for the "resistance" (*muqawama*) vision (referring to resistance to the Western countries or enemies in general)—in other words, to make Iraq part of the Axis of Resistance led by Iran. In this context, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq militia Secretary General Qais al-Khazali clearly declared this goal at a conference he attended in February 2015:

When some people hear the term resistance, they hesitate to use it because they think that resistance is directed against the state. This is not what is meant. Instead, we can say that the resistance has now shifted from resistance by factions to resistance by the state. In other words, we have reached the stage of state resistance, meaning that the authorities, the people, and the laws and regulations are part of the resistance (al-Khazali, 2015).

The PMF, however, did not cease to exist after the collapse of the Islamic State's strongholds in Iraq and Syria and the organization's defeat. The militias did not give up the status and advantages that they had obtained from their incorporation in the umbrella organization. As al-Khazali said, it appears that the PMF militias meant to enter the Iraqi state's politics and organizational framework, while at the same time retaining their identity as a military entity acting in the substate sphere, or even beyond Iraq's borders, in most cases with a clearly defined ideology. In order to turn the militia into an active political organization in the parliamentary or even governmental sphere, they needed to coopt the state into legitimizing the militias, thereby legalizing the PMF's activity.

The process that turned the Shi'ite militias into an organized body equivalent to the "Iraqi army" and in time outnumbered it, is analyzed below. Of no less importance was the change in their status in Iraqi law—from a multitude of militias with no state support to a well-organized organization that for all intents and purposes is part of the state security apparatus. This includes an allocation of bases and equipment, the establishment of a government company to finance their activity, and a process of passing legislation to upgrade benefits for their members.

The Process of changing PMF's status in Iraq: From its founding to political, economic, and legal influence

The first stage in the creation of the PMF was recruitment of the militia members themselves in accordance with national requirements and the fatwa by al-Sistani. This gave religious validity to the permanent presence of the Shi'ite militias in the state security forces. As a result of these circumstances, an organization initially emerged that lacked uniformity among its various elements: pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias, a militia identified with Shi'ite leader Muqtada al-Sadr, a militia of al-Sistani supporters, and Sunni tribes (Knights, 2025a, pp. 115-116).

The involvement of the Shi'ite axis led by Iran in the PMF's activity was reflected above all in the leading role played by Revolutionary Guards Quds Force commander General Qasem Soleimani, who took part in planning the PMF's combat against ISIS together with PMF chief of staff Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was responsible for order and internal organization. The organization's preservation and numerical growth (over 200,000 militia members in recent years) represent a significant achievement, given that the militias that joined the PMF came from various Shi'ite movements and ethnic groups—including Sunni, Christian, and Yazidi militias—all of which became subject to Iranian influence when the organization was founded (Bengio, 2025).

The substantial change in the PMF's status occurred in 2016, about a year and a half after it was launched. For the first time, legislation was passed, officially making the organization an integral part of the state security forces, albeit one defined as an independent entity, reporting its activity directly to the prime minister, not the Ministry of Defense or the Iraqi army Chief of Staff. The definition of its role enabled it to act against security threats. At the same time, the legal status of its internal command and hierarchy and its relations and ties with the other state security forces, headed by the army, were left ambiguous. Even at this stage, tension therefore emerged between the army and the militias and escalated as they operated without coordination and contrary to orders from the government and the army (Al-Mawlawi, 2025).

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The significance of this legal authorization from the state was not merely symbolic or theoretical. It was reflected above all in the material aspect—the procurement of military equipment from the state, including arms, and its distribution to formal military frameworks (similar to army units), with a corresponding allocation of resources. When the fighting against ISIS waned in 2018-2020, the PMF became more actively involved in internal security affairs on the seamline between security and internal Iraqi politics. This trend reached a peak with the beginning of the Tishreen protest—a wave of demonstrations against the deteriorating economic situation

and high unemployment, which also reflected popular opposition to Iran's intervention in the country. These protests were led by politically unaffiliated young people, a large proportion of whom were Shi'ites. The PMF, which at this stage was already integrated in the activity of Iraq's security forces, participated in the violent suppression of these protests, which included the killing of demonstrators (Berman et al., 2020). During his short term in office, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who attempted to use force to restrain militia terrorism against American targets in Iraq, was targeted by militia members who used violence and even tried to assassinate him using drones (Schneider, 2020).

The next stage in institutionalizing the connection between the Shi'ite militias and the state's governmental institutions was during the 2021 elections and the formation of the new government in 2022, following a period of internal Shi'ite conflict between leaders of various PMF member movements. Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shi'ite leader who received the largest number of votes in the elections, insisted on differentiating his movement from the pro-Iranian militias and refused to sit with them in the same government. For their part, the leaders of the political parties and representatives of the pro-Iranian militias united in a coalition entitled the "Coordination Framework." This crisis, accompanied by violent clashes, ended when al-Sadr and his representatives withdrew from parliament, after which the Coordination Framework formed the new government. At this point, the pro-Iranian militias were able to institute governmental measures to their benefit, including legislation. After forming a government headed by Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani, leader of one of the Shi'ite political parties, a public company was founded (named al-Muhandis after the PMF's first chief of staff, who was assassinated together with Qasem Soleimani), with an annual budget of tens of millions of dollars and an allocation of government land and other assets to the militias (Alwaqai Aliraqiya, 2023).

This action is the clearest manifestation of the trends that characterize the situation. Even if some of the militias are ideologically close to Iran and receive aid from it, their goal—exploiting their status as Iraqi political players—takes precedence over external aid. They seek to participate in government institutions, the government and parliament in order to mold state frameworks and policies to their purposes, while feeding at the public trough. They wish to attain the status of a state executive arm by means of the law passed in 2016 that accords the PMF militias recognition as a legal entity that is part of the state security forces. After becoming part of the government, their aim is to take advantage of the democratic institutions and the state economy to establish a financial institution to finance their actions and enrich themselves. The PMF's penetration of governmental institutions also has legal ramifications—the appointment of judges loyal to the pro-Iranian militias to key positions to ensure their legal protection, prevent political appointments harmful to the militias' rule and to suppress the opposition (Smith & Knights, 2025).

The next stage in legislation to fortify the militias' status in government was a legislative initiative by the PMF leadership led by Falih Al-Fayyadh (as of the end of 2025 it had not been completed). This initiative included two laws: a PMF service and retirement law and a PMF authority law, expanding the law enacted in 2016 governing the PMF's status and authority. The new PMF authority law states that the PMF will no longer be an emergency force established by order of the prime minister and under government supervision; it will be an institution with full authority and virtually immune to subsequent reforms, let alone elimination. The new proposal also states that the PMF will be responsible for the preservation of the political order, which is liable to encourage the militias to again employ repressive measures against demonstrators, as it did in 2019. In other words, if the new authority bill passes, it will further

undermine the democratic base and human rights in Iraq (Knights, 2025a).

The PMF service and retirement law was designed to anchor PMF members' rights in the same way as the service and retirement laws for the government security agencies and the army. Some regarded the inclusion of the retirement age in this legislation as an effort to compel the leadership to accept changes, because it means that 400 senior officers will be forced to retire. Because of these internal tensions, the law did not pass; a new form of the law is now being considered (Toomey, 2025). In addition, and corresponding to the events that have taken place since the outbreak of massive protests (the 2019 Tishreen protests) against the takeover by the Shi'ite militias and the Iranian foothold in the country, occasional waves of protest have occurred, mainly by young people calling for "an end to rule by the Iranian militias," as in a demonstration in Al-Nasiriyah in southern Iraq – one of the Shi'ite population centers in the country (Milafat Arabia, 2024).

The research hypotheses: What explains the appearance of a state serving the militias in Iraq?

The process described above makes it clear that while state institutions in Iraq have been stagnating since the ISIS crisis began in the summer of 2014, the PMF militias have acquired influence, including on the shaping of the strategy against ISIS. Indeed the militias have been so successful that they have outstripped the official Iraqi institutions and have challenged the ability to enforce order in the country and enforce the orders of those institutions on the militias. One possible explanation for this is the internal features of the country, with an emphasis on the relations between the central government and non-state players—in this case violent non-state players benefiting from advantages over the state institutions. These non-state players derive their power and influence directly from the communities or groups in society whom they represent.

The fundamental assumption in this context is that the state's inability to ensure security when needed, as reflected in the Iraqi army's failure in confronting ISIS, damaged the legitimacy of the state, which is supposed to defend its citizens. The result was internal tensions and splits in society. This situation in turn encouraged the further appearance and strengthening of militias identified with specific groups in society. These militias acquired greater legitimacy than the central government for taking action against threats to these groups. The militias are taking advantage of their opportunities to expand the range of their activity and challenge the state's sovereignty. In the case of Iraq, it is obvious that the substantial advantages of the PMF militias over Iraqi army units in organization and internal unity among the fighters and the high degree of legitimacy they enjoyed for action in the combat zones—in some cases they comprised local residents—have reinforced their status in combating ISIS. The umbrella organization was able to sustain itself, while the state appeared weak or insubstantial in comparison with the militias' record of achievement (Salehyan, 2020, p. 106).

These developments occurred at a time when relations between the state and society in Iraq were on precarious footing. The advance of the pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias, which are gaining control over the state's resources, is attributable to the combination of a democratic political order with a polarized multi-ethnic society in which conflicting interests between ethnic groups, political movements, and leaders result in tension and violence, such as clashes and terrorism.

During the period of democratic change following the downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime and also following the election of a new government in democratic elections, state institutions experienced difficulty in enforcing order and providing security throughout the country. Activity by militias affiliated with tribes or political movements mounted, as did extreme Islamic terrorist

organizations (among them Al Qaeda in Iraq, which later became ISIS). This reflected the trend towards conflict between ethnic groups or political movements of conflicting orientation. When ISIS began its campaign of conquest in northern Iraq, followed by its penetration of additional regions, the central government's army failed to stop it and was forced to rely on ad hoc assistance, provided by the pro-Iranian militias. The militias exploited this opportunity to organize themselves, expand the range of their activity, and improve the legitimacy of their actions under state sponsorship. They had the advantage of deriving their power from society and enjoyed the support of a broad base of the Shi'ite population (the majority in Iraq), which was seeking an effective defense against ISIS. This situation enabled the pro-Iranian PMF militias to progress in Iraqi politics and divert public funds into their pockets by anchoring their status in law on the same format as the Iraqi army and the rest of the formal security forces.

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From centralization to decentralization in security, and the undermining of state sovereignty

The relations between the government, the army, and pro-Iranian militias in Iraq reflect a shift from the centralization of power and authority in the sovereign state (in the classic Max Weber model) to the decentralization of sovereign authority among a large number of players. The research literature on sovereignty models describes the state of hybridity in the security sphere as the splitting or delegation by the state of authority to substate players in the framework of cooperation or coordination between them for the purpose of achieving shared security objectives (Srivastava, 2022). In the case of Iraq,

however, no shared security objective is involved. The sovereign state's objectives (renewal of control or enforcement of sovereignty) absolutely contradict the objectives of the militias operating as players not subordinate to the sovereign. The militias make no commitment to obey the commands of the sovereign (the government and the army), even if PMF regards itself as an arm of the state (Knights, 2024, p. 1111).

The case in question therefore reflects the undermining or weakness of the sovereign order resulting from the way in which the state is attempting to exercise its authority over the militias. It grants them legal status, but in effect authorizes their illegal activity at the cost of its actual sovereignty. In order to explain this phenomenon, it is necessary to take into account all of the players operating in the country, their influence, and the interaction between them—not just the official institutions, but also other players comprising society.

The state in society approach

Joel S. Migdal's *State in Society* theory challenges the traditional conception of a uniform autonomous state. Migdal argues instead that the state is a non-uniform political entity composed of various competing institutions in which traditional forces such as tribes, religious groups, and local leaders are frequently involved. Instead of ruling society, a dynamic relationship is created in which the state and society shape each other. This concept emphasizes the informal character of the interaction between players, based on negotiation or a dispute over control, especially in developing countries. The state is merely one of a range of players operating in society and competing with each other for hegemony. As such, it needs their help in order to establish its legitimacy as a player with authority who must be obeyed. If the state is unable to generate norms of obedience to state institutions (civil society) and constitutes merely a framework for competition between the players operating in it, the latter can be expected to challenge

the state's legitimacy and its ability to impose its law on them. In such an eventuality, state assistance to these players will only help them to reinforce their own legitimacy and popularity at the state's expense (Migdal, 2001).

In the case of Iraq, a divided society in which the norms of obedience to the law or the central government are weak, the practical effect of including the militias in the state security forces for the purpose of unifying the war effort is to strengthen the militias and weaken the state.

At the societal level, such relations between the state and militias operating separately from the army are liable to have extremely grave consequences, fatal for the state's sovereignty, when these militias engage in illegal activity, mainly smuggling. The combination of their armed and violent character and this smuggling activity, which enables them to arm themselves and act beyond the range of state supervision, makes it difficult for the state to exercise control or restrain them. Peter Andreas refers to these types of players as "clandestine transnational actors" operating both inside a country and beyond its borders. Their illegal (and sometimes violent) activity violates the state's laws, leading them to act secretly in order to evade law enforcement efforts. Andreas asserts that their interests are varied. Some of the smugglers are motivated by economic incentives (high profits), while terrorists, guerilla fighters, and rebels act from political ambitions or religious inspiration. There are also differences between them in organization and the location of their activity: some are highly organized; others are not. Some operate only locally, others regionally or globally. At the same time, the most challenging aspect for the state in these players' activity is their expertise in avoiding detection by the state security institutions (Andreas, 2003).

The regional-axis explanation: Patron-client relations between Iran and the Shi'ite militias

An alternative explanation for the augmented status of the Shi'ite militias at the expenses of

Iran's profound influence in Iraq is manifested in its ability to operate proxies there, smuggle arms to them, and exert political pressure on the government in Baghdad. Among other things, this is a result of Iraqi dependence on Iran, particularly in the energy sector—the supply of electricity and gas

Iraqi state sovereignty, accomplished by means of the government's relationship with the PMF umbrella organization, is outside intervention. Iran has obtained influence in Iraq through its ties with the government and to an even greater extent through its ties with the pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias. Iran's profound influence in Iraq is manifested in its ability to operate proxies there, smuggle arms to them, and exert political pressure on the government in Baghdad. Among other things, this is a result of Iraqi dependence on Iran, particularly in the energy sector—the supply of electricity and gas. This kind of relationship can be described, as in the research literature, as patron-client relations: protection and aid from the patron country for players it regards as loyal and cooperative, who are sometimes also dependent on it for financing or goods supplied by the patron (in the case of the militias, financing of activity and a supply of Iranian arms). This type of relationship with Iraq enables Iran to easily intervene and exert pressure on the government in Baghdad for the purpose of advancing the status of the militias in the PMF framework (Ostovar, 2018).

In analyzing the relations between Iran and the Shi'ite militias in Iraq, it is possible to detect a variety of patterns of relations distinguishable from each other in a number of ways: the degree of a militia's dependence on aid from Iran, the degree of ideological or political similarity to the Iranian regime, and in general the extent of Iranian influence and control over the militia's operations. Assuming that the Iranian regime does not possess the same degree of influence over every militia and that not every militia is loyal and obedient to the Iranian regime to the

same extent, Iran's relations with the Shi'ite militias in Iraq is more like a decentralized network with no clear hierarchy among all of the elements, although Iran plays a key role in it (Tabatabai et al., 2021; Zimmt, 2025).

In practice, the network of connections with the militias in Iraq is decentralized and probably less hierarchical than the Iranian regime sought to achieve by expanding its influence in the neighboring country as part of its regional strategy of proxies. At the same time, in the interactions between the Iranian regime and a large proportion of these militias that are loyal to Tehran, the logic of patron-client relations is easy to detect. Local players develop a connection with a regional player (usually a country possessing resources) with an interest in fostering this connection for the purpose of exploiting it or using it in the long term. In other words, aid in money and arms to the relevant militias is aimed at improving their fighting capabilities and instilling in them the motivation for victory in a way consistent with the regional player's interests. This external intervention in turn increases the militias' power vis-à-vis the government institutions and gives them the means to exert pressure on the central government, which has been forced to recognize their status and even support them in order to avoid an internal conflict with them and their patron (Ostovar, 2018, pp. 19-20).

The PMF's founding was accompanied by direct Iranian intervention and guidance on Iraqi soil, with an emphasis on the Quds Force under the command of Qasem Soleimani. In this sense, however, the PMF is an organization designed to create order and facilitate and streamline ties with dozens of Shi'ite militias, given the differences between them and the varied extent of their identification with and loyalty to the Iranian regime. The principal challenge for the Iranian regime in this matter is coordinating the militias' actions and preventing tension and internal conflict between the member militias that may be generated by political or ideological rivalry. The establishment of the new

framework (similar to the founding of Hezbollah in Lebanon) was therefore designed to facilitate Iran's intervention in Iraq and directly further its goals by means of the Shi'ite militias, rather than attempting to accomplish this through the central government (Alaaldin, 2024).

Furthermore, Iran is aware of its limited ability to promote Iranian interests in Baghdad through the central government there, which maintains ties with the US and wishes to preserve balance in its relations with Iran and the US. Operating through proxies who are not dependent on the government and whose actions are not always known to it, is advantageous for Iran. Strengthening the Shi'ite militias and turning them into a military and political power on which the government and the security forces are dependent, is designed to ensure that the government will not restrain the militias and will finance their activity. Even if the government in Baghdad objects to this policy, the Iranian regime will be able to continue promoting military and economic goals in Iraq, such as the deployment of Iranian armaments in Iraqi territory by the militias and smuggling through Iraqi territory, in order to evade the US sanctions against Iran, e.g. its oil industry. In recent years, pro-Iranian militias have been using boats in these smuggling efforts (Knights, 2025b).

According to this approach, as an external player responsible for arming and financing Shi'ite militias in recent years, Iran is also responsible for the significant change in the militias' status by setting up the PMF umbrella organization, which is enabling the militias to coordinate and streamline their activity. The Iranian regime regards the operation of proxies as important, especially in a neighboring country, for a number of reasons. First of all, it ensures that Iraq will never again constitute a threat to the Iranian regime, as it did when Saddam Hussein ruled Iraq. Secondly, the use of proxies enables Iran to achieve regional goals involving Iranian axis in countries in the region: terrorist actions against American forces who

renewed their operations in Iraq as part of the war against ISIS, the consolidation of militias capable of fighting at Iran's side when necessary, and the use of the Iraqi theater to smuggle arms and goods (such as oil). The pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias in Iraq have engaged in all of these activities in recent years. The process of strengthening and organizing the Shi'ite militias in Iraq into the PMF framework therefore reflects not only the local motivation of these militias, but also their Iranian patron's objective of empowering its clients in Iraq in competition with the central Iraqi government. Iran wishes to increase their power in comparison with the Iraqi army and the other state institutions, thereby expanding the Iranian foothold in Baghdad (Smith & Knights, 2025).

On the other hand, some Shi'ite militias are challenging Iran's plans in Iraq. One of the Shi'ite movements that initially joined the PMF is that of Shi'ite leader Muqtada al-Sadr. In recent years, he has taken issue with the militias allied to Iran and criticized Iranian involvement in Iraq; resulting in an open and violent conflict within this camp that constitutes a threat to Iranian interest there. In other words, the Shi'ite militias are not Iranian puppets; they have their own motives, which are forcing the Iranian regime—especially Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani—to spend great effort on coordination and easing tensions and rivalries between the various militias (Schneider and Zimmt, 2022).

An empirical test of the above hypotheses and theoretical explanations, which is presented below, consists of the PMF's response to the Swords of Iron War between its inception on October 7, 2023 and the end of 2024. Implications and consequences for the relations between the Iraqi state, the PMF, and the Iranian-led Shi'ite axis are provided.

The Iraqi government and official state institutions have refrained from any military response whatsoever to the war in Gaza, nor to the provision of "assistance fronts," such as those comprised of other member of the

Shi'ite axis—first Hezbollah in Lebanon and later the Houthis in Yemen—, which began firing missiles at Israel. Starting in early November 2023, pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias in Iraq began proclaiming their own barrages of missiles and drones against Israel. The Shi'ite militias in Iraq had never before taken such a step (they had previously been involved in a few sporadic launchings, especially during previous rounds of fighting between Israel and the Palestinians in Gaza) and the militias conditioned a halt in their missile attacks on the end of the war in Gaza. Both before and after their fairly frequent attacks against Israel, the Iraqi militias fired barrages against American bases in Iraq and Syria. The announcements by the Shi'ite militias in Iraq that took responsibility for these actions, were signed the "Islamic Resistance in Iraq"—a generic name similar to the "Islamic Resistance in Lebanon"—a term for Hezbollah in Lebanon (The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2023).

