

# Thin Red Lines: The Syrian and Iranian Contexts

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Deterrence literature analyzes red lines extensively, casting them as a tripwire used by a nation trying to deter an enemy by defining a prohibited act and the retaliation that can be expected. It thereby tries to raise the cost of carrying out the prohibited act in order to convince the enemy not to engage in it by threatening, explicitly or implicitly, the use of force. A public or tacit declaration of a red line is usually a defensive measure meant to prevent the enemy from taking a step it has planned – an attempt to define the rules of the game – and thereby prevent undesirable escalation. This type of communication, part of the strategy of deterrence, is used to signal the enemy that its deterrence is ineffective, elicit information about its intentions, and even – as this essay will attempt to demonstrate – try to establish international legitimacy for various actions, not necessarily military. The deterrence literature generally uses the term *casus belli*, and for the most part does not distinguish between this term and red lines.<sup>1</sup> The element of deterrence is embedded in the choice the enemy has of whether, how, and when to cross the line, and in the commitment of the state whether, when, and how to realize the threat.

Although “red line” has become a common term in recent years, the discourse is replete with fundamental misunderstandings. At the most basic level, a red line refers to a scenario the enemy wants to enact or step it might take that the defending side views as a game changer. The red line therefore invites some type of action in order to prevent the change in the status quo. A red line may present differently according to three important dimensions: the response required of the deterred side, the

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expression or exposure given to the threat, and its target audience.<sup>2</sup> A positive outcome occurs if the other side's obedience is attained within a reasonable amount of time.

There are several ways to draw a red line: warning the enemy through back channels to reconsider its intentions; declaring a red line publicly, either with or without mentioning a possible response; engaging in threatening military maneuvers; and finally, resorting to military action. In the absence of direct channels of communication between the sides, it is sometimes necessary to draw red lines using various acts, including military, designed to persuade the enemy to take some step or another. The side issuing the threat must, when the time comes, have the resolve to realize the threat despite its costs and force the enemy to believe it will be prepared to pay it, even at the cost of harm to itself. Indeed, when a nation declares a red line, it deliberately constrains its own freedom to maneuver, especially if the declaration is accompanied by talk of punitive measures. The threat will carry most credibility if it entails a risk assumed by the threatening side to take action liable to cause damage also to it. The more costly these signals are and the more they limit the threatening nation's freedom to act, the greater the credibility they have. But it is precisely these costly threats that suffer a credibility problem if, in the view of the enemy, the threatening nation isn't willing to fight for them. Many failures of deterrence stem from the inherent tension between decision makers' desire to retain room to maneuver by leaving the threat as vague as possible, and the need to transmit a clear message endowing the threat with credibility.

This essay examines several red lines drawn by Israel and the United States in the context of the civil war in Syria and the Iranian nuclear program, as well as red lines that were not drawn, in order to study the advantages and disadvantages in using this method to demarcate respective strategic interests. It does not preclude the use of the tool, but rather seeks to understand the reason and manner for using it and the potential attendant costs in the contexts under discussion.

### **The Syrian-Lebanese Arena**

Israel views the transfer of certain weapons to Hizbollah as an upset to the balance of power, and therefore, since the end of the previous decade, has defined this act as a red line. Israel's senior political and military echelon has warned that Israel would not accept the transfer of what

the country considers threatening weapons from Syria to Hizbollah, including chemical weapons, advanced anti-aircraft missiles, shore-to-sea missiles, and certain types of surface-to-surface missiles and rockets. The moment these particular weapons were shipped to Hizbollah, despite the Israeli warnings not to do so, Syria knowingly crossed the Israeli red line. Until January 2013, Israel did not take any action on these shipments, apparently reasoning that the chances for escalation vis-à-vis Syria and Hizbollah were high.