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Between November 2023 and November 2024, the Iraqi militias took responsibility for 300 barrages against Israeli targets. Less than a third of these came close to Israel and damage was inflicted in only a few cases (Polak, 2024). In one case, in October 2024, the "Islamic Resistance in Iraq" and Iraqi security sources announced that an "advanced drone" launched against a base in the Golan Heights had caused the death of two soldiers (Zimmt, 2024). The attacks against American targets tailed off drastically after an incident in late January 2024 in which a drone launched by one of the militias killed three American soldiers staying at a base in Jordan. When the US threatened to respond militarily

following this deadly incident, including against “Iranian interests,” Revolutionary Guards Quds force commander Esmail Qaani intervened directly. The international media reported that he arrived urgently in Baghdad and demanded from representatives of the Shi’ite militias that they refrain from attacking the US. Shortly afterwards, a spokesman of Kata’ib Hezbollah (which the US had blamed for the attack) announced the cessation of attacks against American targets (Schneider, 2024).

In the absence of any initiative or direct threat from Israel to respond militarily to the attacks by the militias in Iraq (probably due to concern that Americans would be harmed directly or as a result of the militias’ response to Israeli attacks), the militias continued their barrages against Israel until November 2024, soon after the ceasefire in Lebanon. During this period, warnings from the US and later also from Israel began reaching Baghdad, placing responsibility for the pro-Iranian militias on the Iraqi government (Sa’ar, 2024).

During this period, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia’ al-Sudani, fearing materialization of the Israeli threat to attack Iraq, called for Iraqi non-involvement in any regional conflict and warned the militias against the consequences of their action (Baghdad Today News, 2024). The Shi’ite militias’ attacks against Israel eventually petered out and were not renewed in 2025, following American threats, which also included a demand to disarm the militias—a demand expressed by representatives of both the Biden and Trump administrations as part of a reassessment of relations between the US and Iraq resulting from the escalating crisis with Iran that preceded open warfare in June 2025, with no direct connection to the state of war in Gaza. As for possible Iranian involvement in the decision to halt firing, a source in the Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba militia stated after the events, “The reports of Iranian pressure to restrain our activity are incorrect. We made our decision independently and Iran does not intervene

in our affairs. At the same time, we are open to dialogue with the government, provided that it realizes the importance of the existence of resistance factions in the national security equation” (Fadel, 2025).

Reflecting on the period of active combat by the militias in Iraq makes clear the importance of domestic considerations in inducing them to halt the “assistance front.” For the PMF member militias, which are worried about American or Israeli attacks in response to the launching of missiles and drones and the growing tension between them and the government on this issue, the preservation of their military and political power in Iraq is clearly a higher priority than considerations of solidarity with other members of the Shi’ite axis (Rudolf, 2025, p. 435).

This conclusion is consistent with the internal-institutional explanation of the process that Iraq has undergone—the increase in status of the Shi’ite militias as political players seeking to maximize their achievements against their rivals in the Iraqi political arena. They use their ideology and intervention in regional conflicts to improve their internal and regional status. Furthermore, the events that took place during the period during which the militias in Iraq were involved in attacks against American and Israeli targets also highlighted the deviations between the decisions taken by the militias and the interests of Iran, which restrained them. The tools that Iran has created for exerting its influence in Iraq (as explained above in the regional-axis explanation) do not adequately explain the militias’ behavior from the beginning of their physical involvement in the war until the end of that involvement—the constraints imposed or pressure exerted by Iran on these militias during part of the period must be taken into account. The core explanation of the players’ behavior during the entire period is their ideological or political considerations and the dynamic between domestic players inside Iraq (including the government, according to the internal-institutional explanation).

The Iraqi case shows that the internal circumstances in a country—especially the characteristics of the players within the Shi’ite axis, the relations between them, and their connection with the central government—have a substantial influence on the extent of Iran’s influence and success in getting the Shi’ite militias to cooperate and obey its dictates. It is useful to examine the similarities and differences between the case of Iraq here and the case of Hezbollah in Lebanon. There is considerable similarity between the basic conditions of Iraq and Lebanon: The societies of both countries are split among several ethnic groups which have engaged in conflict between each other and even in civil war throughout their history. At the same time, in both countries (since 2003 in Iraq) there is a formally democratic regime based on power sharing, while a national identity has emerged and is moving the country in the direction of preserving its territorial integrity and preventing internal rifts from leading to disintegration (Byman, 1997, p. 4).

Despite this similarity, a comparison reveals substantial differences. The Shi’ites constitute a firm majority of the population in Iraq; the rules of the political game there accord them more influence over the government than the Shi’ites in Lebanon enjoy, who are not a majority, although their influence has grown in recent years. As far as the Iran-sponsored militias are concerned, a “state within a state” exists in both countries in the sense of an organization competing with and undermining the central government’s sovereignty. In Lebanon, this consists of a single organization (Hezbollah), while Iraq has a large number of organizations that are associated under a single umbrella (the PMF), but which differ ideologically and in orientation, including the degree of their affiliation with Iran. This fact affects the structure and character of the connection between Iran and the axis players in both countries. In Lebanon, Iran is Hezbollah’s sole patron and Hezbollah is Iran’s primary client in the absence of a reliable support in the government (parts of

which are now decidedly hostile to Iran), while in Iraq, the Shi’ite-dominated government is relatively comfortable with the Iranian regime. The large number of organizations there, the internal rivalry among them, and the difficulty of achieving unity between them make the patron-client relationship between Iran and the PMF less stable and looser than Iran’s strong ties with Hezbollah. The internal considerations of the Iraqi militias are likely to prove more decisive than Iran’s influence (depending on how close they are to Iran).

Discussion and conclusions

The formation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the first umbrella organization of militias in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, institutionalized the connection between the militias, despite the substantial differences that prevailed between its constituent political movements and entities from the very beginning. This method of organization greatly expanded the resources and means at the disposal of a number of the most dangerous terrorist organizations currently active in Iraq and other countries in the region (Kata’ib Hezbollah is a clear example of this; simultaneously with its activity in Iraq, it also spread to Syria when the Assad regime was in power, as well as other countries).

The great significance of this mega-project for the organizations belonging to it and the opportunities with which it provides them are of enormous importance in understanding the PMF in the broader context of relations between states and non-state players. What happened in Iraq that enables the various militias to enjoy the benefits of Iraqi sovereignty—its equipment, resources, and economic asserts—without paying the minimal price of respecting its sovereignty?

This paper analyzes two theoretical hypotheses for this purpose, which can be treated as competing explanations. One hypothesis considers this development from the bottom up—as a result of political

processes combined with the security shocks that Iraq experienced during the decade since the change in regime and the inauguration of the democratic constitution. This has led not only to political tensions and collisions, but also to the escalating establishment of militias identified with the ethnic groups that comprise Iraqi society—something like a “shadow army” of Iraq’s official army. This trend reached a peak in the establishment of an umbrella organization of Shi’ite militias—the PMF—with an estimated 250,000 members. This development, which took place simultaneously with the conquest of parts of Iraq by ISIS, reflected the strengthening of the militias’ status at the expense of the state army. The state was forced to accept the militias’ advantage on the battlefield. As part of its cooperation with them, the government anchored their activity in law and later allowed them to benefit from the government budget. A company was even founded to provide them with additional financing.

The second process, which is cited more frequently in the literature about the militias in Iraq, is the Iranian regime’s fostering of Shi’ite militias for the purpose of intervening in Iraq, in particular sending them Iranian arms. As in Lebanon, it appears that the Iranian regime is able to take advantage of instability and the decline in internal security in Iraq to maximize its potential for intervention. It therefore comes as no surprise that the rise of ISIS and its threat to the Iraqi state caused Iran to aid in the establishment and supplying of the Popular Mobilization Forces to prevent ISIS from mounting a threat to Iran, but also in order to enhance Iran’s influence within Iraq through local clients.

The main conclusion from this article’s analysis is that despite the fulfillment of all of the conditions for the PMF’s rise as attributable to the regional-axis explanation—Iran’s prolonged intervention in Iraq and in particular the strengthening of the Shi’ite militias as a prolonged challenge to the central government’s sovereignty—the internal

institutional explanation for the phenomenon being discussed is the determinant one. The central government’s weakness in sovereignty enforcement resulted from the defective functioning of the law enforcement agencies and the security forces (caused mainly by governmental corruption). These internal failures undermined the central government’s authority and bolstered the legitimacy and influence of substate alternatives to the state security forces (cohesion of forces on an ethnic or tribal basis). This was the background to the rise of militias and their erosion of state authority. The militias later demanded status and governmental assets, especially when they were united in an umbrella organization. Aid in the form of financing and arms, in particular from Iran, certainly helped this umbrella organization consolidate its status and achieve dimensions of a scale comparable to the government security forces, but the internal state weakness came first—this was the factor that facilitated the “state serving the militias” phenomenon that we are now seeing.

In pursuance of this and from the empirical analysis of the intervention by the militias in Iraq in the Swords of Iron War, it is possible to understand the connection between the internal processes in Iraq and how the militias came to be a part of the resistance front that has been attacking Israel since October 7.

It appears that after the defeat of ISIS and the consolidation of the Shi’ite militias’ grip on the government in Iraq, the control in Iraq achieved by the PMF has weighty consequences for the security situation in the country. All in the context of a lack of consensus on the militias among the Iraqi public, even the Shi’ite public, as shown by the social protest that erupted in 2019 against the foothold obtained by the militias and Iran. Despite the absence of general public legitimacy, the PMF militias enjoy patronage and aid from government institutions, such as access to resources and weapons and the ability to exploit Iraq’s strategic location and its borders with important Middle Eastern countries to

smuggle weapons, funds, and oil products for their own benefit and that of Iran and all of the resistance axis players—from Yemen to Lebanon. In recent years, and specifically during the Swords of Iron War, there are increasing signs that Iraq is becoming a theatre for regional actions by the resistance axis players— the Houthis, Hezbollah, Hamas, and others –, as it provides a welcoming space, an area that is easy to operate in, particularly in comparison to the difficulties and suppression of military and economic activity they face in neighboring countries such as Syria and Lebanon.

These trends, combined with an ideology that derives its inspiration from the “resistance culture” of the Iranian regime and Lebanese Hezbollah, are moving the Shi’ite militias in Iraq towards a direct conflict with Israel, albeit in a restrained form. This restraint was evident in the Swords of Iron War until the ceasefire in Lebanon in November 2024 and has become even more so with the avoidance by the militias of an active and direct part in the conflict with Israel during the 12-day war between Iran and Israel and the US in June 2025. They are taking into account the risk they would incur from a military response to their actions, as well as internal considerations—not to carry out far-reaching measures that would detract from their power and political status in Iraq at a time when their political activity has reached a peak in comparison with previous years, following their achievements at the highest level of government.

These internal considerations are likely to restrain the militias’ terrorist activity against Israel or against American targets to some extent and cause them to prioritize their political goals within Iraq—as the current governing coalition—rather than adopt an ideological goal in the framework of the struggle by the Axis of Resistance against Israel and the US, the benefit of which is dubious, given the price that the current war has exacted to date from Hezbollah and Iran. The discourse that the principal militia leaders (such as Qais al-Khazali) have been

using for years signals their intention to become an integral part of the political game without surrendering their weapons, while employing justifications for their military activity in order to accumulate power and a political foothold. For this reason they speak of themselves as political players, think in political terms, and manipulate political incentives for themselves in the dynamic framework that exists between them and rival groups in an Iraqi society hostile to them and especially their military activity.

It therefore seems most likely that the elections in Iraq scheduled for November 2025 will once again bring to the surface the issue of the militias’ status and power and their ability to continue taking advantage of their military might to erode Iraqi state sovereignty. In recent years, an authentic socioeconomic protest movement against this pattern has developed in Iraq focusing on the negative consequences of the pro-Iranian militias’ actions and intervention in Iraq by the Iranian regime. Despite the violent suppression of the large wave of demonstrations on this issue that broke out in Iran in 2019, the continuation of the trends analyzed in this article is likely to bring about a renewed outbreak of protest.

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Overtaking on the Right: The Iranian Ultra-Conservative Challenge and its Implications for Regime Unity

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Since the end of 2024 there has been growing criticism from ultra-conservative and revolutionary factions in the Islamic Republic on issues of domestic and foreign policy. Most of the criticism has focused on Iran's lack of response to the Israeli attack on October 26, 2024, Iranian failures in Syria in view of the collapse of the Assad regime, and the decision to postpone implementation of the hijab law, which is intended to increase the severity of penalties for breaches of the Islamic dress code. Although disagreements between the main political streams in Iran are a regular feature of the system, the protest by radical groups is a subject of intense public and political interest, mainly because it centers around decisions that are not the sole responsibility of the government and that were taken by political institutions directly subordinate to the supreme leader, particularly the Supreme National Security Council. Therefore, sections of the conservative camp have expressed concern that the challenges to government policy posed by the radicals could not only further undermine social cohesion but also damage the unity of the governing elite. Even if the radical elements' growing criticism of regime policy does not constitute an immediate and significant threat to the unity of the Iranian political and security elite, it could undermine the basis of the regime's ideological support and harm its long-term ability to deal with more important threats to its stability.

Key Words: Iran, politics, society, regime stability, foreign policy, Syria

Introduction

In mid-December 2024, dozens of citizens identified with ultra-conservative factions on the Iranian right wing held a non-violent protest in which voices were raised against government policy. The demonstrators demanded implementation of Operation True

Promise 3—a further Iranian attack on Israel in response to the Israeli attack on Iran on October 26, 2024. They also asked President Masoud Pezeshkian to dismiss his deputy for strategic affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif, who is considered relatively moderate, and to

declare the implementation of the hijab law, which had been passed by the parliament (Majlis). This law imposes severe penalties on women who fail to cover themselves as required, but in December 2024 the Supreme Council for National Security decided to freeze its implementation.

The demonstrators were not satisfied with making demands of the president, and threatened to take action to bring down his government if he failed to respond to them (Entekhab, 2024a). One demonstrator even threatened the president directly, saying that his fate could be like that of the first president of the Iranian Republic, Abolhassan Banisadr, who was impeached in 1981 after strong disagreements with the leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Ruhallah Khomeini, and forced to flee to France. A few further demonstrations have taken place in recent months in a number of Iranian towns, involving dozens of citizens identified with the radical camp. In at least one case the protest descended into a violent confrontation with the police (Khabar Online, 2024c; Farhikhtegan, 2024). At the end of March 2025, clashes between the security forces and the ultra-conservative demonstrators reached a peak with the violent dispersal of a demonstration by citizens who were protesting the delay in implementing the hijab law (Times of Israel, 2025).

Internal disagreements are a regular and ongoing feature of the Iranian political system. Arguments between the various political camps—conservatives versus reformists, pragmatists versus radicals-revolutionaries—focus on issues affecting both domestic and foreign policy. The conservatives are more committed to maintaining the status quo regarding the fundamental principles of the Islamic Republic, while the reformists are more prepared to accept some policy changes within the framework of the accepted rules of the Republic. While the pragmatists (in both main camps: the conservatives and the reformists) are prepared in certain circumstances to adapt their ideological beliefs to the constraints of

time and place, the radical revolutionaries are determined to uphold revolutionary dogmas.

All the presidents of Iran, including those identified with the conservative camp, such as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) and Ibrahim Raisi (2021-2024), and others who were identified with the pragmatic-reformist camp, including Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) and Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021), faced significant political challenges and strong criticism from the various centers of power and rival political factions. However, the recent protests by the ultra-conservative groups have aroused particular interest, because their complaints are not limited to government policy but are also directed at decisions taken by political institutions that are above the government and directly subordinate to the supreme leader Ali Khamenei, headed by the Supreme National Security Council. The radicals' objection to government policy on both domestic and foreign issues was so exceptional that it was even criticized by the president's critics in the conservative camp, who argued that it could damage social cohesion and national unity, and undermine the regime's stability.

The wave of demonstrations in Iran in recent years, which reached a peak in the years 2022-2023, when protests erupted following the death of the young woman Mahsa Amini, aroused renewed interest in the balance of power between the Iranian regime and its opponents, and in the conditions for political change in the Islamic Republic. Deep-seated social processes and escalating pressures both at home and abroad pose a heavy challenge to the regime, and could over time endanger its status as well as its stability. However, the regime continues to retain certain powers that enable it to survive the challenges for the time being. Firstly, it has the means to suppress protests violently and effectively. Secondly, it still enjoys considerable support among the security forces and law enforcement, above all the loyal Revolutionary Guards, who are dependent upon it. Change could ensue if some

part of the security forces began to refuse to participate in the oppression.

Moreover, at this stage the ruling political elite is managing to maintain internal cohesion in spite of political disagreements. Unlike the Shah's elite, that had close ties with the west and was able to find political and economic refuge outside Iran, the ruling elite of the Islamic Republic has no choice but to fight for power in order to survive. Thirdly, the regime still enjoys the active or passive support of various social groups, some for ideological reasons while others are economically dependent on it (Zimmt, 2025).

Several researchers have pointed to a weakening of cohesion among the mechanisms of the regime and the military-security elite that supports it as a necessary condition for political change. They estimate that the waves of protest will not lead to revolution as long as they remain without a solid organizational framework or a national leadership, if the ruling elites can maintain their cohesion and the security forces remain loyal (Azizi & van Veen, 2023).

The debate on the importance of cohesion in the ruling elite goes beyond the Iranian case and is also relevant for other authoritarian regimes, such as Russia (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2019). After the protests that erupted in Iran in the summer of 2009, following claims of fraud in the presidential election results, the Iranian political sociologist Hossein Bashiriyeh outlined some factors that could turn a protest movement into a revolutionary movement. Among other things, Bashiriyeh pointed to the cohesion of the ruling elite and the unity of the security elements responsible for suppressing protest, such as the Revolutionary Guards, the Basij militia, the internal security forces, intelligence-collecting mechanisms and the judiciary, as factors that help the regime to prevent the protests from developing into a serious and immediate threat to regime stability (Safaei, 2023).

This article examines the expressions of criticism heard in recent months among factions

identified with the ideological-revolutionary base of the Tehran regime around three central issues: the absence of an Iranian response to the Israeli attack, the Iranian failure in Syria, and the delay in implementing the hijab law, as well as the reactions in the pragmatic-reformist camp and in the conservative camp. The article discusses the question of whether criticism by radical elements is a sign of cracks in support for the regime. Deepening such internal rifts and undermining the cohesion of the ruling elite could weaken its ability to deal with the challenges it faces, in the long term and particularly in times of crisis. Heading these challenges are the deteriorating economic situation; the widening gap between the regime and the public; increasing external pressure following the entry of President Donald Trump to the White House; regional developments, particularly the weakening of the pro-Iranian axis; and the consequences of the Israeli attack on Iran.

Trends in the Iranian political system and the rise of the ultra-conservative stream

Since the Islamic Revolution all political power has been controlled by the revolutionary elite, who run a network of institutions that constitute the regime (Nazam). All political streams active under the regime accept its rules, do not seek to deviate from the basic principles of the system, and of course are not working to eliminate a system of government formulated on the concept of "The Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist." (In spite of its efforts to preserve the appearance of national unity, the Iranian political elite has been divided since the early 1980s into two main ideological camps, which are defined in various ways (right and left, radicals and moderates, reformists and conservatives, and so on), each of which is split into further smaller factions.

Any simplistic division of Iranian political streams, as happens in the west, is problematical because it does not reflect the complexity of

the attitudes within each stream on social, economic and political issues. For example, in the 1980s, the Islamic left, that promoted left-wing economic and social concepts, supported the export of the revolution, but adopted positions advocating social openness in the domestic arena. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) was identified with the conservative camp, but his policies on economic, social and religious issues actually reflected populist and anticlerical trends (Khalaji, 2013), while his positions on foreign policy were radical. Moreover, certain figures have been moderate on specific topics but extremist on others, and often expressed moderate views on one occasion and more extremist attitudes on other occasions. Not only that, the usual divisions are not valid in the long run because the political system is dynamic, and over the years prominent figures have changed their views and created new political alliances and coalitions. For example, the faction that was usually defined as 'radical' in the 1980s gradually adopted more moderate positions, and in the second half of the 1990s, supported President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), considered the most outstanding symbol of the reformist movement (Zimmt, 2022a).

Since the 1990s, the political system has been characterized by power struggles, mainly between conservatives and reformists. The conservatives advocated continued loyalty to the values of the revolution and derived their strength mainly from conservative clerics and the traditional middle class. They expressed pragmatism on certain subjects such as economic issues, but radicalism on others, particularly matters of culture and the opposition to western influence. The reformists usually favored some retreat from revolutionary slogans, which they felt were irrelevant or unfeasible (Menashri, 1999).

The late 1990s and early 2000s marked the height of the reformists' power, when they succeeded in taking control of the executive branch with the election of Khatami as president

in May 1997, and the legislative branch, following their victory in the 2000 elections to the Majlis. The series of reformist victories were perceived by the conservative establishment as a serious threat to revolutionary values and the stability of the regime. The conservatives began to neutralize the power of the reformists, by legal means and using political and civil oppression. During Khatami's presidency, the activities of the ultra-conservative rightwing movement Ansar-e Hezbollah reached a peak. This movement, which was founded in the 1990s, was involved in violence against reformist activists and senior public figures, and even in attempts to assassinate political rivals. While restricting the actions of the reformists, the conservatives embarked on a process of reorganization after some political soul-searching due to their defeats, and at the end of the 1990s a new conservative stream emerged. Young men from the second generation of the revolution began to enter Iranian politics, most of them veterans of the Iran-Iraq war who had served in the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij. They wished to preserve the basic values of the Islamic Revolution, which as they saw it had been eroded under the presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and Khatami. The new conservatives, who were dubbed Osulgarayan ("Principlists"), sought to present themselves as a real alternative both to the older generation of conservatives, considered largely irrelevant by younger Iranians, and to the reformists, whose struggle for political reforms and civil rights were perceived to a large extent as a threat to the basic values of the revolution (Zimmt, 2022a).

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the two main political camps, the conservatives and the reformists, were engaged in discussions on their future directions. While some conservatives continued to support revolutionary attitudes and remained determined to counter any possibility of change, others in essence adopted attitudes that had formerly been the preserve of the reformists,

based on recognition of the need to adapt revolutionary ideology to current conditions and the reality of the time. Although they were still committed to the Islamic Revolution and a system of governance founded on Velayat-e Faqih, they did not rule out gradual and limited changes in certain areas, such as restricting government involvement in civilian life, easing the atmosphere of security, removing some discrimination against women, extending freedom of expression, and being more open to the West, including the United States. The increasing dominance of these pragmatic groups in the conservative camp, whose most prominent representative was President Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021), paved the way for new coalitions and political alliances between the pragmatic center, known in Iran as E'tedalgaryan (moderates) and the reformists, against radical revolutionary elements, such as the Steadfast Front, identified with the radical wing of the conservative camp and opposed to any deviation from basic revolutionary principles in domestic and foreign policy (Zimmt, 2022a).

In spite of greater individualist tendencies, Iranian society is still characterized by a large degree of collectivism, expressed in strong commitment to the family framework and a shared national and cultural identity.

Alongside trends in the political system, over the years there has been a widening gap between government institutions and the younger generation, and many young people have started to turn their back on Islamic revolutionary values and the clerics. Nevertheless, even 46 years after the Iranian revolution, there are still young people who continue to demonstrate commitment to the regime, and some are characterized by an even greater degree of radicalism and loyalty to revolutionary values than the previous generation. Narges Bajoghli studied the

efforts of media producers who support the regime to recruit the support of the younger generation, and she highlights young members of the Revolutionary Guards, Basij, and Ansar-e Hezbollah who expressed concern regarding the future of the revolutionary project in Iran. Some of them showed even greater commitment to the principles of the Islamic Revolution than their parents (Bajoghli, 2019).

Sociologist Manata Hashemi has pointed out the gaps between the generations and the tendency to conformity among many young people of low social status, which could affect their attitude to the authorities. In spite of greater individualist tendencies, Iranian society is still characterized by a large degree of collectivism, expressed in strong commitment to the family framework and a shared national and cultural identity. Iranian society still attaches great importance to internal social classes (Khodi) and conforming to the norms and expectations of one's group. Hashemi's research showed that young people from weaker social strata do not generally rebel against conventions and prefer to follow the accepted codes of social behavior, in order to obtain economic opportunities and improve their chances for advancement (Hashemi, 2020).

The consequences of the rise of a revolutionary younger generation are also found in regime institutions, including the Revolutionary Guards. Kasra Aarabi pointed to growing criticism among young members of the Revolutionary Guards in the face of Iran's regional strategic failures, and inter-generational struggles in the organization. In an article published after the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria, he quoted a young radical in the Revolutionary Guards, who claimed that devout youth would not forget the cowardice of the decision makers, and pointed to the widening cracks in the organization in view of Iran's failures in Syria and the abandonment of the Assad regime by the political and military leadership in Tehran. According to Aarabi, young Revolutionary Guards accuse their senior

commanders of delays in making decisions regarding developments in Syria and they are starting to doubt their commitment and fitness. In the eyes of these young people, the fall of the Syrian regime and the abandonment of Shia holy sites constitute a blow to the memory of the victims of the military campaign in the country. The younger Revolutionary Guards are more radical and “more Catholic than the Pope.” Not only that, they are gradually turning against the old guard and increasingly questioning their loyalty and readiness to take action against enemies of the regime (Aarabi, 2024). Although it is not clear at this stage if the criticism of the younger generation reflects a wider trend, these voices join other expressions of criticism against the regime coming from groups identified with its ideological base.

Lack of direct Iranian military response to the Israeli attack

On October 26, 2024 Israel attacked Iran in response to the Iranian attack on Israel on October 1 (Operation True Promise 3). The Israeli attack caused considerable damage to Iran’s air defense system and its ability to manufacture ballistic missiles. According to a report in the New York Times, Iranian leader Khamenei ordered the Supreme National Security Council to prepare for a further attack on Israel, after receiving a detailed report from senior military commanders on the scope of the damage caused by Israel (Stack, 2024). Nevertheless and despite issuing some threats, Iran has so far refrained from responding to this attack, apparently for fear of an even stronger Israeli response and perhaps even American involvement, particularly in view of the US presidential elections that took place just after the Israeli attack.

As time has passed with no response, expressions of disapproval have grown stronger. The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria in early December 2024 reinforced the criticisms of the radicals, who pointed to the direct link between the Iranian avoidance of a response

to the Israeli attack and its failure in Syria, with the fall of its ally in Damascus. Although most of the complaints were directed against President Pezeshkian, they could also be interpreted as criticism of the regime’s policy as a whole, because decisions on issues of national security are made by the Supreme National Security Council. Under the Iranian constitution, the council is authorized to determine the country’s defense policy and national security as part of overall policy determined by the leader. It is true that the president is head of the council, but its members also include the Foreign, Interior and Intelligence Ministers, commanders of the Revolutionary Guards and the regular army, heads of the legislative branch and the judiciary and two personal representatives of the supreme leader. Since the three aforementioned ministers are usually appointed by the president with the approval of the supreme leader, while the head of the judiciary and the military-security system are appointed directly by the leader, the president and chairman of the Majlis are the only members of the council who are not apparently dependent on Khamenei, who also appoints the council’s secretary and his two representatives. This gives him almost complete control of the council (Thaler et al., 2010).

The online news site Raja News commented that not only did the delay in response put the “resistance” in a position of weakness, it also encouraged Israel to attack Iran again.

Condemnation of the lack of Iranian response to the Israeli attack was also voiced in the media and by politicians identified with the radical right. The online news site Raja News commented that not only did the delay in response put the “resistance” in a position of weakness, it also encouraged Israel to attack Iran again. The site claimed that the fall of Assad in Syria was a dangerous turning point for the Axis of Resistance, so Iran’s failure to respond to the attack could mean the loss of a golden

strategic opportunity to redefine the balance of regional power, and restore the initiative to the Axis. Moreover, any delay or hesitation by Iran would lead its enemies to estimate that its regional strength was fundamentally weakened and send a message that it had lost its ability to respond and its willingness to uphold “red lines” (Raja News, 2024b).

Under the headline “Essential Assurance,” the daily Vatan Emrooz also warned that if Iran failed to respond to the Israeli attack, it would face a more serious danger. According to the daily, Israel’s repeated threats to attack Iran prove that it could also attack important national infrastructures. Therefore any retreat from Iran’s intention to demonstrate its serious willingness to counter threats from Israel could lead to the implementation of such threats. Only a military response could change Israel’s calculations, remove the threats, restore Iranian deterrence, and protect its security and territorial unity (Vatan Emrooz, 2025a).

The declarations by radical Majlis members are of even more importance. Majlis member Ghazanfari, representing the Steadfast Front, which is identified with the radical right, put the responsibility for the absence of an Iranian response to the Israeli attack on the president and his government. He claimed that the president himself admitted that he had agreed to delay Iran’s response because he had faith in the American promise to achieve a ceasefire in Gaza and preferred not to act in a way that could put such a possible ceasefire at risk. Ghazanfari pointed out that the delay in the Iranian response to the killing of Hamas leader Ismayil Haniyeh in Tehran and Hezbollah chief of staff Fuad Shukr in Beirut at the end of July 2024 had severely damaged the Axis of Resistance led by Iran. He added that a number of senior Iranian officials (by implication, not only President Pezeshkian) were responsible for the delay in responding, and that if the Majlis concluded that they were indeed involved in this, it would take forceful action against them, irrespective of their status (Asr-e Iran, 2024a).

Sadegh Koushki, another member of the Steadfast Front, rejected concerns that an Iranian response against Israel would lead to war. “I ask the [Iranian] commanders if we are not already in a state of war with Israel,” he declared (Tabnak, 2024b). These statements from two Majlis members are evidence that even they do not see the president and members of his government as solely responsible for the lack of response. Although they do not directly criticize the supreme leader himself, something that is not tolerated in the Islamic Republic, their words could be interpreted as criticism of the higher military and security echelons that are both directly subordinate to the supreme leader.

Iran’s failure in Syria

The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 significantly weakened Iran and the pro-Iranian axis. Senior Iranian officials expressed concern over future developments in Syria and admitted that the fall of Assad had harmed Tehran’s ability to help its regional proxies, led by Hezbollah. However, they tried to play down the importance of Syrian developments and stressed that the fall of the regime would have no real negative influence, because Hezbollah had the ability to make its own weapons and it was not dependent on Iran (Meir Amit Intelligence & Terror Information Center, 2025).

As distinct from the official Iranian line, after the fall of Assad other voices were heard acknowledging the severe blow suffered by Iran and its regional axis. On this matter, too, the criticism was not limited to the president alone, but was also directed at the regime’s policies as a whole. For example, Majlis member Mohammed Mannan Raisi referred to the developments in Syria as an expression of divine anger. He wondered how Iran had handed Syria over to the radical Sunni organizations, after sacrificing thousands of fighters and investing billions in its involvement in the country. Raisi described a short meeting with one of the senior commanders after the

collapse of the Assad regime, when he asked him about the attack on Israel. The commander wondered about the point of such an attack when half an hour later Israel would attack Iran and then the people would have to implement Operation True Promise 4. Raisi said he was astonished at this response. Referring to Khamenei's statements that they must show Israel it was mistaken in its calculations about Iran, he mockingly wondered if developments in Syria showed that some of their military commanders understood the leader's words quite differently and were working to adjust Iran's calculations instead of Israel's. He stressed that the only red line for him was the leader of Iran, and he would not refrain from criticizing anybody, even senior military or security figures, and if necessary, he would not hesitate to reveal the names of those who were negligent in complying with the leader's instructions (Khabar Online, 2024a).

The former chairman of the Iranian Broadcasting Authority Mohammed Sarafraz expressed a similar position. "From the goal of liberating Jerusalem in Operation Al-Aksa Flood (the Hamas attack of October 7) we have arrived at the capture of further areas in the Syrian Golan, in south Lebanon and the northern Gaza Strip by Israel. Hasn't the time come for you to learn from your mistaken calculations?" he wrote on his X account (Sarafraz, 2024).

Other expressions of recognition by groups close to the regime, of Iran's strategic failures in Syria, can be found in statements and commentaries published in the Iranian media after the fall of the Assad regime. In a speech in a Tehran mosque that aroused great interest in the Iranian media, Behrouz Esbati, a former senior officer in the Revolutionary Guards, admitted that Iran had suffered a severe defeat in Syria. He strongly condemned the conduct of Russia, that had acted against Iranian interests in Syria and even colluded with Israel, according to him, as well as the actions of President Assad, whose commitment to the Axis of Resistance was limited and who imposed restrictions on

the activities of Iran in Syria in the final days of his government (Didbaniran, 2025a).

The Jomhuri Eslami daily also took an approach that deviated from the regime's official narrative regarding political changes in Syria, and called for a clear vision of the regional reality in order to deal with the consequences of recent events. An article published after the fall of Assad stated that it was impossible to deny the fact that Israel, the United States and radical Islamic groups had managed to achieve many of their objectives in Syria. It added that "acceptance of this reality, followed by a review of the policy that led to the bitter developments in Lebanon and Syria, is the only way to atone for the defeat" (Jomhuri Eslami, 2025).

Ultra-conservative groups also expressed criticism of the failure of Iranian policy in Syria on social media. Some claimed that the demonstration of weakness in Iran's decision-making process and the absence of a response to the Israeli attack on Iran contributed to the collapse of the Assad regime. They also criticized the decision by the National Broadcasting Authority (which is subordinate to the supreme leader) to change its position on the Syrian rebel organization Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) which took control of Syria. In the days prior to the fall of the Syrian regime, the Iranian national media stopped calling its members "terrorists" and began calling them "armed fighters" (Tabnak, 2024b).

Criticism on social media was also not limited to civilian institutions, including the government and the broadcasting authority, but also directed at the armed forces and the Revolutionary Guards. For example, there was criticism of the disastrous actions of the Quds Force commander Ismail Qaani and his contribution to the fall of the Syrian regime. Some posters justified this criticism by citing the fact that during the critical days when the Syrian rebels were approaching Damascus, Qaani was documented participating in religious mourning ceremonies in the supreme leader's office (Shahrekhabar, 2024).

Criticism of domestic policy issues

In December 2024 the Supreme National Security Council decided to freeze implementation of the hijab law, that had recently been approved by the Majlis. The law, which followed the wave of protests in 2022-2023, imposed severe sanctions on women who were not meticulous about wearing the hijab, including heavy fines and denial of social services (Gol, 2024). The decision to suspend the law was taken in view of growing criticism of it, including from President Pezeshkian, claiming it would increase public discontent and perhaps even lead to the renewal of protests.

Another Friday preacher in the Alborz district, Seyyed Mohammed Mehdi Hosseini Hamedani, also strongly condemned the decision to suspend the law, stressing that its implementation was the only way to protect the religious duty to wear the veil.

Suspension of the law was strongly condemned by radical factions, who put heavy pressure on the Majlis speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf to work for its implementation. In a press interview, the deputy head of the Majlis culture committee, Seyyed Ali Yazdikhan, stressed the need for the law, stating that if the government wished to put forward a new bill it could do so, but that could not prevent implementation of a law already approved by the Majlis (Khabar Online, 2025c). Other senior clerics echoed the criticism. A preacher at Friday prayers in Tehran, Seyyed Ahmad Khatami, criticized the president for failing to announce the official adoption of the law as required by the constitution. He argued that a woman's failure to wear the veil is contrary to both Islam and the law, and that senior members of the regime must promote the dissemination of the culture of righteousness (Khabar Online, 2025a). Another Friday preacher in the Alborz district, Seyyed Mohammed Mehdi Hosseini Hamedani, also strongly condemned the

decision to suspend the law, stressing that its implementation was the only way to protect the religious duty to wear the veil. He added that those who were delaying the law should be called to account (Khabar Online, 2025b).

Previous Iranian presidents have also been criticized for their policies, particularly on domestic affairs, over which the president has greater influence than foreign policy. For example, the initiatives of President Rouhani who tried to introduce internal changes, which basically meant restricting government interference in the lives of citizens, met with strong reactions from his conservative opponents. As his intentions to extend openness, ease the enforcement of the Islamic dress code and remove some of the restrictions on social media and the activities of cultural figures, became more evident, so too did the objections of the religious establishment, the political system and the Revolutionary Guards, who feared that they would undermine the values of the revolution (Zimmt, 2022a). Moreover, even presidents with a conservative outlook, such as Ibrahim Raisi, were not immune to criticism, including from conservative and radical circles. A few months after his election in 2021, there were strong disagreements between Raisi and his conservative opposition, due to growing discontent at his failure to improve the economic situation. The criticism was not limited to elements identified with the pragmatic-reformist camp but was also expressed by conservative politicians, media and clerics (Zimmt, 2022b).

What made the uproar over the issue of veiling relatively unusual was the fact that, like the criticism of foreign affairs issues, the complaints around the retreat from enforcement of the Islamic dress code were also directed at regime institutions that are directly subordinate to the supreme leader, including the Supreme National Security Council and the judiciary. A comment piece on the Raja News website, which is identified with the radical right, raised objections to the Supreme National Security

Council's interference on the subject of hijab. The article stated that the council's request to the Majlis to delay the official announcement of the law did not help to improve the situation in the country but only severely damaged public trust in the government and the ruling system (Raja News, 2024a).

Not only that, commentators identified with the radical right were not satisfied with condemning the postponement of the hijab law but also warned of its implications for the identity, stability and cohesion of the Islamic Republic. Conservative political commentator Fouad Izadi warned that Iran could lose the loyalty of religious young people and supporters of the regime if it was unable to preserve its Islamic identity. He noted that the willingness of young people to fight for the country depended on their continuing identification with it. If they felt it was no longer Islamic they would lose their motivation to fight. Izadi called on senior members of the regime to avoid creating the feeling among younger members of the Party of God (Hezbollah) that the Islamic Republic of Iran was similar to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. In that case they would not be prepared to defend it, and Iran could become another Syria, in which the army stopped fighting for the regime (Asr-e Iran, 2024b).

Political activist Mohammad Sadegh Koushki, who is a researcher at Imam Sadegh University in Tehran, has drawn a comparison between developments in Syria and the situation in Iran. His claim is that the Iranian government is undergoing a process of hostile takeover by President Pezeshkian and his reformist supporters, whom he compared to the Syrian rebels who took over Damascus. He argued that by their opposition to the hijab law and their support for removing restrictions on social media, the president's supporters were capturing one stronghold after another in the Islamic Republic. Moreover, he blamed the Majlis and the judiciary for ignoring breaches of the law by the government, and compared them to the Syrian army which retreated from the

Islamist rebels and did nothing to stop them taking control of Damascus. "If the Majlis and the legal system fail to perform their duty to restrain the government and fight against repeated breaches of the law by the president and his cronies, it would not be wrong to compare these two institutions to the defeated Syrian army" he wrote (Khabar Online, 2024b).

Pragmatists versus Radicals

As expected, the attack on the president and his policies from radical circles aroused strong reactions from the president's supporters in the reformist-pragmatic camp. They warned that granting the demands of the extremists could undermine social cohesion and even renew the popular protests, while severely harming Iranian interests. Not only that, they stressed that the areas of policy under fire from the president's opponents were not solely his responsibility.

The reformist daily Shargh was strongly critical of the radical groups, claiming that their demands in the areas of domestic and foreign policy went against the wishes of citizens to limit enforcement of the Islamic dress code, to remove blocks from social networks, and to work for the removal of economic sanctions. According to Shargh, the extremist attack on the president could reinforce social polarization and reignite the protests. The paper recalled that the wave of demonstrations throughout Iran at the end of 2017 started in the city of Mashhad with political rivals of President Rouhani in the conservative camp, who wished to protest his economic policy, but they quickly spiraled and spread to dozens of other cities with slogans against the regime and supreme leader Khamenei (Shargh, 2024).

The news website Entekhab also warned against the return of protests like those of 2017. The determination of the radical groups to implement the hijab law, their pressure on the government and the armed forces to respond to the Israeli attack, their emphasis on the need to continue blocking social media, and the spread of rumors about the president's possible

resignation—according to Entekhab, all these were intended to bring down the Pezeshkian government and incite the people against the authorities while ignoring the position of the supreme leader and the government's attempts to recruit a broad national consensus. The site called on the radical groups to learn the lessons of the 2017 and 2019 waves of unrest (the fuel protests), that led to harsh crises for the regime and the citizens (Entekhab, 2024b).

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The main radical criticism focused on foreign affairs, and in particularly the lack of response to the Israeli attack. The website Asr-e Iran accused the radicals of conducting a psychological campaign designed to destroy the image of senior regime officials, both politicians and military commanders. In a comment piece, it mocked young people who had only recently reached adulthood, had a few days' growth of beard and heard a few words about war, resistance and rockets, and were now gathering in the streets and demanding that their leaders raze Tel Aviv and Haifa, as if Iran enjoyed absolute military superiority, the enemy was weak, and only their own fears kept the rockets in their storerooms, while the two Zionist cities remained standing. The website also accused the extremist groups of spreading fear among the public with their warnings of further Israeli attacks on Iran. If Iran was so strong that it could start a war against Israel and win, then it could also defend itself from further Israeli attacks. But if it was so weak that Israel could attack Tehran, what was the point of recommending an Iranian attack on Israel? Asr-e Iran stressed that a wise man who starts a journey, first considers its end, and if the Iranian chain of command

had concluded that this was not the right time for action against Israel, there was a logical and justified reason. Only elements opposed to Iran in the regime and among the people would push the country into hasty war, and those calling for an attack were helping the psychological warfare of Iran's enemies, by sowing fear in the public (Asr-e Iran, 2024c).