The common explanation for the attacks on Syria attributed to Israel in January 2013<sup>3</sup> and again in May and July 2013<sup>4</sup> cites Israel's reasoning that the chances for escalation in the northern sector were low if Israel reacted to crossed red lines. Before the military operation in Syria attributed to it, and in an attempt to make communication between the sides as credible as possible, Israel held military maneuvers and tried – apparently in vain – to transmit warnings to Syria through a third party.<sup>5</sup> After the attacks, Syria and Hizbollah postponed their response, both because of Israel's deterrence in general and because of a new set of priorities that sought to avoid an immediate military confrontation. In addition, Israel chose not to assume responsibility for the attacks, allowing the attacked side significant deniability. Similarly, the targets were not Syrian assets but rather Iranian and/or Russian weapons on their way to Lebanon, making it easier for the Syrians to contain the damage. Finally, the attack did not occur on either Iranian or Lebanese soil, exempting both of them – the weapons supplier and the weapons client – from an immediate response.<sup>6</sup>

After the attacks attributed to Israel, both sides tried to formulate new rules for the arena. Syria and Hizbollah heightened their threats, stating that further attacks would result in an immediate and harsh response in the Golan Heights.<sup>7</sup> This declaration was accompanied by firing on Israeli positions in the Golan, with the Syrian regime assuming responsibility for the shelling: "Any violation of Syrian sovereignty will result in an immediate response."<sup>8</sup> By contrast, Israel's threatening messages were inconsistent: one message was that if Syria attacks Israel or tries to strike Israel through its proxies, Israel will retaliate to the point that Assad will risk forfeiting his regime.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, high level officials have said that Assad's regime is preferable if the alternative is an extremist Islamist one.<sup>10</sup>

The resumption of weapon shipments will shift the dilemma back to Israel: continue or suspend attacking the shipments, factoring in the

cost it would have to pay in the case of escalation. Assuming that relative freedom of action is a constant is illusory, because relative freedom of action is a consumable asset. In practice, there is cumulative pressure exerted on the leadership on the rival side to respond, even if this contradicts a cold cost-benefit analysis; this pressure might generate a large scale response followed by undesirable escalation. After the attacks, Israel chose, unlike previous experiences, not to respond to the Syrian shelling,<sup>11</sup> and took pains to note that its actions should not be viewed as interference in Syria's civil war,<sup>12</sup> in an apparent attempt to lessen Syria's motivation to respond to the attacks on its soil. In addition, because the United States granted significant legitimacy to Israel's action, this presumably had an effect on the assessment of the deterred side – i.e., Syria – given the American-Israeli coordination on the issue.<sup>13</sup>

America's red line in the Syrian arena was drawn in relation to the use of chemical weapons in the country's civil war. Already in August 2012, President Obama stated that mass transfer or use of chemical weapons would constitute the crossing of a red line<sup>14</sup> and would change his thinking on the issue. In March 2013, Obama somewhat reduced the extent of America's commitment to its red line when he said that should it emerge that chemical weapons were in fact used in Syria, this would be considered a game changer for the United States.<sup>15</sup> It seems that the President tried to lessen the American commitment while at the same time trying to deter the Assad regime from using this type of weapon. The administration's freedom of action was not curtailed given the ambiguous nature of the proof of what was underway in Syria. But even after evidence began accumulating about the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime,<sup>16</sup> the administration sought to blur the issue and its commitment.<sup>17</sup> One of the assertions made by the administration stated that American intelligence could not provide a definitive answer as to whether chemical weapons were in fact used.<sup>18</sup> It was only on June 13, 2013 that the administration finally determined that Assad's regime had in fact used chemical weapons and said it planned to send weapons to Syrian rebels, though without direct involvement.<sup>19</sup>

Did the lack of an immediate American response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria empower the Syrian regime to continue and maybe even extend their use? Perhaps. What is clear is that the lack of political willingness on the part of the United States to act generated a deliberate attempt to downplay the gravity of what occurred. It is

certainly conceivable that downplaying the horror of the events and the lack of an immediate response to the use of chemical weapons increased the doubts that Israel and other American allies in the region have about America's commitment to its allies and the red lines America has drawn in the context of the Iranian nuclear program. Even if the United States eventually decides to intervene more actively in the Syrian civil war out of humanitarian reasons, or in order to retain its influence in the region, it is still quite conceivable that in the future both enemies and allies will view America's credibility with greater skepticism.