The reformist newspaper Hammihan, in its response to growing pressure from the radicals, stressed that in their efforts to undermine government stability by criticizing the delayed response to Israel and Iran's withdrawal from Syria, they ignored the fact that these issues are not the sole responsibility of the president. The daily said that strategic decisions, such as Iranian intervention in Syria in 2011 or the withdrawal in 2024 were not under the authority of the president, and that according to the constitution he was not the supreme commander of the armed forces. The decision to refrain from attacking Israel was also not in his power, although he was the head of the Supreme National Security Council. The paper wondered if extremist Majlis members, the hardline paper Kayhan and Friday preachers were unaware that important decisions on foreign affairs, such as negotiations with the United States, were taken at the most senior level of the regime and were not linked to any particular government (Hammihan, 2024a).

Another article in the same paper stated that the radical elements are blaming all the crises that have plagued Iran for many years, including air pollution, the foreign currency crisis, electricity power cuts and inflation, on the few months that have passed since the election of President Pezeshkian, and according to this logic, even the fall of President Assad was linked to Pezeshkian and his deputy Zarif (Hammihan, 2024b).

Conservatives versus radicals

While the responses of the president's supporters in the reformist-pragmatic camp to criticisms from radical circles were expected,

the conservative responses expressed growing concern over their recognition of the potential harm implicit in the unusual criticisms of the political and security elite and their fears of undermining government cohesion. Although some of the conservatives have shown understanding of the radical arguments, particularly over the need to enforce the Islamic dress code, they warned against excessive extremism that could endanger Iran's internal stability, especially in view of the challenges it currently faces. It is clear that even within the conservative camp there is greater recognition that the actions of radical groups could be interpreted as a challenge to government institutions and the supreme leader himself.

For example, the conservative newspaper Farhikhtegan had reservations about the protests of revolutionary circles against the government, claiming that when criticism spreads into threats to depose the president, its influence becomes as negative as a fatal poison, and it creates a radical atmosphere and rifts in society. This is particularly serious when the people responsible define themselves as part of the regime, rather than its opponents. The paper warned that at a time when external threats to Iran are increasing, and Israel and the United States seek to intensify social rifts in the country and create chaos, the tendency to polarization in the sociopolitical sphere is very dangerous (Farhikhtegan, 2024).

The newspaper Sobh-e-No warned against the appearance of "super-revolutionism" in the conservative stream, that adopts radical interpretations and challenges state institutions. This conservative daily was responding to the statement by Fouad Izadi that Iran could lose the loyalty of religious youth if it did not preserve its Islamic identity, stressing that these young people were prepared to sacrifice themselves first and foremost to defend their homeland, and that they were not only loyal to their religious faith and Islam, but also to the principles of independence and national unity. They would fight not only to defend the Islamic

dress code but also to defend national interests and the territorial integrity of their country. According to this paper, the super-revolutionary approach seeks to appropriate the revolution for itself, to define it in an extreme way, and to use it as a means of granting legitimacy to strict and uncompromising attitudes. This kind of thinking widens the gap between generations and is designed to create a radical atmosphere contrary to the social reality and the interests of the people and the country. The paper warns that extremist trends cause severe damage to national cohesion, weaken social solidarity and increase internal rifts (Mashregh News, 2024).

Reservations about the extreme attitude of some revolutionary youth were also heard on media identified with the radical right, such as the daily Vatan Emrooz. An opinion piece published by the paper stated that membership of the Party of God (Hezbollah) meant being loyal to the Islamic regime and supporting the Islamic Republic. A Hezbollah member is someone who works for the interests of the regime. Therefore, when Iran's enemies are trying to reignite the flames of protest via the debate over the hijab, the most important mission for the religious-revolutionary stream is to defend the regime and its supreme leader, and avoid any moves that could weaken it and encourage hostile conspiracies. According to Vatan Emrooz, the Iranian regime defended hijab during the protests of 2022-2023, and religious supporters of the regime must give it their full trust and rely on it to know how to handle this issue, even if the public interest is to prevent implementation of the law at this time. They must employ a greater degree of understanding and patience, and avoid any actions that could undermine state stability, however pure and humane their motives (Vatan Emrooz, 2025b).

Some clerics have also been critical of public protest by the radical stream. Ayatollah Mohsen Gharavian warned against extremist activity, claiming that it damaged social solidarity and weakened national unity. In response to radical

In response to radical demonstrations against the removal of blocks on social media and the delay in implementing the hijab law, the cleric said that in recent years Iranian society had shown that it was tired of extremism, and it wanted gradual change in the direction of economic and cultural development.

demonstrations against the removal of blocks on social media and the delay in implementing the hijab law, the cleric said that in recent years Iranian society had shown that it was tired of extremism, and it wanted gradual change in the direction of economic and cultural development. The activity of extremist groups operating without a license against the overall policies of the state was damaging to stability and national unity, and did not help to solve the problems in society. He stressed that most important decisions in the country were made by state institutions subordinate to the leader, such as the Supreme National Security Council and the Council for Defining Regime Interests. Therefore opposition to policies dealing with issues under the authority of these bodies ignored the legal mechanisms of the state (Didbaniran, 2025b).

A member of the Council of Experts, Ayatollah Mohammad Mehdi Mir-Baqheri, considered one of the most extreme clerics, disagreed with the radical complaints regarding the strategic failures of Iran and the “Resistance Front” in Syria, claiming that they were serving the enemies of Iran. He stressed that Iran and its regional allies have the ability to overcome the loss of Syria following the collapse of the Assad regime, and noted that unfortunately some revolutionaries are echoing the narrative of enemies who are waging war on Iran’s image (Rasa News, 2025).

A similar complaint was also raised by the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali-Akbar Ahmadian. In an interview with the official website of the supreme

leader, Ahmadian expressed his regret that the accusation that Iran was weakened by recent events in the region was also being heard within Iran, although it was part of the psychological campaign being waged by the enemies of the Islamic Republic. Referring to the delay in the Iranian response to the Israeli attack, he said that the response would come at a time that best served national interests, and that military actions had to be based on military logic and not emotions. He stressed that anyone who questioned this was playing into the hands of enemies who wanted to sow fear in Iran (Iranian Supreme Leader’s website, 2024).

Summary and significance

In a lecture at Tel Aviv University, Uriah Shavit referred to the affair of the East German politician Gunter Schabowski, who gained most of his fame from a press conference on November 9, 1989, which was followed by the opening of the border between east and west Germany and the fall of the [Berlin Wall](#). At the end of the press conference, in which he referred to new regulations that were intended to allow east Germans to cross the border, Schabowski was asked when they would come into force, and although he did not know the answer, he replied: immediately. This statement led citizens to storm the wall and destroy it (Novotna, 2015). Shavit stated that soldiers stationed along the border between east and west Germany did not fire a shot at the citizens that night, even though their orders had not yet changed. That was because they understood that the price of following the orders could be greater than the price of disobedience. He claimed that regimes collapse when their supporters and defenders decide that they have lost their determination to defend themselves (TAUVOD, 2016).

Shavit’s approach can be used to explain the significant concern in the Islamic Republic, including in the conservative camp, in view of the reservations, doubts and criticisms expressed by radical groups for what they identify as a display of weakness by state institutions in the conduct

of domestic and foreign policy. Commentator and regime critic Shahn Tahmasebi, who lives outside Iran, recently estimated that doubts about Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards could also become stronger among regime supporters, and that one additional shock, such as the failure of a third Iranian strike on Israel or another Israeli attack on Iran, could be enough to finally shatter the image of the leader and the illusion of strength of the Revolutionary Guards (Tahmasebi, 2024).

This does not necessarily mean that the Islamic Republic is facing an immediate and significant threat to the cohesion of its political and security elite. Moreover, we can assume that in the scenarios of more severe internal and external challenges that could put the stability of the regime at risk, regime supporters are likely to close ranks and support it even if some of them believe that the government's policies are deviating from its ideological roots and its commitment to the fundamental values of the Islamic revolution. However, the prominent responses to the activities of radical circles could indicate that the Iranian political system itself is increasingly aware that it cannot simply treat the voices heard in the political and public spheres in recent months as part of the traditional and familiar power struggles between conservatives and reformists, or between radicals and pragmatists, and that there is an element of potential challenge to the cohesion of the ruling elite.

It appears that the need to defend themselves against rising doubts about the ideological foundation of the regime and its commitment to revolutionary principles has recently intensified, more so in view of the lessons learned from the collapse of the Assad regime, and particularly the unopposed retreat of the Syrian army as the rebels advanced, and the growing pressures faced by the Islamic Republic at present. Even if these doubts would not threaten the survival of the regime in normal times, they act as a force multiplier to other

threats to its stability. This trend could leave the Iranian leadership facing a difficult dilemma: whether to try and please the wider public by adopting a more conciliatory foreign policy and willingness to extend civilian freedoms, even at the price of possible further erosion of its ideological support base, or to satisfy the demands of its revolutionary supporters with a more radical domestic and foreign policy, at the price of risking greater public dissatisfaction and widening the gaps between the regime and the public, as well as the possibility of a renewal of protests and clashes with the west. Khamenei is already facing such a dilemma, as he approaches the test of negotiations with the United States on the nuclear issue, and he could soon be forced to agree to far-reaching compromises on the future of his country's nuclear program.

Moreover, the ability of the Iranian regime to permit a certain degree of criticism of its policies has helped it to preserve at least the appearance of ideological and political pluralism and expressions of popular representation. It is actually the possibility of criticizing government elements (excluding the Supreme Leader) that has helped the regime in its efforts to reinforce its stability and survive. Therefore, if the regime does not allow criticism even from circles identified with its ideological base, tensions could be diverted to other channels that would be even more threatening to its ideological home ground and endanger its survival.

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“The Struggle Has a Dimension Not Previously Understood”: Retrospective on the Novel by the Orchestrator of the October 7 Massacre

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This article proposes a retrospective reading of the novel, *The thorn and the carnation* by Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip in the years 2017-2024 and one of the planners of the October 7, 2023, massacre. The book, which was written in 2004 while Sinwar was imprisoned in Israel, gives an early glimpse of the roots of his teachings that sanctify violent jihad, sacrifice of life, hatred of Jews and rejection of any peace arrangement with Israel. Notwithstanding the importance of understanding the Hamas ideology, the novel has attracted almost no research interest so far. This article examines both the links between the novel and the October 7 attack, and the diverse—and sometimes conflicting—ways in which the book was received within the Arab-Islamic world and beyond, against the background of the Swords of Iron war and the elimination of Sinwar. The analysis shows that *The thorn and the carnation* is not only a literary creation but also a living, breathing ideological manifesto, that continues to shape political, religious and cultural awareness among large audiences across the globe. As a case study, it shows that literary texts have the potential to serve as a valuable tool for research and intelligence organizations to identify the enemy’s motives, to deepen their familiarity with its world view and even to predict its intentions. At the same time, when such texts penetrate the heart of popular public discourse, they can lay the foundations for radicalization and encourage terror.

Key Words: Hamas, Sinwar, Gaza, Israel, Swords of Iron, October 7, Antisemitism

Introduction

In April 2022 the Hamas television channel broadcast a series for Ramadan called *The Fists of the Freedom Fighters* (*Qabdat al-Ahrar*),

showing armed Hamas fighters invading Israel, capturing IDF bases and taking soldiers prisoner. The leader of Hamas in Gaza at that time, Yahya

Sinwar, heaped praise on the series and gave prizes to its producers, stating that the fighters of the movement’s military arm were destined to make the fictional plot a reality (Walla, 2023).

Some eighteen months later, on October 7, 2023, Hamas translated the script into an operative plan of action. Israel failed to interpret the early clues provided by Hamas in its military training, the statements of its leaders, its public conferences, and of course in its television programs (MEMRI, 2021). Israel’s long-standing policy of containment of the consolidation of Hamas rule in the Gaza Strip ended with a strategic surprise culminating in the worst tragedy in its history. To Israel’s lack of sensitivity before the massacre can be added its scant familiarity with *The thorn and the carnation (al-Shawk wal-Qaranful)*, an autobiographical novel published by Sinwar in late 2004. The book gives refined expression to the overtly murderous ambitions of the person who became Hamas’ leader and the driving force behind the October 7 massacre, while he was still a relatively unknown Hamas operative serving a life sentence in an Israeli prison for the murder of Palestinians suspected of collaborating with Israel. Surprisingly, even after the massacre, awareness in Israel of Sinwar’s “literary project” and the contents of his novel remain very limited, while in the Arab world and elsewhere the book’s recognition reverberated widely and it quickly became a best-seller.

This article is divided into four parts: historical background, focusing on the interaction between Hamas ideology and the policy it adopted from its inception up to the October 7 massacre; a retrospective reading of Sinwar’s novel in view of the Swords of Iron war; an examination of the antisemitic motifs in the book; and an analysis of the public discourse in the Arab world and elsewhere around this book, against the background of war, and particularly following Sinwar’s death.

The article is based on a qualitative interpretative approach, which combines textual analysis of the book with an examination

of the sociopolitical context in which it was written and the author’s religious-ideological background. The novel was read retrospectively in light of events that occurred almost two decades after its publication, noting the links between the ideas and the images it contains, and the October 7 attack and its goals. As such we examine the features of the plot, the characters and the symbols, and expose the principles and ambitions that drove Sinwar the author—and eventually the leader—and how he translated them into policy.

In April 2022 the Hamas television channel broadcast a series for Ramadan called *The Fists of the Freedom Fighters (Qabdat al-Ahrar)*, showing armed Hamas fighters invading Israel, capturing IDF bases and taking soldiers prisoner. The leader of Hamas in Gaza at that time, Yahya Sinwar, heaped praise on the series and gave prizes to its producers, stating that the fighters of the movement’s military arm were destined to make the fictional plot a reality

The research also analyses dozens of references to the book since October 7, 2023, in the press, on news websites and in social media, in Arabic and other languages. The purpose of this methodology is to examine the dynamic between the original text and its revived reception among various audiences in the wake of the war. It is read as a popular cultural manifesto—albeit controversial—which has shaped political and religious awareness and provides an ethical structure and symbols. It also encourages acts of violence and even personal martyrdom among Hamas activists and their sympathizers in the Gaza Strip and elsewhere.

The analysis is based on the assumption that literary narratives are not only a reflection of reality but also an important tool for shaping collective consciousness, moral perceptions and religious beliefs. Narratives are conceptual frameworks within which political players—individuals and movements—define their

identity, give meaning to their actions, and position themselves within the political arena, with the aim of influencing the world view of their target audiences (Somers, 1994).

Background: Hamas and Sinwar—From the First Intifada to October 7

Sinwar's novel, although it did not receive due attention before or after October 7, is a unique attempt by a Hamas leader to give literary expression to the radical and violent nature of his movement.

Hamas—The Islamic Resistance Movement in Palestine—was founded towards the end of 1987 in the Gaza Strip, following the outbreak of the First Intifada. It was led by Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, a charismatic Palestinian theologian who was influenced by the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, suffered disability from a young age and used a wheelchair. Hamas was established as a branch of the Brotherhood in Palestine and sought to offer a religious alternative to the PLO, with an emphasis on the centrality of Islam in the struggle to liberate Palestine and destroy Israel (Shavit & Winter, 2016, pp. 36-39).

According to the strategic vision of Hamas, as expressed in the movement's charter of August 1988, Palestine is *waqf* (endowment) land that belongs to the Muslims until Judgment Day. The charter calls for the liberation of all of Palestine from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River, and the destruction of any sovereign Jewish existence in the Land of Israel. According to clause 15 of the charter, the way to do this is by armed jihad—violent struggle against “the enemies who are stealing parts of Muslim land” that is perceived by Hamas as sacred, which is “the personal duty of every Muslim.”

The permanent peace treaties with Israel are presented in the charter (clause 11) as a betrayal of Islamic religious commandments. They cannot countenance any Arab country or leader surrendering even an inch of the land.

The charter is also an antisemitic document that looks forward to a world without Jews

at the end of days (clause 7). The Jews as a collective are presented as the enemies of Muslims (clause 32) and described as “Nazis.” In the spirit of *The protocols of the elders of Zion*, the charter accuses Jews of promoting conspiracies against humanity in general and against Muslims in particular, attributing to them the responsibility for two world wars as well as the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate (Intelligence & Terror Information Center, the Intelligence Heritage Center, 2006, clause 20).

Over the years, Hamas leaders converted these ideas into a murderous political program. When the PLO leader Yasser Arafat entered into negotiations with Israel and in 1993 signed an interim peace agreement (the Oslo Accords) including mutual recognition and acceptance—at least by declaration—of the two-state concept, Hamas was determined to sabotage the negotiations by force and at any price. It waged a violent campaign against Israel, including suicide attacks, kidnappings, shootings and stabbings, costing the lives of hundreds of Israeli men, women and children. Hamas justified the murder of Israeli citizens by arguing that Israel is a militaristic society and therefore every Israeli individual is a potential or actual soldier, whom it is permissible to kill (The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2022).

In January 2006, after implementation of the Israeli disengagement plan from Gaza, democratic elections were held for the Palestinian National Council, which were won by Hamas. A year and a half later, the movement took over the Gaza Strip by force and became its ruler. Since then, the Palestinian territories in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have been split between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, respectively. Repeated attempts at Palestinian reconciliation have failed.

In 2006, the Middle East Quartet—an international body whose purpose is to supervise settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and which consists of the UN, the United States, the European Union and Russia, defined

three conditions for Hamas to be accepted as a legitimate political player in the international arena: recognition of Israel, renunciation of violence, and acceptance of the interim accords signed by Israel and the PLO. The movement rejected these conditions, saying that it would not abandon its basic principles and would respect the wishes of its Palestinian voters (New York Times, Weissman, 2006).

Over the following years Hamas successfully established its rule in Gaza, but from 2013 to 2017 it suffered strategic obstacles due to a crisis of relations with Egypt. The removal of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt was a heavy blow for its daughter movement—Hamas. Not only that, the new government in Cairo led by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi accused Hamas of supporting the Salafi-Jihadi terror activities that were raging in the Sinai Peninsula and claiming thousands of Egyptian victims, tightened the closure of the Rafiah border crossing, and stepped up efforts to expose and destroy hundreds of smuggling tunnels used by the movement.

In July 2015, after the assassination of the Egyptian Prosecutor General by Salafi-Jihadi operatives who were trained in Gaza, Egypt threatened to pursue sanctions against Hamas, including defining it as a terror organization, if it failed to mend its ways. These threats were accompanied by a campaign of delegitimization against the movement, which was described in the Egyptian media as the military arm of the Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas found itself increasingly isolated in the regional and international arena, and suffered growing financial distress and damage to its standing among the Palestinian public (Winter & Lupo, 2018).

Against the background of these constraints, Hamas began to reconsider its policies and declarations in the hope of easing the growing external and internal pressures, by reaching agreements with Egypt and Fatah, and even drawing up a kind of renewed and updated charter. After internal disagreements, the

organization decided to leave the 1988 charter in place, while publishing a new political platform under a different name, a platform that could be updated according to changing circumstances.

Thus in May 2017 Hamas released its *Document of principles*, which did not replace the 1988 Charter but differed from it in four aspects: It featured less use of religious-Islamic concepts such as jihad, and more secular-national terms such as armed resistance; it denied links to its parent movement—the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which was removed from power by the Egyptian army in 2013 and made illegal; it renounced antisemitic rhetoric by clarifying that “the struggle against the Zionist enterprise is not a religious struggle against Jews”; and expressed a willingness to set up a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital based on the June 1967 armistice lines, but without recognizing Israel, the Oslo Accords or any permanent solution requiring division of the land.

This document was insufficient as a platform for reconciliation with the Fatah government in the West Bank, but it paved the way for tactical understandings between Hamas and the Egyptian regime. As for relations with Israel, there was nothing new in Hamas’ willingness to set up a Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank to begin with, as an interim phase. In fact, since the end of the 1980s, all the leaders of the movement—from Yasin to Sinwar—had proposed a *hudna* (temporary truce) of a number of years in return for a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, but had never retreated from their uncompromising adherence to the final target of liberating all of Palestine “from the river to the sea,” their refusal to recognize Israel, and the rejection of any permanent peace treaty with the Jewish state (Sher et al., 2017).

In their years of ruling the Gaza Strip, Hamas alternated between violent and non-violent resistance to Israel, depending on how it perceived its needs and changing circumstances—a situation that led to periodic

rounds of fighting between the two sides. At the same time, the movement's hope for the physical destruction of Israel remained its long-term strategic vision, but not an immediate operational objective. The change in perception emerged after Operation Guardian of the Walls (May 2021), when the Hamas leadership, headed by Sinwar, began to see the destruction of the Jewish state as an achievable goal, not just a utopian dream. This concept—which apparently lay behind the October 7 attacks—was based on feelings of strength shared by Hamas and its allies in the Axis of Resistance, and on their assessment that Israel was suffering from growing internal weakness.

In June 2022 Sinwar wrote to the head of the Hamas political bureau Ismail Haniyeh, in a document which was found by the IDF during the war, setting out a practical action plan to bring about the collapse of Israel. The plan was named “The Second Warning” (*Wa’d al-Akhira*)—echoing the Quranic prophecy, frequently mentioned in Islamic discourse, discussing the eradication of the Jews and the destruction of their state (Sura 17, verses 4-7). In the letter—which reflected the process of turning the dream of the Hamas leadership into a defined plan of action—Sinwar described a coordinated regional effort by members of the Axis of Resistance in a large-scale campaign:

We'll all go in—we and the party [Hezbollah] and the opposition force and the Al-Quds axis in the region (excluding Iran)—with all our strength in a surprise attack from all fronts with all force available, to bring down the occupying state and bring about its end [...] [This clash] will change the whole area, its regimes and its political reality in general and lead to a huge Islamic revolution in the region. Our brothers in the military [arm] believe that if the party has a third of what has been spoken of in terms of military capabilities and it joins in with all

its force—together with reasonable participation on the part of Yemen, Iraq and Syria (from the axis forces, not the states), the participation of guerrilla [forces] across the border from Jordan, our solid participation, and igniting the West Bank and the interior [Israeli Arabs]—we can, if Allah wishes and with his help, achieve our longed-for objective. This is the preferred scenario, and we must reach agreement on this. The crowning titles of the campaign must be Al-Aqsa and Jerusalem, since they are the “nuclear warhead” of the whole region. The timing will certainly be linked to one of the Jewish festivals when there is an increase in their incursions into the Al-Aqsa [compound], their attacks and their Talmudic prayers. Obviously Passover—which in one way or another overlaps with Ramadan—is the most suitable, but other Jewish festivals could also be used to light the fuse (Rost, 2025).

As shown by other documents seized by the IDF during the war, Sinwar carefully chose the timing of the October 7 attack. He did not inform Hezbollah and Iran in advance, for fear of a leak that would destroy the element of surprise, but afterwards he called on the forces of the Axis of Resistance to come to his aid. As he explained, the motives for activating the war plan were Israeli violations of the status quo at the Al-Aqsa compound, which were perceived as desecration of the holy site and an opening to the rebuilding of the Temple on its ruins and to the Judaization of Jerusalem; plus the fear that Israel itself would initiate separate surprise attacks on elements of the Axis of Resistance (Caspit, 2025).

Another important objective for Sinwar was to block the normalization agreement taking shape between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Such an agreement would have granted Israel recognition by the Arab Kingdom where Islam

was born, drawing other Arab and Muslim states into the circle of peace, and finally destroying the Hamas hope of uniting the Islamic nation into a joint battle to liberate Palestine and destroy the Jewish state. At a meeting of Hamas’ political bureau on October 2, 2023, Sinwar declared that in order to thwart the negative strategic direction of the region, “there is no alternative to unconventional action by the movement and the Axis of Resistance forces” (Reuters, 2023; Ynet, 2025).

Sinwar’s biography is intertwined with formative episodes in the history of Hamas, both during the initial period of founding the movement, and during the challenging period of establishing its rule in the Gaza Strip after his release from prison. He was born in 1962 in Khan Yunis to a family of refugees from Majdal (Ashkelon), and in the early 1980s studied Arabic language and literature at the Islamic University in Gaza. He was arrested by Israel in 1982 and 1985 for student activities and sentenced to short periods of imprisonment (Howeidy, 2024).

When Hamas was established, Sinwar was put in charge of its internal security mechanism, Al-Majd, whose function was to locate and eliminate anyone cooperating with Israel. This mechanism eventually became the military arm of the movement. He was arrested in 1988 and convicted in 1989 of the murder of four Palestinians he accused of allegedly collaborating with the occupation. Sinwar was imprisoned, and according to his prison guards, he aroused both esteem and dread in other Palestinian prisoners (Funiy, 2023).

During his incarceration, Sinwar learned Hebrew and translated a few non-fiction books from Hebrew to Arabic, including *Shin Bet among the tears* (Published by Yedioth Ahronoth, 2004). He also wrote two non-fiction books dealing with Hamas. The highlight of his writing was the novel, *The thorn and the carnation*, which was smuggled out of Eshel prison in Beer Sheba at the end of 2004 with the help of other prisoners, and published without identifying the publisher.

After his release in the Shalit deal in 2011, Sinwar advanced through the Hamas ranks, filling a number of important roles on his way to the leadership: He was elected leader of Hamas in Gaza for two consecutive terms (in 2017 and 2021). After the elimination of Haniyeh in Teheran in July 2024, Sinwar was appointed to replace him as head of the movement’s political bureau—a position he held until he himself was killed by IDF forces on October 16, 2024, when he was found hiding in a building in the Tal Al-Sultan neighborhood of Rafah.

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The thorn and the carnation is fiction, but there are clear similarities between the lives of its protagonists and that of the author. The connection between the novel’s plot and reality rests on the book’s chronology, which skips between a number of real events in the conflict with Israel in the period 1967-2004—wars, treaties, intifadas and terror attacks. In the foreword, Sinwar reveals his sources of inspiration as a writer and his desire to reach a global audience:

This is not my personal story, nor the story of a particular person, although all its events are real. Each event, or each set of events, pertains to this or that Palestinian. The only fiction in this work is its transformation into a novel revolving around specific characters, to fulfill the form and requirements of a novelistic work. Apart from that, everything written here is real, whether I experienced it myself or whether I heard about it from others, family members or neighbors who experienced it themselves over decades in the

beloved land of Palestine. I hereby dedicate [the novel] to those whose hearts are devoted to the Land of Isra and Mi'raj [Muhammad's night journey to Jerusalem] from the ocean to the Gulf, indeed, from ocean to ocean (Al-Sinwar, 2004, p.2).

To summarize, the book tells the story of a Palestinian family who are uprooted from their home in 1948, migrate to the Gaza Strip, and from 1967 onwards have to deal with the reality of life in the Al-Shati refugee camp under Israeli occupation. The matriarch single-handedly raises her three biological children and two nephews under one roof, without their fathers who were forcibly separated from their children as a result of the Six Day War. The sons grow up to affiliate with various Palestinian factions and differ on how Palestinians should confront the Israeli occupation (Hugi, 2024).

Three of the boys are the novel's leading characters: Ahmad, who is the narrator, is a science student whose heart leans towards Hamas under the influence of his cousin Ibrahim, who serves as his role model. Ibrahim, the hero of the novel—who symbolically bears the name of Sinwar's real father and son—is active in the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza, from which Hamas eventually emerges. Ibrahim is studying at the Islamic University in Gaza and working to inculcate others with the movement's ethos of "resistance." By contrast, Mahmud, Ahmad's older brother, is a Fatah activist who disagrees with Hamas ideology, sees the PLO and the Palestinian Authority as the legitimate representatives of the Palestinian people, and supports the Oslo Accords as the way to achieve a political settlement with Israel (Fahmi et al., 2024; Zibaei & Ali Naithal Al-Gharabi, 2024).

From *The Thorn and the Carnation* to "The Al-Aqsa Flood"

Sinwar is considered the brains behind the October 7 massacre, and it is hard for contemporary readers of *The thorn and the*

carnation to miss the heavy hints to the brutal attack against Israel that he conceived and executed some two decades later.

The seeds of the disaster appear throughout the novel, where literary expressions often echo the operational agenda that materialized on the day the order was given: the perception of the war with the Jewish state as a religious war; the sacrifice of one's life through jihad against Israel as a sacred value and a supreme goal, in spite of its heavy price; the desire to kill as many Israelis as possible, without differentiating between soldiers and civilians, and sometimes without differentiating between Israeli Jews and Israelis of other religions; admiration for hostage-taking as a tactic intended to elicit negotiations for the release of Palestinian prisoners; and the ambition to destroy any peace and normalization agreements between Israel and its Arab neighbors by means of violent terror, while rejecting the political line of the Palestinian Authority.

The name given by Sinwar to the October 7 attack was "Al-Aqsa Flood" (*Tufan al-Aqsa*) although it was mainly directed against communities in the western Negev. By linking Jerusalem to the attack, Hamas sought to give the campaign a religious-Islamic character (and not only national-territorial), and to express the supreme strategic objective of the movement: uniting all fronts of the struggle against Israel and recruiting the Arab-Islamic collective to liberate the land of Palestine, with the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem—Islam's third most holy site—at its heart, by means of uncompromising religious war.

This approach is revealed in its full intensity in Sinwar's novel. The narrator Ahmad shares with his readers a seminal event he experienced while a high school pupil in Gaza on his first visit to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in the late 1970s, when it was still possible to enter Israel from the Gaza Strip almost without hindrance. The visit was organized by the Islamic Bloc, which later became the Hamas student movement, and the guide was his cousin Ibrahim. On the

way to Jerusalem the pupils' bus stopped near Latrun, where Ibrahim—with tears in his eyes—picked up a handful of dirt, which he claimed was tainted with the pure blood of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, who according to tradition, fought on this spot in the year 637, during their journey to conquer the land under the command of Abu Ubayda b. al-Jarrah. He expressed a wish to water the ground with the blood of the successors of those early Muslims, the Palestinians of today, until its liberation (pp. 130-131).

The high point of the visit came, of course, when the pupils entered the Al-Aqsa compound. They prayed in the mosque, listened to the Friday sermon, visited the Dome of the Rock and heard the story of the Prophet's night journey to the city. While they absorbed the sanctity of the place, they noticed an insufferable injustice: soldiers of the Israeli occupation were stationed at the entrance and deciding whether to allow or deny the entry of worshippers. At that moment he was filled with anger that the nation of Islam that stood behind the Palestinians, with all its wealth and military power, was not doing enough to liberate the mosque from the "gangs" that had taken control. It was then, says Ahmad, that he realized that "the conflict has a dimension not previously understood; it wasn't just about land and a people displaced but a battle of faith and religion" (p. 132).

As expressed by the novel's heroes, anger at the abuse of Al-Aqsa and Palestine must be translated into violent action—jihad to defend the holy site and liberate the land, with willingness to sacrifice one's life according to the path trodden by the heroes of Islam from the time of Prophet Mohammed, through the military commander Salah Al-Din Al-Ayyubi who conquered the land of Palestine and liberated Jerusalem from the Crusaders in the twelfth century, down to the present day (pp. 142-143).

Sometimes the ideal of sacrifice takes on specific faces and names, when a friend or relative of Ahmad and Ibrahim loses his life in the struggle against Israel. In one of the

cases described in the novel, the pain at the death of a friend named Yasser is mixed with joy that God granted him a martyr's death (shahada), and the weeping in the mourners' tent mingles with shouts of joy from his family who distribute sweets and large colored pictures of the deceased. In another case, the wife of the novel's hero Ibrahim is described as "one who never stops smiling" when she receives the news that her husband has been killed by an Israeli airstrike (pp. 250-251, 334).

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For Sinwar, the lives of Palestinians—and even more so, Israelis—have no value, only their sacrifice has. In fact, the slaughter of October 7 is dwarfed by the fantasies he puts into the mouths of his novel's heroes. He describes the tense expectations that prevailed in the Gaza Strip during the First Gulf War—hopes that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein would send missiles with chemical warheads and wipe out half the population of Israel (which at that time numbered five million). Therefore, when the sirens first pierced the air, the Palestinians came out with cries of encouragement for the Iraqi leader: "In spirit, in blood, we will redeem you O Saddam... Ya Saddam Ya Habib, strike-strike Tel Aviv." But how great was their frustration when they learned that the rockets sent towards Israel had only conventional warheads. As the narrator puts it, "We felt as if we were drenched in icy water" (pp. 228-229).

After the dashed hopes of the slaughter of millions of Israeli citizens with chemical weapons, the heroes of Sinwar's novel had to

be satisfied with more modest acts of murder, but the goal remained the same: to make the occupiers “curse the day they came to our land and conquered our holy places” (p. 262).

Another issue on which it is possible to draw a straight line from the novel to the October 7 attack is the great interest shown by Sinwar, who wrote the book in jail before being freed in the Shalit deal, in hostage-taking as a bargaining tool for the release of Palestinian prisoners and as a personal and collective obligation

The narrator praises a series of attacks involving shootings, explosive devices and suicides aimed at civilians (including women and children) from the start of the Oslo process to the Second Intifada. These include the attack on the Dan number 5 bus on Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv, which was carried out in October 1994 and led to the death of 22 people, with 104 injured, using an explosive belt made by a senior member of the Hamas military wing, the so-called “engineer” Yahya Ayyash; the attack at Beit Lid Junction in January 1995, in which 22 were killed and 66 injured; the attack at the Tel Aviv Dolphinarium in June 2001, in which 21 were killed and 120 injured, mostly youngsters who were attending a party at a dance club (many years before the slaughter of hundreds of party goers at the Nova Festival on October 7, 2023); the attack on the Sbarro restaurant in Jerusalem, in which 16 were killed and 140 injured; and the first launches of mortars, shells and home-made Qassam rockets at villages in the Gaza Strip and in the western Negev (pp. 295-296, 298, 326, 328, 331).

The Palestinian attacks deep inside Israeli territory, including in the cities of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Netanya and Ashdod, are presented in the book as proof of the Palestinians’ ability to cause serious damage to the enemy, in spite of its strong army and the huge gap in the balance of power between the sides. According to the narrator, the attacks were very

successful: They aroused panic in the hearts of the conquerors; incited tensions in Israeli society over continuation of the peace process; caused Israeli streets to become deserted; and kept stores and cafes closed and empty. At that time only a handful of Israelis dared to use public transport. Sandbags were placed in urban shopping centers, which took on the appearance of military bases due to the use of checkpoint barriers and the deployment of thousands of soldiers and police officers (pp. 330-331).

An observer of the devastation of Gaza since October 7 will certainly wonder whether Sinwar would have carried out the slaughter if he knew in advance the scale of the death and destruction it would cause in the Gaza Strip as a whole, and that he himself would be asked to sacrifice his life. Based on the novel he wrote, it is very likely that his reply would be positive.

The book’s heroes justify the heavy price in lives and property paid by the Palestinians for their terror attacks during the Second Intifada, and some of them sacrifice their own lives in the name of faith and jihad. Moreover, their sacrifice is made knowing that the IDF arsenal includes fighter jets and tanks, against which the Palestinians have no defense. In one chapter of the book, Ibrahim dismisses the calls to Hamas to lay down its arms and allow the Palestinian people to live without war. He jokes that after Israel has struck Hamas operatives from the air, invaded Palestinian cities and left them in ruins, it has no choice but to rebuild them so that it will have something to destroy in future clashes with the movement (pp. 327, 330-331).

Another issue on which it is possible to draw a straight line from the novel to the October 7 attack is the great interest shown by Sinwar, who wrote the book in jail before being freed in the Shalit deal, in hostage-taking as a bargaining tool for the release of Palestinian prisoners and as a personal and collective obligation. The Jibril deal in 1985—in which 1,151 Palestinians were released in exchange for three IDF prisoners in

Lebanon—is described in his book as a moment of joy in the Palestinian territories, as well as invigorating the national struggle with the release of these “experienced” members of the various Palestinian factions (p. 159).

The book describes in detail two other operations for which Hamas was responsible: The kidnapping of Border Police Officer Nissim Toledano in 1992, which was intended to bring about the release of Sheikh Yasin and ended with the murder of the hostage and the exile of 415 Hamas operatives to Lebanon, and the kidnapping of the soldier Nachshon Wachsman in 1994, which was intended to bring about the release of 500 Palestinian prisoners, headed by Sheikh Yasin, and ended with a failed IDF operation to release him (pp. 245-246, 293-295).

Just as Hamas worked in 2023 to derail the efforts to achieve normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, so in the 1990s they focused on bringing down the Oslo Accords. The novel deals extensively with the rift between those Arabs and Palestinians who chose the political path and the strict Hamas adherence to an uncompromising armed struggle and resistance to every permanent peace arrangement with the Jewish state. The roots of this rift go back to the peace initiative of Egyptian President Anwar Al-Sadat. According to Sinwar’s book, Sadat’s speech in the Knesset in November 1977 was profoundly shocking to the Palestinian people. In an act of protest, Palestinian terrorists assassinated the Egyptian journalist Yussuf Al-Siba’i who was a close associate of Sadat and a member of his entourage on his visit to Israel (p. 111).

Once the Oslo Accords were signed, the inter-Arab dispute became an internal Palestinian one. Many of the conversations between the novel’s heroes present the strident disagreement between on the one hand, the PLO, and later the Palestinian Authority, who sought peace treaties with Israel for pragmatic considerations, and on the other hand, Hamas who firmly opposed political compromise, preferring to create a situation of sovereignty that was not anchored

in any binding permanent arrangements beyond a temporary truce, i.e. *hudna*. For example, in response to the willingness of PLO supporters to set up a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Hamas supporters expressed their opposition to recognizing the right of the Jewish state to control 75 percent of historic Palestine, since “Israel is an abusive state that was founded on our land and should cease to exist” (p. 267).

In addition, the book’s heroes reject outright the argument that the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian entity requires accepting the existence of Israel. In a discussion between PLO supporter Mahmud and Hamas supporter Ibrahim, the latter insists that it is possible to establish a Palestinian state without recognizing Israel’s territorial rights on any part of the land.

A few years before implementation of the 2005 Israeli disengagement from Gaza and the Hamas takeover of the Strip, Ibrahim predicts that the killing of hundreds of Israelis by the Palestinian resistance will spur Israel to withdraw unilaterally from Gaza and the West Bank, and pave the way for a Palestinian state in liberated parts of the country without the need for recognition of the Jewish state. When Mahmud insists on asking him to explain the difference between withdrawal conditional on recognition of Israel and withdrawal without such a condition, Ibrahim replies that if Israel leaves the land without an agreement, under pressure from the resistance, Palestinians will not be bound by any commitments towards it, and the door to continuation of the struggle to destroy it will remain open until the circumstances are right (pp. 267-268).

As the book shows, the disagreement between supporters of the PLO and of Hamas is not only ideological but also political. Hamas refuses to recognize the PLO and the Palestinian Authority as the sole representatives of the Palestinian people, likewise the agreements signed by the PLO with Israel, and the powers granted to the PA by virtue of agreements over territories for which it is responsible. The

technical justification for this position expressed by Hamas supporters in the book is that the factions of the Palestinian opposition do not see themselves bound by agreements that they did not sign, particularly since the PLO did not consult them before signing and did not have them approved by a referendum (p. 289).

As described in the novel, these justifications are added to the Hamas rejection in principle of the conditions of the Oslo Accords, including: ending violent resistance, entering into relations of cooperation, coordination and security ties with Israel, and worst of all—recognition of the right of the “Zionist entity” to govern most of the territory of Mandate Palestine under broad international guarantees.

In one chapter of the book, Ibrahim is summoned for questioning at the Palestinian Security Office. The official explains the new reality of one legitimate Palestinian Authority, which has signed agreements with Israel under international guarantees, and warns him that he will be arrested if he does not obey its laws. In response, Ibrahim accuses him of collaborating with the Israeli plot to split the Palestinians into two groups, one committed to agreements and the other to continued opposition. At the same time he stresses that Palestinian national aspirations will not be fully achieved by negotiations but only by force of arms, since as everyone will eventually realize, “our enemies only understand the language of the gun and fire” (pp. 290-291, 297-298).

The book is therefore a further reflection of the struggle between Hamas and the PLO for Palestinian public opinion, where each side proposes its own path in the fight for national liberation. For example, in one of the arguments between the book’s protagonists, PLO supporter Mahmud accuses Hamas of carrying out attacks in order to acquire for itself—instead of via the Oslo Accords—Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian territories. Mahmud’s reply is that there is no point in waiting for Israel to withdraw in the framework of a political process, since in any case Israel is destined to “flee under the

pressure of the resistance” from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (pp. 297, 301-302).

Antisemitic Motifs in the Novel

The thorn and the carnation is a largely political essay, a song of praise to the path of violent resistance against Israel more than an antisemitic manifesto whose purpose is to preach hatred of the Jews as such. And yet it is precisely for this reason that the antisemitism springing from the pages of the book is so organic. It reflects almost inadvertently the assimilation of hostile attitudes towards Jews into Hamas discourse and ideology, and apparently also among a large proportion of the Palestinians who support the movement.

The antisemitic motifs expressed by the novel’s characters include references to Jews as the eternal enemies of Muslims, attributing despised characteristics to Jews, and wishing for the killing of Jews and even their annihilation.

The most widespread antisemitic motif in Islamist discourse is the concept of Jews throughout history as the enemies of the Muslims, thus linking Muhammad’s struggle against the Jews of the Arabian peninsula in the seventh century CE with the struggle of Hamas against the Jews of the present. A popular myth among Islamists—one that is mentioned repeatedly in Sinwar’s book and became a symbol of humiliation of the Jews—is the Battle of Khaybar in 628, in which the Muslims defeated the Jews of the city and forced them to surrender half their possessions to avoid being converted to Islam. This battle is also mentioned in the note found in the pocket of the commander of the Hamas military wing on October 7, in which he calls the Jews “a disease for which there is no cure” and urges his soldiers to cut off their heads “in the name of the God of Khaybar” (Shuval, 2023).