### **The Iranian Arena**

One can point to several red lines that Israel (at times with American backing) has drawn in the past decade that have been crossed by Iran without generating an Israeli military response.<sup>20</sup> In 2003, the red line was mastering the technology of uranium enrichment: "We believe that within a year Iran will reach the point of no return and then no form of pressure will help," said then-Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz.<sup>21</sup> When Iran attained that ability, the red line was redrawn as the start of uranium enrichment in practice. After Iran began enriching uranium, the new red line curtailed enrichment to a limited number of centrifuges. Later, then-Defense Minister Ehud Barak spoke of Iran's entering a "zone of immunity" (in practice, the start of operations at the underground facility in Fordow) as a red line.<sup>22</sup> Afterwards, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu defined the red line as the amassing of a specific amount of fissile material enriched to a low level, in the amount of enriched uranium Iran would need to make a bomb.

When Israel drew these lines, it did so without presenting specific punitive measures, and Iran crossed, or circumvented, them without exacting any response from Israel or the United States, both of which responded by repeating that "all options are on the table."<sup>23</sup> One may therefore well ask if from the outset these red lines were meant just to arouse the international community, especially the United States, to take a firmer stand against Iran. Either way, the pattern is clear: every time Iran crossed a red line, Israel drew a new one (closer to the bomb). Israel's warnings grew more and more stern without having any effect, causing damage to its credibility and erosion to its deterrence in this context, even if Israel, through its actions, contributed to the sense of urgency on the

part of the international community in confronting the Iranian nuclear issue.

Prime Minister Netanyahu claims that Iran has not crossed the red line he drew regarding its nuclear project at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2012.<sup>24</sup> And in fact, Iran has not yet crossed Israel's red line with the processing of some of the uranium into fuel rods for the Tehran nuclear research reactor.<sup>25</sup> This, however, may be only a temporary positive development, because the process is partly reversible, and within just a few weeks it is possible to render the uranium usable for military purposes. It may be that the Iranian decision to divert some enriched uranium to the research reactor is evidence of an Iranian desire to act cautiously in light of the red line drawn. But this is not necessarily proof of the success of the strategy; rather, it may be proof of Iran's success in circumventing it, making Israel's red line artificial, ineffective, and quite possibly even counterproductive.<sup>26</sup>

An example of partial success in transmitting messages of deterrence was evident when Iran threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz in response to tightening the sanctions against it, and the United States drew a clear red line on the issue. As a result of explicit threats issued by senior Iranians to block the strait, the Bahrain-based US 5th Fleet's spokeswoman warned that any disruption "will not be tolerated" and that the US Navy is "always ready to counter malevolent actions to ensure freedom of navigation."<sup>27</sup> In January 2012, it was reported that the Obama administration secretly transmitted a direct message in this vein to Supreme Leader Khamenei, stating that any disruption to international shipping in the strait would constitute a crossing of a red line and would generate a harsh American response.<sup>28</sup> And indeed, the decisive American threat apparently succeeded in deterring Iran from closing the strait to Western shipping.

On the nuclear issue, the Americans have so far avoided drawing a clear red line, but rather provided vague assertions to the effect that "a nuclear Iran is a red line," adding that this is not a challenge that can be contained.<sup>29</sup> In using the phrase "a nuclear Iran," the US President was likely referring to a nuclear weapons breakout (or weaponization).<sup>30</sup> But one of the problems with drawing such a vague red line is that the target nation (i.e., Iran) is liable not to identify the red line and may cross it inadvertently, unless it is given a clearer message through back channels. It may be that in the view of the US administration, drawing a vague

red line will safeguard it from possible future embarrassment and the need to make tough decisions. A further potential difficulty is that the Americans have drawn their red lines based on their outlook, strategy, and capabilities, which are not necessarily congruent with Israel's outlook, strategy, and capabilities.<sup>31</sup> This is liable to make it difficult for Israel to attack Iran before Iran crosses the American red line.

### The Limitations of Red Lines

The red lines drawn by the United States and Israel in the Iranian context have defined the conduct that the two nations want to prevent but not the nature of the retaliation Iran can expect if the lines are crossed, thus retaining a certain measure of freedom to maneuver. In September 2012, in his speech to the UN General Assembly, Prime Minister Netanyahu declared that "red lines don't lead to war; red lines prevent war...Faced with a clear red line, Iran will back down."<sup>32</sup> Indeed, drawing red lines may reduce uncertainties and errors in reasoning and thereby prevent escalation. According to this approach, and because of possible failures of rationality on the other side, an act of deterrence must be as open and clear as possible and include clarifications about the deterring side's capabilities and the cost the deterred side will have to pay for crossing a prohibited line.