Similarly, in some parts of the novel the call “Khaybar Khaybar O Jews, the army of Muhammad will return!” is repeated in various contexts: Gaza youths rejoicing after damaging the tires of IDF jeeps (p. 204); non-Palestinian

Arab and Muslim demonstrators marching in support of the intifada in the capital cities of their countries (p. 326); and a young man called Muhammad who sets out on a suicide mission in Gush Etzion. Like the Nukhba forces, who called their relatives in Gaza to boast in real time about their atrocities on October 7 in the Gaza perimeter communities, Muhammad calls his mother to exchange his final words with her, and leaves his telephone open so that she will be able to hear the heroic moments that end his life:

He cried "Allah is the greatest, Khaybar is out", throwing his grenades one after another, and then broke through the door of the main hall shooting [...] Shots were exchanged with the security forces that rushed to the place. Muhammad fell and repeated "I bear witness that there is no God but Allah and I bear witness that Muhammad is his messenger." Then his mother let out a cry, wailing "Praise be to God who has honored me with his martyrdom" (pp. 332-333).

The perception of the evil and unchanging character of the Jews is used in the book as an explanation for the mutual abhorrence, which is destined to exist between Palestinians and Israelis, with selective reliance on Islamic sources. For example, the massacre at the Cave of the Patriarchs carried out by Baruch Goldstein in 1994, in which 29 Muslim worshippers were killed, is described as representative of the Jewish collective and not as an individual act of terror that was widely condemned in Israel. According to the novel, the slaughter occurred after the Imam read a verse from the Quran condemning the Jews and their violent and offensive conduct going back to the days of the First and Second Temples: "We declared to the Children of Israel in the Scripture, 'Twice you will spread corruption in the land and become highly arrogant'" (17:4). At that moment, Sinwar

writes in the novel, a "tall [settler] with a wild and dirty beard" crept into the hall and shot the worshippers (p. 286).

The opposition to the Oslo Accords expressed in the book is also justified by the treacherous nature of Jews. For example, in a discussion between the novel's heroes, Hamas supporter Hassan asks PLO supporter Mahmud, "Since when have [the Jews] honored agreements and contracts?" He cites a Quranic verse that refers, according to widespread interpretation, to the Jews' violation of their covenant with Muhammad and the aid they gave to infidels: "How is that whenever they make a covenant or a pledge, some of them throw it away? In fact, most of them do not believe" (2:100) (p. 301).

Mahmud, for his part, is unwilling to accept Hassan's approach and accuses him of irrationality, which confuses what is written in the Quran about the Jews of ancient times and Jewish Israelis of today. Hassan replies that the PLO members will very soon realize that the Jews have cunningly deceived them, just as "they killed the innocent and fought against Allah and his messenger" in the early days of Islam:

This is what Allah told us about them. We know them, their minds and the way they act. They recognize neither covenants nor treaties [...] Don't you know that history repeats itself, and that Jews remain Jews? You will see, Mahmud, you will soon see, and I will remind you [of this] if we are still alive (p. 308).

The terms "Jews" and "Israelis" are used interchangeably in the book, but the hatred of Jews is not limited to their role as the representatives of the "conquering and oppressive Zionist entity," which is constantly infringing the national rights of the Palestinians; it derives in fact from their religious identity. For example, the book mentions an attack in Gaza on an IDF vehicle, which it later emerged was

carrying Druze soldiers. Although the Druze are described in the book as violent and immoral, as people who were cruel to young Palestinian women and dishonored them, nevertheless Hamas members express disappointment and sorrow on realizing they have attacked Druze. “Ah, if only they had been Jews!” sighs Ibrahim, watching on television the weeping wives, mothers and sisters of the Druze victims (p. 276).

The perception of Jews past and present as the enemies of the Muslims—and as possessing permanent immoral features that make it impossible to live in peace with them—naturally leads to the desire for their deaths and even total extermination. Towards the end of the story and just before Israel takes his life, Ibrahim recalls “the promise of the stones and the trees”—an Islamic tradition also mentioned in the Hamas Charter (clause 7), which foretells the killing of Jews on the Judgement Day:

The Prophet of Allah said: The hour will not come until the Muslims fight the Jews, and the Muslims will kill them, until the Jews hide behind stones and trees, and the stones and trees will say: ‘O Muslim, O servant of Allah, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him,’ except for the Gharqad tree, for it is the tree of the Jews” (p. 333).

This tradition, ultimately, was Sinwar’s personal wish and mission when he planned “The Al-Aqsa Flood,” and the commandment he left for his readers.

Arab and International Discourse around *The Thorn and the Carnation* Following the Massacre

Works of art sometimes only arouse broad public attention after the death of their creator. Such is the case with Sinwar’s novel, which received wide recognition in the Arab world and beyond following the slaughter of October 7, 2023, and particularly after he was killed a year

later. On publication of the dramatic account of his death, *The thorn and the carnation* began to arouse interest on Arab social media, where many users were surprised to discover that the head of the Hamas Policy Bureau had dabbled in writing and was the author of a literary novel (Baraka, 2024).

The book was quickly marketed to Hamas sympathizers as Sinwar’s last will and testament, and even as a prophetic text in which the author expressed his wish for the martyrdom that he achieved some two decades later. Many Arabic writers pointed to the similarity between the last moments of Sinwar and of Ahmad, the novel’s narrator, who was also killed fighting Israel, and whose last words were: “I imagined myself storming their positions, butchering them like sheep, then becoming a martyr. Before my eyes stood Allah’s messenger in Paradise, calling to me, ‘welcome, welcome!’” (p. 332, Mamduh, 2024a; Imad, 2024; Sharqawi, 2024).

The novel—which was first published semi-clandestinely in 2004—was printed in a revised Arabic edition by several publishers, and copies were quickly snapped up (Bawabat Tunis, 2024). Within a few months it was declared the best-selling book at book fairs in Amman in Jordan, Al-Sulaymaniyah in Iraq, and Idlib in Syria, and also enjoyed success in bookstores and fairs in Kuwait, Algeria, Morocco and Egypt (El-Khabar, 2024; Al-Kuwayti, 2025). The book was also translated into English, French, Italian, Turkish, Kurdish, Russian, Chinese and Persian, and distributed through bookstores worldwide. In Iran no less than seven editions of the Persian translation sold out in less than two weeks (Al-Vefagh, 2024).

Hamas noted the success of the novel, and handed out hundreds of copies in Lebanon to politicians, cultural figures and pro-Palestinian activists (Palestinian Information Center, 2024). However, in the Palestinian arena itself, interest in the novel was relatively limited, apparently for two reasons. Firstly, in the areas under its control in the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority was not keen to encourage the popularity of

a book that undermined its legitimacy and glorified its political rivals. As for the Gaza Strip, we can assume that the conditions prevailing after October 7, 2023 were not conducive to distributing and reading books.

In addition to hard-back sales of the novel in Arabic, there were hundreds of thousands of free downloads from online sites. Its dizzying success can be seen in the fact that by June 2025 the *Goodreads* website contained over 300 reviews of it from readers in various countries, all of which without exception appeared after the October 7 massacre, and the majority after the death of Sinwar. The average rating for the book was 4.59 stars (70 percent of readers gave it five stars, 20 percent gave it four stars, and less than 2 percent gave it only one or two stars). Most of the reviews were written in Arabic, but about 15 percent were in other languages, including English, Persian, French, Turkish and Malay (*Goodreads*, n.d.).

There were also numerous reviews of the book in the press, on Internet sites and in Arabic literary journals, and they can be divided into three types based on the ideology and interests of their writers. The first type are the reviews written by supporters of the axis of Islamist resistance, which includes Hamas. They were prominent on platforms and media identified with Qatar and Turkey—Hamas’ patrons and its leaders’ hosts—and with Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iran. These writers stressed the ideological approach presented in the book, whereby the conflict with Israel is religious, and not only national, and praised the ethos of jihad and martyrdom preached by the author.

For example, in December 2024 the Al-Aqsa Conference, a Qatari initiative intended to increase public awareness of the Palestinian issue and which was indirectly subordinate to the Qatari Ministry of Youth & Sport, organized a discussion of the book. Participants praised the novel’s heroes for their “sacrifice of life, property and children for the sake of Al-Aqsa and not only for the homeland,” since “Al-Aqsa is a matter of faith that is not limited to the

borders of the homeland, which were created by its enemies” (Al-Aqsa Conference, 2024).

An article on the Qatari *Al-Jazeera* channel website by Sulayman Saleh, formerly a member of the Egyptian parliament for the Muslim Brotherhood, describes Sinwar as “a man of vision and purpose.” According to the writer, his book carries a message that is directed not only at the Palestinian people but at the whole Islamic nation, and its purpose is to increase awareness of the Palestinian problem. Not only that, he admired Sinwar for writing the book in literary Arabic and not in spoken Palestinian Arabic, so that his message would reach Arabic readers everywhere, and also because he—as a member of an Islamic movement like Hamas—saw the integration of literary-Quranic language as an anchor of his religious identity (Saleh, 2023).

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Similarly, the *Palestine Online* website that is affiliated with Hamas states that Sinwar changed from the author of a fictional novel to a “flesh and blood hero,” an example of realizing one’s dream in a way that exceeded the imagination he displayed in his book (Al-Battah, 2024). An article in the Turkish daily *Yeni Şafak*—known for its support of the Erdogan government’s pro-Islamist line—presents Sinwar’s life story as a source of inspiration for “Palestinians and those living in the heart of the Islamic world.” The columnist, Seljuk Turkilmaz, wrote that “for us, reading and reflecting on [Sinwar’s] book is a duty.” He portrayed Sinwar as a “great warrior” who secured his place in history by sacrificing his life defending Muslim lands (Turk Press, 2024).

The translator of the book into Persian, Asmaa Khajazadeh, spoke in an interview about her great interest in works dealing with the resistance front and her fierce hatred for “the

Zionist entity.” She said that when Sinwar was killed, a new hero entered the “resistance hall of fame.” Moreover, Sinwar the martyr—who will be inscribed in history as someone who fought to the last moment—will remain immortal and will be more dangerous to the Zionist enemy than the living Sinwar (Al-Vefagh, 2024).

Other reviews with an Islamist tinge found in the novel the perfect complement to violent resistance. On the Qatari website *Al-Arabi Al-Jadid*, Yussuf Sharqawi, a Palestinian commentator living in Syria, claimed that Sinwar’s literary project was closely linked to his resistance project, and it was not by chance that he waited two decades to reenact with his own body the final scene from the novel (Sharqawi, 2024). An article on the Arabic Post website, whose offices are in Turkey, states that Sinwar imbued the heroes of his book with the values of “asceticism, sacrifice and redemption,” creating “an internal impulse for resistance.” Therefore we can learn from his book how Hamas in Gaza trained “a young generation able to oppose the occupation,” while nurturing “the motivation for resistance through years of education and preparation” (Arabic Post, 2024).

Other Islamist writers referred to autobiographical elements in Sinwar’s novel and eulogized him as a “martyr, jihad warrior, symbol of courage and a pure person, whose name will be engraved in the memory of enemies before friends” (Al-Shammari, 2024). The Lebanese writer Ali Naeem, who himself was awarded the Qasem Suleimani Prize for Resistance-Supporting Literature in 2024, pointed out on the *Al-mayadeen* website, which is identified with Hezbollah, that the book written by the Hamas leader sheds light on “another side of the diverse and multifaceted personality of the great commander Yahya Sinwar: He was a writer and scholar with every fiber of his being, but equally devoted to his people’s plight until his last breath” (Naeem, 2024).

The second type of Arab response to Sinwar’s book also treats him positively, but out of solidarity with the voice he gave to the

human suffering of the Palestinians and the denial of Palestinian national rights, rather than with the Islamist ideology of Hamas and the Axis of Resistance, as presented in the book. Reactions of this kind appeared mainly in media close to the regime in Egypt, which sees itself as committed to the Palestinian cause, in parallel to its internal struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood and its suspicious and ambivalent attitude to Hamas.

For example, the Egyptian writer Ammar Ali Hassan wrote in the establishment daily *Al-Masry Al-Youm* that Sinwar’s book is very good at describing the hard lives of the Palestinians under Israeli occupation. In his words, the novel teaches about “the Palestinians’ rituals of mourning and rejoicing, their attitude to aid organizations, their schools, their children’s games, the architecture of their simply furnished homes, and what they eat and drink, and also about the suffering and fear of mothers when their sons are arrested, imprisoned, wounded or beaten to death” (Hassan, 2024). Similarly, an article on the pro-Palestinian Arab website *Al-Hasad* says that the book describes the suffering of the Palestinians in refugee camps, where they experience “lack of food, poverty, hunger, fear and repression” (Al-Rajab, 2024).

Other articles in the Egyptian press use selective quotes from Sinwar’s novel to reinforce the image of Egypt and its army demonstrating solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza, but they ignore other parts of the book that criticize the peace treaty that Egypt signed with Israel. For example, an article in *Al-Shorouk* notes that Sinwar’s book praises the Egyptian soldiers who were in the Strip until 1967 for showing kindness to the Palestinian children and giving them sweets every day (Imad, 2024). In the same way, an article in *El-Watan* states that the novel includes “strong praise for the Egyptians, their compassion and their tenderness” and recognizes “the importance of Egypt and its central role in providing support for the Palestinian cause over the years, even before 1948” (Mamduh, 2024b).

Finally, the third and least common type of response to Sinwar’s novel contains strong criticism of the book and its author, reflecting the political and ideological tensions between Hamas and its Arab and Palestinian opponents. Although censure of Hamas and its leaders is not as widespread in the Arab world as the discourse supporting them, it is clear that it has increased both in traditional media and on social networks, as the war continues and the damage it has caused becomes more evident. A handful of writers found in the book reinforcement for their views on the futility of the Hamas path of violent resistance, on the tragedy into which the movement dragged Gaza residents in the wake of the October 7 attack, and its constant efforts to turn the conflict with Israel from a national to a religious struggle, while thwarting any chance for political compromise.

Particularly scathing criticism can be found in a series of articles by Hussam Khadra, a Palestinian journalist living in Cairo. On the *Amad* website, run from Egypt by the Palestinian politician Hassan Asfour, a Gaza native known for his opposition to Hamas, Khadra mocked Sinwar because his book called the aggressive behavior of IDF soldiers towards the residents of Gaza in 1967 “defeat” while he later called the bloody war that broke out after October 7 “victory” (Khadra, 2024a). He also pointed out that Sinwar was mistaken in his book when he estimated that Israel would not dare to enter the crowded refugee camps in the Gaza Strip and destroy them, and the price of this mistake was heavy: Two million Gaza residents were forcibly dragged into a children’s game called “Jews and Arabs” that he fondly remembers in the book, in which kids in the refugee camp were divided into two groups that fought each other with wooden sticks (Khadra, 2024b).

Referring to Sinwar’s obsession with pursuing internal “traitors”—collaborators with Israel—Khadra accuses him of a mental disturbance that ultimately takes its toll on the residents of Gaza:

The author mentions stories of treachery three times, and he formulates them in a way that provides a window into the soul of a man suffering from an antisocial behavior disorder. The symptoms of this disorder include hostility, violence, lack of empathy for others, lack of remorse for harming others, and taking unnecessary risks, taking dangerous actions with no thought for personal or group safety—the Gazans saw all this with their own eyes throughout the war that crushed the Gaza Strip (Khadra, 2024c).

Criticism in a similar vein was made by the Egyptian publicist Sami El-Behiri on the Saudi website Elaph. He said that reading the book gave him a number of insights into Hamas, including: that the movement was responsible for attacks against Israeli citizens, leading to the murder of Yitzhak Rabin and the rise of the extreme right in Israel; that it turned the Palestinian problem from a territorial dispute to a religious struggle between Judaism and Islam, using Muhammad’s war on the Jews of Khaybar 1,400 years ago as a metaphor for the conflict with Israel and comparing Hamas fighters to his army; and that it is an extreme party that will not accept any Palestinian partner in its government, as shown by Sinwar’s complete disregard in the novel for Yasser Arafat, the leaders of Fatah and their dramatic return from exile, while the leaders of Hamas such as Ahmad Yasin and Yahya Ayyash and the attacks carried out by the movement are addressed extensively (El-Behiri, 2025).

On the Emirati news website *Al-Ain*, it is argued that the novel reads more like a propaganda document than a work of literature. Moreover, the carnations that Hamas planted in the Gaza Strip turned to thorns in the wake of the “Al-Aqsa Flood,” and they are “burning Gaza and threatening to ignite a regional war in which everyone loses” (Al-Ain News, 2024).

The interest aroused by the novel does not stop at the borders of the Arabic-Islamic world, and its distribution in the West aroused a series of controversies. In early 2024 Amazon offered an English translation of *The thorn and the carnation*. The appearance of a book by an arch-terrorist for sale on one of the world's largest online commercial platforms led to protests by Jewish and pro-Israel organizations, and the book was withdrawn after a few days (JNS, 2024). Protesters argued that its contents incited violence, were soaked in Jew hatred, and encouraged terror. Not only that, they expressed a concern that profits from its sale would eventually reach the terrorist organization Hamas (UKLFI, 2024).

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In early 2025 there was further uproar when the management of La Sapienza University in Rome cancelled a symposium organized by pro-Palestinian students to mark the release of the Italian edition of the book. The President of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, Naomi Di Snai, condemned this “dangerous initiative” that could encourage “organized terror” (AFP, 2025). At the same time, the translation that first appeared in December 2024 continued to be sold in Italy through leading online bookstores. In a promotional item on La Luce website, which is linked to the book's publisher, it is described as “a rare glimpse into Palestinian society fighting for its honor and identity,” and its publication is described as “an expression of

the publisher's courage and its commitment to freedom of expression” (La Luce, 2024).

Notwithstanding the protests, editions of the book in English and other languages continued to be sold on international websites such as eBay and in bookstores in Switzerland, Germany and the United States. Connolly Books in Dublin, which was established in 1932 and describes itself as “Ireland's oldest radical bookshop,” referred to distribution of the book as an ethical mission beyond any commercial consideration. The store's Internet site was generous in its praise for the author, who was portrayed as “martyred while bravely fighting against Israeli genocide in Gaza.” Potential readers were invited to “traverse the corridors of his mind, where the seeds for the heroic ‘al-Aqsa Flood’ operation initiated on October 7, 2023, were sown” (Connolly Books, n.d.).

Identification with an Islamist terrorist movement like Hamas is not reserved for radical social movements in Ireland; it is seen in others who have made a connection—if only implicit—between the anticolonial struggles of their country and what they interpret as “legitimate resistance” to Israel. A month before Sinwar was killed, Susan Barday, a lawyer concerned with human rights in the Middle East, wrote in the South African weekly *Mail & Guardian* that the novel gives “an intimate and heart-wrenching perspective on Palestinian resistance.” She says that the author—at that time still alive—demonstrates leadership “through the escalating violence and genocide” (Barday, 2024).

Although most reactions to the novel were supportive, both in the Arab-Islamic world and in the international arena, it is clear that it aroused interest mainly among people who already supported Hamas. In this sense it was not just a means of propaganda but also a tool to establish Sinwar's legacy among his followers.

Conclusion

In an interview published in *Ha'aretz* in September 2006, shortly after the Second Lebanon War, the poet Haim Gouri talked of an

insight he heard from the Egyptian intellectual Dr. Hussein Fawzi during his first visit to Egypt in December 1977. In a conversation about the Israel-Egypt wars, Fawzi talked of the humiliation felt by Egyptian men after the Six Day War, when their wives and children scorned them. He said, “If Israeli intelligence had read Egyptian poetry written after 1967, they would have known that October 1973 was unavoidable.” Gouri’s conclusion was clear: “Every good intelligence officer should read poetry, while we didn’t read it and still don’t read it” (Lev-Ari, 2006).

The analysis of *The thorn and the carnation* and the controversy it aroused clarifies once again the power of a work of art: How it can reflect deep cultural, religious and political trends; act to distill radical world views into a literary text that can then become assimilated into the popular discourse in both East and West; and how it can grant those ideas legitimacy and even encourage violence.

The book gives a glimpse into Sinwar’s internal world and reveals the correspondence between his literary ideas and his murderous actions. Glorifying jihad, the desire for mass killing of Israelis and the blatant antisemitism, all chime with the Hamas concept realized in the October 7 slaughter. Sinwar’s efforts to thwart any normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia also fit in with his characters’ aversion to any political settlement of the conflict, and his adherence to the vision of destroying Israel and liberating Palestine from the river to the sea at any price.

When examining the continuity between the novel’s messages and the actions of Hamas on the ground, one concludes that the seeds of the attack were sown not only in Sinwar’s operational planning but even before then—in his literary work. Thus, to the series of failures by decision-makers, intelligence agencies and the research community in Israel before October 7, one must add the insufficient attention paid to literary texts, which could have served as stark warnings.

That a novel written by a murderous antisemitic psychopath is being sold today in the capitals of Arab countries and even in the West, with no interference or penalty—and even attracting glory and praise—must serve as another warning sign.

Not only does the novel serve as a mirror to the past, but also as a spotlight to the future—it helps us to understand the structural limitations on every attempt to reach an agreement with Sinwar’s successors. Even after the orchestrator of the October 7 massacre was removed from the scene, the struggle against the ideology of Hamas and its supporters is far from over. The real defeat will not be achieved on the battlefield alone: Guns can be confiscated and leaders eliminated—but the ideological roots of *The thorn and the carnation* must be uprooted, no less than the operational branches that have sprung from them.

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Quotes from the novel appearing in this article were translated from Arabic by the authors.

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Where Did We Go Wrong?

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Israeli public discourse following October 7 has focused on the false “conceptions” that blinded us to the possibility that reality could develop as it did. The surprise caused to Israel by Hamas’ attack deeply undermined Israelis’ confidence in security professionals and, one would hope, those professionals’ confidence in themselves. More broadly, this should lead members of the security community to ask fundamental questions about their understanding of the world around us. Two of these questions are: “Where did I go wrong?” and “In which cases have I changed my mind?”

Recently, but before Operation Rising Lion, we held a discussion on a social media network that addressed the question “What were you mistaken about in the past two years?” The discussion’s participants, many of whom have relevant military or civilian research backgrounds, provided meaningful answers that could help us clarify the changes that have occurred in the way we perceive reality. This article touches on the key points of that discussion

Key Words: Swords of Iron, Hamas, Iran, Hezbollah, Rising Lion, strategic surprise.

Basic Conceptions on the Eve of the War

A central issue that came up was the surprise of October 7. Some of the discussion’s participants pointed out that prior to Hamas’ surprise attack, they had believed that the movement was interested in maintaining quiet for the purpose of building up its force for a future conflict and to provide for welfare needs in Gaza. Others had believed that the change the movement had undergone was even more profound. Their view on the eve of the war was that within Hamas, there had been a shift away from a strong jihadist identity toward the use of political and pragmatic tools in order to advance the movement’s goals.¹

Among those who underestimated the seriousness of Hamas’ intentions to destroy Israel, some mentioned that, accordingly, they had been mistaken in estimating the cost-benefit balance of conquering Gaza versus accepting Hamas’ force buildup. Thus they had opposed a proactive military campaign in the past instead of seeing it as the lesser of two evils. Some noted their surprise that Hamas was able to “bring Israel to its knees” and correspondingly stated that the assumption that the IDF would be able to contain Hamas turned out to have been mistaken.

It is worth noting that a topic that was not raised at all in the discussion was the Israeli policy of the differentiation between the

Palestinian Authority and Hamas, pursued by Israel's governments over the past fifteen years, which included refraining from comprehensive political processes with the Palestinians. The silence on this point might reflect the fact that participants who believed before the war that political processes were important have not changed their minds on this question, or alternatively, that they did not and continue to not see much value in political processes.

The Military Campaign in Gaza

The discussion on the fighting in Gaza in the Swords of Iron War revealed a split among participants. Some referred to the collapse of the IDF's border defense system on October 7 as a surprise, reflecting their mistaken assessment of the IDF's strength and readiness. Also regarding the war that followed, some indicated that they had been mistaken in their assumption that the ground forces were prepared for their missions. Meanwhile, other participants saw the number of IDF casualties, which was lower than what they had expected when they had previously imagined a campaign to conquer Gaza, as a mistake in their assessment of the cost of conquering Gaza. This is connected to the previously discussed error in the cost-benefit analysis of conquering Gaza compared to accepting Hamas' military buildup.

Another topic mentioned by many participants as a mistake was Israel's success in freeing hostages in partial deals. Note that it was not the occasional successes in hostage-release special operations that were seen as reflecting a mistaken assumption—perhaps participants assumed that a few such operations were possible—but the success of Hamas and Israel reaching a point where they were willing and able to carry out prisoner and hostage exchanges in a format that was not “everyone for everyone.” Also notably absent was a topic discussed extensively in the public discourse—the prolonging of the war, which was not brought up by any of the discussion's

participants as a topic on which they were surprised by developments.

The Campaign in the North

Similar to the mistake that some of the participants identified regarding the potential cost to IDF forces of a campaign in Gaza, a similar error was made regarding conflict with Hezbollah. The participants had expected that the IDF would have difficulty in a war against the Hezbollah forces, which were seen as superior to those of Hamas, leading them to price a war in Lebanon even higher than their already high assessment of the cost of a war in Gaza. The participants added that the mistake was especially pronounced with regards to the home-front. Years of discussing Hezbollah's firepower capabilities had prepared the Israeli public for a pounding of the Israeli home-front and massive damage to the cities of northern and central Israel.

To explain this mistake, some pointed out that the campaign developed very differently from previous assumptions about how a conflict with Hezbollah would unfold. If concerning Hamas, the error was the assumption that the movement would not initiate a proactive war, regarding Hezbollah, the mistaken assumption was that the war would begin with almost no prior warning or escalation and that if it developed out of ongoing friction, this would place Israel in an inferior position. This is because the assumption had been that Israeli success in such a war depended on carrying out a surprise opening strike, as it was reported that Israel had considered doing on October 11, 2023, and as it later did against Iran. In practice, the ongoing friction prior to launching the war caused the area in which IDF forces operated in southern Lebanon to have fewer enemy forces than expected. In addition, some of the discussion's participants commented that the nature of Israeli preparations for the war, which naturally receive less day-to-day attention than the enemy's preparations, was of great importance for the success against Hezbollah.

Furthermore, the incremental escalation during the summer of 2024 enabled the IDF to gradually deprive the enemy of a significant portion of its firepower before deciding to escalate to a full-scale war. In this context, the pager explosion operation was of enormous importance. According to many reports, it was not carried out as part of a strategic plan to defeat Hezbollah but out of fear that the capability would be exposed. As one of the participants in the discussion said, this was an important reminder that the use of force sometimes creates opportunities that are difficult to foresee, even if it lacks a clear strategic purpose.

The Iranian Context

As mentioned, the discussion described here took place prior to Operation Rising Lion, so it did not relate to the high-intensity campaign against Iran. The most prominent mistake mentioned in the Iranian context was in assessing the seriousness of Iran's intentions to destroy Israel. The participants felt that they had been mistaken not only regarding the seriousness of Iran's intentions but also regarding how far along the practical implementation of the plan was. One person in the discussion compared this to the oft-recited Jewish prayer, "next year in Jerusalem," which for many years of Jewish exile had been merely a figure of speech that did not lead to practical action. In fact, it turned out that the Iranians, much like early Zionists, had moved toward the practical application of their distant longing.

Internal Israeli and International Aspects of the War

The discussion's participants did not just point out errors in understanding Israel's enemies; they also addressed events inside Israel and its relations with the world. One topic that recurred in various forms in participant statements, was the mistake in assessing the government's survival following the failure on October 7, and the expectation many had that the failures of

that day would lead to the establishment of a state commission of inquiry. Several participants indicated their disappointment in those they had seen as international allies in academic circles and in center-left circles, who stood against Israel and Israelis at the very early stages of the war, even before serious doubts emerged over how the IDF was waging the war.

The moral aspects of the war led to the liveliest discussion among the participants. While some of the participants stated that they had been mistaken in their assessment that the Israeli public would demonstrate greater moral sensitivity to Palestinian civilian suffering, others rejected the criticism and pointed to the reserve forces' continuing to show up for service and society's mobilization in support of those who have been harmed and in favor of continuing the fighting, as a sign of the moral excellence of Israeli society. Clearly, the measure of morality used by the two sides in this discussion is not the same, and it indicates the difficulty of discussing this sensitive question over how to evaluate the moral standing of Israeli society in the war.

Conclusions

Overall, the discussion can be grouped into several themes:

- Taking the enemy's intentions seriously: Following the October 7 attack, like after the Yom Kippur War, some claimed that we must focus on enemies' capabilities and not their intentions. However, as the analysis offered here indicates, listening to the enemy's intentions as they were actually expressed provided a good glimpse into its plans. If we had taken the Palestine Square Countdown Clock in Tehran, which counts down to Israel's destruction, more seriously, we might have been better able to analyze the situation.
- Overestimating enemy capabilities: Regarding enemy capabilities, the error vis-à-vis Hamas was underestimating them. It is equally correct to ask why we were mistaken in

places where we expected worse results than actually occurred. This applies to the fighting against Hezbollah but also to how the campaign against Iran developed. Various statements and reports indicate that on the eve of Operation Rising Lion, military and civilian decision-makers estimated that the damage to the home-front and the operational forces would be much more severe than what actually happened. The plan implemented against Iran provided an extraordinary response to Iranian operational threats, and it is essential to continue to address the question of why our enemies in Lebanon and Iran had difficulty carrying out their plans as we understood them.

- The importance of use of force: In the years preceding the Swords of Iron War, Israel's use of force focused on the "war between the wars"—relatively limited operations that aimed to impair enemy military buildup without leading to a large-scale campaign. In the context of the previous point, one of the reasons for this was concerns about the losses that Israel would incur in a large-scale war. The Swords of Iron War is a serious and difficult war with high costs, but these stem mainly from its length and how it began and not from exceptional enemy success in inflicting losses on Israel. The war showed that the use of force can open unpredictable avenues to change facts on the ground.
- Avoiding a pendulum swing: Following the last point, it is tempting to conclude that Israel should respond to all its challenges with force, but this would be swinging the pendulum too far to the other side. Israel can solve many problems using force, including those that it did not think that it could. However, some remaining problems are better addressed through diplomatic measures. Even more important is the balanced and coordinated use of force and policy tools in order to make the most of the opportunities that each of

these tools provide.

- The importance of expertise in the face of inevitable mistakes: The question of where we went wrong focuses, of course, on our mistakes and, as a result, can create the impression that expertise has no value. But this cannot be further from the truth. First, focusing on mistakes overlooks the numerous instances in which knowledge and in-depth understanding have served us well. Second, even when experts' assessments are mistaken, their knowledge and understanding, along with the analysis and learning that take place over time, create opportunities. A good example of this is the war against Hezbollah, where the ongoing analysis and in-depth understanding of the organization enabled the creation and exploitation of opportunities that Israel did not foresee. Experts and those dependent on them must remember that error is always lurking, but this does not eliminate the need for knowledge; instead, as the clichés rightly say, it demands humility and flexible thinking.

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Notes

- 1 In this context, see Zimmt, R. (2024). Symposium: The Role of Ideology in the Conduct of Islamist Actors. *Strategic Assessment*, 27(4), 94-98. <https://tinyurl.com/y637n4b2> (Hebrew)



“Now It’s Our Turn” – The People Behind the Battle Accounts from the Swords of Iron War

Dotan Druck

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Now it’s our turn: A small personal story about the shaping of a great generation (In Hebrew)

By: Shachar Turjeman

Publisher: Am Oved

Year: 2025

No. of pages: 227

Shachar Turjeman has written “a small personal story about the shaping of a great generation,” according to the subtitle of the book, and indeed this is his personal story and that of the platoon he commanded in the Swords of Iron War, first on the Lebanese border and later during the fighting in Gaza, in rehabilitation and maneuvers in Lebanon at the end of 2024. Yet this is not a small story, but a big story about people—

reservists who left their homes on October 7, 2023 in order to fight the enemy. The book joins other books published thus far about this war, written by both soldiers and commanders, most of whom are still serving in the reserves, while the war has not yet ended. It seems that some of the books were published after the initial major maneuver that took place in Gaza, such as those by Elkanah Cohen (2024) and Moshe Wistoch (2024)—who recount the story of the fighting that ended in early January 2024, or at the end of December 2023, respectively—while others wrote with an understanding that the intense period of the war was over for them. In the Swords of Iron War, unlike past wars (except for the War of Independence), there have been “waves” of more intense military activity, in both Gaza and Lebanon, so that sometimes the end of a particular wave seems like the end of the war, or at least its active phase, and this of course affects recruitment and the participation of reserve forces in the war, and consequently the fighters and commanders in the reserves who write and publish their stories.

Other kinds of books have been published on this war, giving us insight into the war itself, the people involved and its strategic aspects. There are descriptive accounts and semi-academic studies of the surprise attack of October 7, such as “Iron Swords, Broken Hearts” (2024) by Michael Bar-Zohar, or “The Gaza Division has been Captured” (2024) by Ilan Kfir. These are similar to the books that were published immediately after fighting ended in the Second Lebanon War or Operation Protective Edge, and they seem to hint at a kind of competition to be the first to define the narrative of the particular war or operation. Another genre is the collection of short stories of heroism brought together by an editor, such as “Heroes alone against Hamas” (2024) by Yoav Limor, or “We’re on the way” (2024) by Nachum Avniel. There are books written by residents of the western Negev, such as Hadas Calderon’s “To see the blue sky” (2024) or “Wrapped” (2025), edited

by Dalya Robinson, and “Journey back to the home that betrayed” (2024) from Ami Kahane, all reflecting the difficult emotions surrounding the October 7 attack, coping with it and its consequences, and also the rebuilding that followed.

Shachar Turjeman’s book, “Now it’s our turn,” is constructed according to the order of events and is a kind of personal journal, in which he describes the experiences of the engineering reconnaissance platoon (Mahsar) of the Engineering Battalion that he commanded. While describing the experiences of his platoon in the war, he is careful to report not only who did what and when, but also shares with his readers his doubts, thoughts of home and friends, the reasons for his decisions, particularly those that had an effect on his men—or more correctly, his friends in the platoon. The first part of the book deals with the defensive fighting in Lebanon at the start of the war, in which the platoon also initiated engagements as far as was possible. The Mahsar of the Engineering Battalion is a specialized platoon that is able to execute a variety of tasks, and Turjeman wanted his actions to be as meaningful as possible.

At the end of the first part of the book, Turjeman describes his platoon’s move down to the Gaza front, following his request to his commanders. “‘Take heart,’ I said, ‘this evening we’re packing up the platoon and going down to Gaza’” (page 47); Turjeman emphasizes for the reader how he chose to convey to his platoon the importance and significance of his decision to move them to the most active fighting front at that time, and the approval it garnered from his commanders. In the second part of the book, which is twice as long as the first part, we quickly discover that the platoon is a very significant addition to the fighting power in Gaza. Turjeman’s engineering reconnaissance platoon is commanded by the forces operating in Gaza, particularly Division 36, but also Divisions 98, 99, Gaza and even 162. Turjeman continually reminds us that Division 36 is their “home,” but it appears that he became very attached to

Division 99 and there they were given numerous missions and excellent cooperation, at least in terms of the number of missions, the feeling that his platoon was needed, the assistance and protection provided as they maneuvered into and out of battle.

While describing the experiences of his platoon in the war, he is careful to report not only who did what and when, but also shares with his readers his doubts, thoughts of home and friends, the reasons for his decisions, particularly those that had an effect on his men—or more correctly, his friends in the platoon.

Turjeman writes of the temporary truces, the short visits home where he encounters his wife, his children, and also reality. In the chapter headed “A short break and return to sanity” (p. 139) he explains the need for such breaks in wartime, although they only provide momentary sanity because almost immediately he goes back to war. “Unlike the south, in Haifa there was no sense of war [...] All the stores and restaurants were open, and even the discounts for soldiers had disappeared in most places” (p. 139). Here Turjeman protests the situation in a country mired in war, but not in equal measure everywhere. It reminds me of my home visits from the security zone in Lebanon in the 1990s; suddenly I encountered completely normal life, just a few kilometers from my military post.

At the end of the second part of the book Turjeman describes an incident from January 8, 2024, in which two fighters from Turjeman’s platoon were killed while four Yahalom soldier and a number of others, including Turjeman himself, were wounded. He describes the course of events prior to the incident: The platoon and Yahalom soldiers had finished laying a number of charges in order to blow up several targets in the Al-Bureij area. A tank that was part of the force securing the action identified enemy forces and fired shells at them, this set off the charges and the soldiers were hit.

A deafening explosion created a shock wave that split the tunnel and threw Eden and David against the concrete wall [...] Outside everything was gray. A cloud of destruction and death covered everything [...] Neither of us moved. We were covered in soot and blood [...] Zinny turned Sagi over and laid him next to me [...] He shouted for a tourniquet, saying Sagi was losing blood, and then asked where Akiva and Gavri were (p. 174).

In the third part of the book, Turjeman begins to talk about his injury from this incident. “Apparently I’m a body, apparently that’s how you feel when you’re dead and lying on the ground [...] Somebody yells ‘bring tourniquets’” (p. 179). Immediately afterwards he is concerned for his platoon: “Wwwhat about Ddadon? [...] And wwwhat about Sssagi? Which Sagi? The famous one? [...] Sagi’s been taken to Tel Hashomer” (p. 181). He discovers that two of his soldiers have been killed, others wounded but they’ll recover, some are in other hospitals. He describes the meeting with his wife in the hospital—a moving, inspiring meeting. Although he is unable to attend the funerals, he manages to visit the families during the Shiva (7-day mourning period) and attend the 30-day memorial. He shares his soul-searching regarding his actions, the way he pushed the platoon to take on missions, and wonders if he should have done anything differently. He ultimately describes being at peace with what he did, and is encouraged by the families—of the victims and also his own immediate family—the men of his platoon. A few months later they are called again, this time for maneuvers in Lebanon. Turjeman continues to command the platoon. It seems that his wife is not very happy but the phrase so familiar to so many of us—“there’s nobody else”—is apparently stronger than anything, and the platoon takes part in a maneuver in south Lebanon, in the Avivi area near Maroun el-Ras.

Right at the end of the book is a short chapter entitled “It’s over” (p. 226-227). It’s not clear whether it’s over for the author, because reserve duty continues, but the story ends with this chapter, at least for now. While he longs for days of grace, peace and calm for the Israeli people, it seems that at least at the time of writing this review, May 2025, the war is continuing with varying intensity, the end is still very far away, and the author and his comrades in this excellent patrol platoon will certainly find themselves in a further round of reserve service—perhaps in Syria, in Lebanon or in Gaza.

In the penultimate paragraph Turjeman writes: “For me, writing has become a means of healing, every word was therapeutic, every sentence strengthened my awareness of this complex and painful reality” (p. 226). Indeed many fighters and commanders have written and are writing about this war, their experiences, their dilemmas, their losses, and on how to keep going.

Elkanah Cohen wrote “Personal Account 7.10.23” (2024) and was one of the first to publish a personal journal from the war, which he expanded in some places with discussions of personal dilemmas and conclusions about people, war, and the relationship between them. He was a combat officer in the reserves and describes how his force fought north of Gaza City in the first three months of the maneuver, from October to December 2023.

Hananel Zilberberg has published his own personal journal, “What’s the Link?” (2024), in which he describes the war that he encountered as the reservist liaison officer in the Forward Command Post of Brigade Commander 7 in the war, fighting in Gaza and then in Khan Younis. His book contains a lot of introspection in which he examines his conduct during and before the war in various positions he held before his discharge.

Lishi Tenenbaum’s book is a kind of very detailed journal kept by a tank commander in the reserves, called “The legendary 2B—the story of a tank crew in the Swords of Iron War”

(2025). The book gives a great deal of detail about daily activities, showing the reader the lives in war of a very small and intimate team – a tank crew.

In his book “Iron Friendship” (2024), Moshe Wistoch combines his own experiences as a combat soldier in the Alon Reserves Battalion with an account of the whole battalion’s activity in the war, which makes this book different from the others.

Nimrod Palmach wrote “My Brother” (2025), in which he mainly describes how he fought on October 7, and the personal challenges he faces in the recovery that came after, including his treatment or healing, as he prefers to phrase it.

This phenomenon of soldiers and commanders writing about the war, the fighting or the battles in which they took part, and also the processing or healing they undergo afterwards, is not unique to this war. I too wrote a book called “Part of Me Was Left Behind” (2024), about the experiences as a fighter and commander in the security zone in Lebanon in the 1990s, the story of the battle in Wadi Brech that became known as the “Fire of Wadi Saluki,” where I lost five fighters of my platoon. But the main part of my book deals with how I and my immediate environment processed what happened, and this could encourage other commanders to process their experiences of warfare.

I will not survey here all the books written by fighters about the wars in which they participated, but it appears that in recent years there has been more room for this, particularly with the rise of numerous private publishers, and those who provide a professional polish for writers who wish to publish their personal stories. Another reason for the increase in the numbers of soldiers and commanders writing about their experiences is the awareness and openness in Israeli society to the mental dimensions of war, to the way in which experiences of fighting are processed and treated, and thus also to the subject of dealing with post traumatic stress, which

emerged strongly in the public consciousness following the case of Itzik Saidian, a Golani fighter in Operation Protective Edge, who set fire to himself in 2021 to protest how the Rehabilitation Division treated those who were mentally damaged.

Particularly in such a socially and politically polarized time, Turjeman avoids the political discussion of the war and thus allows readers to connect with the story, the experience, the feelings and the dilemmas with no additional “baggage.”

Shachar Turjeman’s book is just one of the books published and being written by soldiers and commanders in the Swords of Iron War, though it is one of the better ones. Why? Because he stops in many places during the description of events, turns his gaze inwards, to examine his decisions, looking at the people in his platoon—the Engineering Battalion’s patrol platoon family—and listens to them, and in this way enables readers to identify with the situation, to try and understand what it is to be a man in battle, and above all, the commander in battle. Particularly in such a socially and politically polarized time, Turjeman avoids the political discussion of the war and thus allows readers to connect with the story, the experience, the feelings and the dilemmas with no additional “baggage.”

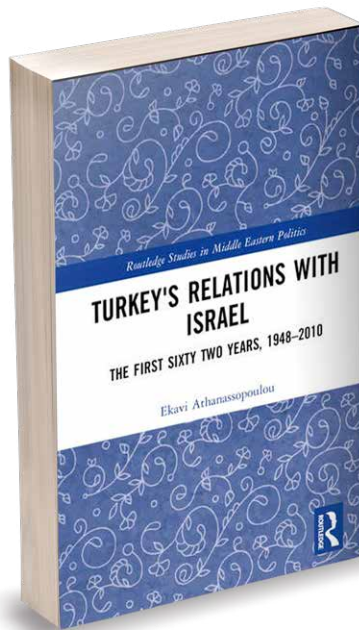
The books of the Swords of Iron War written by soldiers and commanders, the majority reservists, are an important source for learning about the war, and particularly the experiences of the forces on the battlefield and how they conduct themselves. True, there are many reservations surrounding such publications, but the books express the human experiences of their writers as well as the need of fighters and commanders to share and publicize what they went through—a need that as we have noted is becoming stronger in recent years.

These war diaries enable Israeli society to learn directly about the events of the war

and the experiences of the people involved, and can thus help to bridge the gaps between those who experience the war personally and those who are not directly involved, at least not on the battlefield. The journals also enable commanders to read the accounts of fighters and commanders of their own generation, and not just those of the past, such as Yoram Yair who wrote “With me from Lebanon” (1990), telling the story of a paratroop brigade in the First Lebanon War (“Peace in Galilee”) in the words of its commander; or Yoni Sitbon who wrote “Under Fire” (2016), about his experiences as a commander in the early 2000s, and particularly in the famous battle fought by Battalion 51 at

Binat Jebel in the Second Lebanon War. Wide engagement with books of this kind is always important; how much more so in a time of war.

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The First Six Decades of Turkey-Israel Relations: Even When Fruitful, Never Simple

Gallia Lindenstrauss

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***Turkey's Relations with Israel:
The First Sixty Two Years, 1948-2010***

Author: Ekavi Athanassopoulou

Publisher: Routledge

Year: 2025

No. of pages: 384

In her book *Turkey's Relations with Israel: The First Sixty-Two Years, 1948-2010*, Prof. Ekavi Athanassopoulou of the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at the University of Athens presents a comprehensive and thorough analysis, highlighting long term aspects of the relationship that provide context for the peaks and troughs in the period of analysis. This book is compulsory reading for anyone interested in bilateral relations between the countries. It also touches on other central

issues, such as Israel's relations with Arab countries, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Kurdish underground, the conflict in Cyprus, as well as United States' policy towards the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean.

One of the insights emerging from the book is that not only was the “honeymoon” period in Israel-Turkey relations in the 1990s and the early twenty-first century unique when compared to previous and subsequent periods, but also that these years were full of challenges and mutual disappointments.

The book is structured chronologically in three sections: the Cold War period, the first decade after the Cold War, and the start of the new millennium. This highlights the unique nature of the book, since most studies of Israel-Turkey relations have not considered the links between these three periods. Among other things, the book makes use of 58 in-depth interviews conducted by Athanassopoulou with leading figures from Turkey, Israel, the United States and Arab countries, who were directly involved in relations between Ankara and Jerusalem, or who have specialized knowledge of the subject. One of the insights emerging from the book is that not only was the “honeymoon” period in Israel-Turkey relations in the 1990s and the early twenty-first century unique when compared to previous and subsequent periods, but also that these years were full of challenges and mutual disappointments. For example, in May 1996 there was a failed assassination attempt of Turkish President Suleyman Demirel, in which the would-be assassin was apparently protesting against the strategic cooperation between Israel and Turkey (p. 259). Moreover, until Benjamin Netanyahu came to power in 1996, Israel was reluctant to indicate any specific public opposition to the Kurdish underground, and restricted itself to a general condemnation of all types of terror (pp. 226, 231).

The book examines the relationship mainly from the Turkish perspective, and according to the author, Turkey has never had a consistent or coherent foreign policy towards Israel (p. 324). Athanassopoulou explains the changes and contradictions in Turkish foreign policy with respect to Israel through the range of Turkey's "Role Conceptions," with shifting orders of priority throughout the period, including as a faithful ally of the United States and the west, an independent actor, a friend of the Arabs and "brother of the Muslims" at the regional level (p. 5). In the 1990s Turkey also assumed the role of regional "example" and "leader" (p. 325). According to Athanassopoulou, relations with Israel were good in periods when Turkey's role conception as a faithful ally of the United States was dominant, and when this suited American interests with respect to Israel, in the face of Arab countries and the Muslim world (p. 325).

Erdogan understood the advantage of relations with Israel—it was a way of demonstrating to those both inside and outside the country that Turkey had not abandoned its identity as a faithful ally of the United States and the West

The explanation at the level of role conceptions links to the theoretical literature in the field of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and contributes to this book, but when Athanassopoulou references the parallel existence of contradictory conceptions, it appears that this explanation could apply to almost any outcome. Sometimes the author uses similar words (with slightly different meanings) to describe particular roles but the terminology is not consistent, which can be somewhat confusing. For example, when discussing the role of "friend of the Arabs" or "brother to the Muslims," she sometimes adds the words "regional collaborator" or "regional protector," which are similar but do not contain the element of shared religious identity, and could therefore also include Israel.

One aspect that is particularly relevant to the discussion of Israel-Turkey relations since the rise of the Justice and Development Party to power in Turkey in 2002, is the role played by the leader, and particularly by Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in the deterioration of relations. Athanassopoulou stresses the theoretical concept of national role conceptions, that is, the definition of the country's proper role in the international and regional systems within which it operates (p. 2), particularly over the long-term. In this way she effectively reduces the importance of the explanation at the individual level of Turkish decision-making, with respect to events affecting bilateral relations between Israel and Turkey. She maintains that the role conceptions that she describes in her book have been shared by most of the political parties in the Turkish government and opposition (p. 326).

The period covered in the book ends in 2010, in the middle of Erdogan's second term as prime minister. In the early years of Erdogan's rule, not only were relations with Israel not terminated, they in fact became closer (p. 278). Athanassopoulou is skeptical about the widely-held belief that Erdogan refrained from harming relations with Israel due to his fear of the army (which pushed for relations with Israel) and its influence in the domestic political sphere (p. 284). Although she does not entirely reject this explanation, she argues that Erdogan understood the advantage of relations with Israel—it was a way of demonstrating to those both inside and outside the country that Turkey had not abandoned its identity as a faithful ally of the United States and the West (p. 285), in spite of the conservative nature of the Justice and Development Party—whose founders emerged from the reformist faction of the Welfare Party after it was outlawed in 1998 by the Turkish Constitutional Court, on the pretext that it was operating against the country's secular character.

Turkey's identity as a regional leader was also important in guiding its relations with Israel. Pinchas Avivi, Israel's ambassador to

Turkey during the years 2003-2007, managed to persuade Ahmet Davutoglu, who was a senior advisor to Erdogan on foreign policy from 2002 to 2009 (and later Foreign Minister and Prime Minister of Turkey), that Turkey could not be a significant regional player without good relations with Israel, and that Turkey could even play an intermediary role between Israel and other actors in the region (p. 290). This suited Turkey's role conception as a regional leader and example. Subsequently, after Operation Cast Lead that started at the end of 2008, Turkey effectively decided to promote its identity as a leader of the Muslim world at the expense of relations with Israel (p. 306).

One of the issues that is particularly interesting when examined from a contemporary perspective is the subject of Israel-Syria-Turkey relations in the 1990s. At that time Turkey was opposed to the peace process between Israel and Syria, believing that it would enable Syria to move forces from the border with Israel to the border with Turkey. There was also concern that Syria, which had already allowed the Kurdish underground to operate from its territory, would find it easier to continue doing so. Moreover, the discussions at that time between Israel and Syria on the issue of water cannot be disentwined from water disputes between Turkey and Syria. Western diplomats interviewed by the author stated that in its opposition to the peace process, Turkey tried to argue that after Hafez al-Assad's demise, Syria would split into communities—an outcome which at that time Ankara saw as positive (p. 228). This is the complete opposite of

the current Turkish view since the fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, which stresses the importance of Syria's territorial integrity. In May 1997 the Turkish Defense Minister even visited the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights—an event which is hard to imagine being repeated today (pp. 231-232).

At that time Turkey was opposed to the peace process between Israel and Syria, believing that it would enable Syria to move forces from the border with Israel to the border with Turkey

Athanassopoulou has done impressive work for a study covering six decades, which is both thorough and yet short enough to be contained in one volume. What is needed in order to "complete" her work is a discussion of the 15 years that have passed since 2010, plus a deeper examination of the Israeli side. The author states her intention from the outset to focus on the Turkish side, but of course any discussion of bilateral relations cannot be complete without studying the policies of both sides, all the more so in the case of a country as complex as Israel.

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Essential Analysis Distracted by Excessive Anecdotes

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The War on the West: How to Prevail in the Age of Unreason

Author: Douglas Murray (Hebrew)

Translation: Inbal Aloni

Publisher: Sela Meir

Year: 2025

No. of pages: 304

The War on the West: How to Prevail in the Age of Unreason is a translation of a 2022 book by Douglas Murray, the well-known publicist, interviewee and polemicist who is popular

in the media and on social networks. In this, his eighth book, he tackles the “progressive madness” that has taken hold of the West, and which in his view threatens its very existence. This book was published after another of his books, *The Strange Death of Europe*, which deals with similar issues to those he highlights in the present book, a discussion of migration and its significance for European demography and government policies, and which is leading, he argues, to a demographic and cultural disaster, threatening the existence of Europe as a Western civilization.

Murray chooses to focus on Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the cornerstone of his arguments concerning the ongoing and increasing distortion by liberal-progressive circles of all aspects of the West as a civilization and a culture. The central argument that Murray seeks to establish, in a very anecdotal way by using numerous quotes from tweets and social media posts and with reference to dozens of other events, is that the distorted criticism of the West rests on a world view that identifies the West with white racism and white superiority, the root of all evil. Meanwhile it ignores the historical contexts, the fact that slavery existed in many other places, including the Arab world and even on the African continent, while placing excessive and intensive focus on the phenomenon in the West, and completely ignoring the West’s achievements and its enormous contribution to humanity as a whole.

The opening chapter of the book discusses the theory and its offshoots, which have developed and penetrated all areas of life. What he believes to be a very problematic and twisted theory began in academia, from where it has been translated into patterns of thought and conduct that are seeping into social and political spaces, and adapted for political purposes, whose main elements are toxic and unbalanced criticism of everything represented by the West and absolute denial of any contribution by the Western World to humanity, and which are now threatening the West. For example, Murray refers

The central argument that Murray seeks to establish is that the distorted criticism of the West rests on a world view that identifies the West with white racism and white superiority, the root of all evil.

to the impact of the theory, its developers and followers, on the academic world, on education and schools, on health and welfare systems, on law and order, with the emphasis on police actions, and on the cultural arena.

Murray attempts to undermine the logic of the theory by referring to the fundamental hypocrisy and lack of intellectual honesty of its proponents. For example, by failing to protest injustices and racism in the case of China or Russia or third world countries, or by ignoring racist elements in the teachings of Karl Marx and others who they admire.

Murray appears to have clearly diagnosed the problematic and strongly refuted core of the theory, which he calls “very confused,” when he writes:

They claimed that the powerless cannot be guilty of racism—even if they have prejudices. And in the power structure presented by disciples of critical race theory, without hesitation, they start from the assumption that only white people have power. Therefore only whites can be racist. Blacks cannot be racist, or if they are racist, it’s only because they have internalized whiteness (p. 28).

Chapter two contains a historical survey in which Murray seeks to assess the contributions of the West to humanity as a whole, and together with the obligatory mention of injustices, he writes at length of the light, prosperity, human rights and freedom that the West has brought to the world. In passing he refers to Churchill and other prominent Western leaders, and ridicules the arguments put forward by supporters of CRT, who cite various statements or actions of these leaders that show them in a negative light to their progressive followers, while utterly ignoring their contributions to humanity in general. This chapter praises the West and Western civilization, which is presented as a kind of

alternative foundation from which to refute and ridicule progressive claims.

Chapter two also looks at the history of racism. Murray wishes to persuade us that with regards to racism, there’s really nothing new to add, since this is a human phenomenon that crosses cultural and geographical boundaries, and in his short historical survey of Western civilization, he points to the changes and improvements that critics ignore.

The rest of the chapter deals with the corrections Murray says are needed. He stresses that before embarking on these fixes, it is essential to understand the nature of the problem. Here too he has incisive criticism of the flagbearers of CRT for their inability to distinguish between good and bad, their determination to disregard all the good things contributed by the Western World to the human race, and to ascribe all the world’s ills, with excessive exaggeration, to what they claim is the racism and white supremacy inherent in the West.

Religion and culture are the subjects of chapters three and four, in which Murray explains the judgmental blindness that has gripped the advocates of critical race theory in their attitudes to structural and substantive issues relating to religion (including Islam) and culture. Their hatred of the West interferes with the ability of intellectual and other supporters of CRT to discern the problems and distortions within the religious and cultural arena, and what is worse—they blame any such defects on the evils of the oppressive West.

Nobody denies the importance of thorough, critical and sometimes even very critical consideration of the phenomenon, such as Murray engages in. The extremism and radical approach of CRT proponents have led to the creation of an intellectual cult that has acquired political influence and thus seeped into political and academic institutions, which themselves have become extreme. In this sense, Murray touches the exposed nerves of Western societies, with the emphasis on

America, and takes the bull by the horns, as the representative of the fear and above all anger felt by the opponents of the progressives, who see the so-called progressives as a real threat to traditional nationalism, as well as to the social fabric and even the ability of Western societies to continue existing as before.

He has chosen to make use of countless examples, many of them anecdotal, which readers may be unable to assess in the absence of the broader context, and which lack sufficient empirical basis

Yet after reading this long and detailed book, I am doubtful whether Murray has succeeded, according to academic criteria, in the task he took upon himself. In order to refute a theory, it is necessary to propose an alternative theory that provides an explanatory response to the explanatory weakness of the other, disparaged theory. Murray has not written an academic book, and probably did not intend to do so, and he therefore does not try to refute critical race theory using theoretical or academic tools. He has chosen to make use of countless examples, many of them anecdotal, which readers may be unable to assess in the absence of the broader context, and which lack sufficient empirical basis in research criteria, or at least documentation (beyond references to the sources of the items he cites, many of them from social networks).

The result is a feeling that the choice to use so many examples is intended to compensate for their anecdotal nature, and add weight to the author's central thesis and critique, and the cognitive effect he seeks to create. Murray's numerous examples are indeed shocking, and demonstrate the deeply problematic nature of progressive ideas and the troubling influence of CRT, but he skips over any validation of the findings as significant and material in a broader sense. Although he does provide a long list of examples from a variety of fields, and readers will certainly form a sense that he is dealing with events of a total and broad

systemic nature, yet in the absence of sufficient reference to opposing responses on the one hand, and on the other hand, to the extent to which the events he describes have penetrated the collective social consciousness of the countries concerned and their true effect, it is hard to reach practical conclusions based on the breadth of his material.

Reading the book is tiring, and in some cases even distracting, because of the abundance of details and examples. In most cases, Murray devotes one or two paragraphs to each example and moves on to the next, and in some cases the impression is almost like reading a log of police operations. I found that reading the book was easier and more effective when I changed the order—I started with the introduction and the history section, jumped to the summary, and then went back to the other chapters. It is therefore possible that Murray loses some of his readers along the way and weakens his arguments, with too many trees making it hard to identify the wood.

Douglas Murray, a historian who is scrupulous about visiting areas on which he reports, a kind of investigative journalist, an inquisitive publicist, a man of ideas and a prolific and talented writer, is good at formulating the arguments and exposing the absurd building blocks of critical race theory. In this sense, he is opening the critical discourse that is required of the academic and intellectual sphere, a sphere that has extended the boundaries of its influence into all areas of life, particularly in the United States, to the point of tyranny and blindness, thus laying the foundation for dangerous social anarchy and blunting the foundations of Western society. Murray is indeed doing important and even anxiety-promoting groundwork, which is bound to make many readers feel uncomfortable, for a debate on the limits of progressivism and the limits of discourse and collective action in Western society.

The book is certainly a kind of guide or even wake-up call for critical thinking about a critical

theory, whose fanaticism and extremism have made the Western World one-dimensional, flat, distorted, and morally hollow, where every social evil and all political and social conduct can be blamed on the structural racism of the West, white supremacy, and anyone who is unable to understand the greatness of CRT and the light it embodies.

To sum up, this is a book that deals with an important issue, which is at the heart of the sociopolitical, intellectual and even existential experience of the Western World. It is broad in scope with an abundance of examples, some of which are certainly worrying and demand consideration, as they indicate the problematic nature of CRT and its derivatives. The writer recognizes the existence of racism as a phenomenon found in every human society, country and culture, but maintains that the excessive and unbalanced focus on white society by CRT's proponents, which completely ignores historical contexts and the universal, cross-cultural nature of racism, has become an obsession and an illogical and unreasonable

He is opening the critical discourse that is required of the academic and intellectual sphere, a sphere that has extended the boundaries of its influence into all areas of life, particularly in the United States, to the point of tyranny and blindness, thus laying the foundation for dangerous social anarchy and blunting the foundations of Western society.

persecution, which threatens the West. Murray is an energetic and determined critic of CRT and what he believes are its problematic and dangerous effects and highlights the absurdity of some of its claims. The book is therefore thought provoking and arouses feelings of discomfort and even concern. It is certainly worth reading, but with an appropriate critical approach.

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Call for Papers for *Strategic Assessment*

The editorial board of the INSS journal *Strategic Assessment* invites authors to submit articles to be published in the journal's updated format. Proposals for special themed issues are also welcome.

Strategic Assessment, a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on national security, cyber, and intelligence, was launched in 1998 and is published in Hebrew and English by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) at Tel Aviv University. *Strategic Assessment*, accredited by the Planning and Budgeting Committee of the Council for Higher Education in Israel, serves as a platform for original research on a spectrum of issues relating to the discipline of national security, cyber, and intelligence. The purpose of the journal is to spark and enhance an informed, constructive debate of fundamental questions in national security studies, using an approach that integrates a theoretical dimension with policy-oriented research. Articles on topics relating to Israel, the Middle East, the international arena, and global trends are published with the goal of enriching and challenging the national security knowledge base.

The current era has seen many changes in fundamental conventions relating to national security and how it is perceived at various levels. As national security research evolves, it seeks to adjust to new paradigms and to innovations in the facets involved, be they technological, political, cultural, military, or socio-economic. Moreover, the challenge of fully grasping reality has become even more acute with the regular emergence of competing narratives, and this is precisely why factual and data-based research studies are essential to revised and relevant assessments.

The editorial board encourages researchers to submit articles that have not been previously published that propose an original and innovative thesis on national security with a broad disciplinary approach rooted in international relations, political science, history, economics, law, communications, geography and environmental studies, Israel studies, Middle East and Islamic studies, sociology and anthropology, strategy

and security studies, technology, cyber, conflict resolution, or additional disciplines.

In the spirit of the times, *Strategic Assessment* is shifting its center of gravity to digital presence and access. Articles approved for publication, following the review and editing process, will be published in an online version on the journal's website in the format of "online first," and subsequently included in the particular issues.

Strategic Assessment publishes articles in four categories:

Research Forum—academic articles of a theoretical and research nature on a wide range of topics related to national security, of up to 8000 words in Hebrew or 10,000 words in English, including source material (with APA-style documentation). Articles should be researched-based and include a theoretical perspective, and address a range of subjects related to national security. All articles are submitted for double blind peer review. Submissions must include an abstract of 100-120 words; keywords (no more than ten); and a short author biography.

Professional Forum—panel discussions on a particular topic, or in-depth interview, of 2000-3000 words (up to 3500 words in English) including source material (APA-style). Submissions must include a short author biography.

Academic Survey—a survey of 1800-3000 words (up to 4000 words in English) including references and recommended reading (APA-style) of the latest professional literature on a specific topic relating to national security. Submissions must include a short author biography.

Book Reviews—book reviews of 800-1500 words (up to 2000 words in English) including source material (APA-style) on a wide range of books relating to national security. Submissions must include a short author biography.

Articles should be submitted electronically to editors-sa@inss.org.il and indicate the category of the attached article. You may also use this e-mail address for questions or additional information about the journal.

Raz Zimmt and Gallia Lindenstrauss
Editors, *Strategic Assessment*