However, the problem with drawing red lines is that the message the enemy receives may be that the defending side has no commitment to values excluded from the red line, and that the defending side is, in effect, accepting the status quo. In the Iranian context, Iran may refrain from crossing the red line in terms of enrichment but take steps that are no less threatening, such as making progress with plutonium or the delivery system, or enhancing its enrichment capabilities beneath the Israeli red line. This suggests that there is an advantage in leaving the red line somewhat, though not completely vague, because very precisely defined parameters known to both sides might simply stimulate the motivation to outmaneuver them. A detailed red line also shifts the control of how the crisis will be played out into the Iranians' hand: they are the ones who will decide when the crisis goes into high gear and the circumstances that will

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lead there. The declaration of a red line accompanied by the particulars of retaliation is also liable to draw international criticism: a nation seeking deterrence risks portraying itself as bellicose, beating the drums of war. It can therefore be justifiably contended that it is not always wise to be clear and public about one's demands and the retaliation to be expected should those demands not be met, certainly if it is possible to transmit the precise demands through back channels – both to maintain the dignity of the enemy and, just as importantly, to retain one's own prestige in case one doesn't realize one's threats.

Both in the Syrian and Iranian contexts, the extensive use of red lines, along with the different audiences and targets threatened, has lessened their effectiveness. At times, the enemy is liable to understand the declaration of a red line as an attempt to mollify certain audiences, domestic or foreign, rather than as a deterrent message aimed at it. In addition, the attacks attributed to Israel on Syrian soil are evidence of the failure of the deterrence regime or, alternately, evidence that every level of deterrence comes with an expiration date. The seemingly vacillating American red line in Syria is in fact liable to signal the Iranians that the United States is not committed to the red line it declared for Iran, no matter how broad or vague. The failure to follow through with a red line can earn the player a reputation for not being willing to stand behind its threats, which could affect not only the results of the current incident

but also the results of future interactions on this and similar arenas. It is thus quite conceivable that better cementing of America's reputation in a relatively limited event would help it avoid having to realize its threats in some future (and larger) crisis with Iran.

Both in the Syrian and Iranian contexts, the United States has avoided drawing clear red lines because it has not wanted to commit itself to a particular course of action, as failing to realize a red line comes at a price – sometimes an even costlier price than the cost of realizing it. When a red line is drawn, the question is: is one prepared

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to pay the price of defending it, or is one wagering that the other side will be deterred, in which case one has gotten what one wants at low cost. Furthermore, would it not be appropriate alongside the sticks also to

dangle some carrots? Would it not be appropriate to present not only the negative ramifications coming to the enemy should it cross the red line but also the positive results it will generate should it refrain from crossing it? The fundamental question is the deterring side's ability and willingness to realize its threat. The credibility of the deterring message is also derived from the deterred side's assessment of the deterring side's willingness to act on its threats and bear the cost of realizing them (and its certainty that the benefit will outweigh the cost). It is a truism that red lines that include the possible use of military force are nothing more than a deterrent move. But in the Iranian context Israel's red lines, and perhaps those of the United States as well, have also served as a negotiating tool and were certainly not meant for Iranian ears alone. When a small nation draws a red line, its purpose is at times not only to deter the enemy but also to mobilize the international community. If this is the Israeli strategy, it has succeeded to a considerable degree.

The purpose of drawing a red line is to signal to the enemy the limit beyond which its actions will have consequences, but this constrains the side drawing the line because it allows the enemy to test one's credibility and willingness to act. On the tactical/operational level, the declaration of a clear red line and the consequences that crossing it will have is also liable to damage the element of surprise, which is often critical to success of a military operation. If the red line is too vague it is not credible; if it is too sharp, it may be more credible but the cost of not realizing it is high. It is therefore necessary to define the purpose of using a red line and ask the following questions: Is it appropriate to define a red line at all? Who, exactly, is the red line's target audience(s)? How exactly should the red line be formulated? When is it liable to be put to the test? Is one prepared to pay the cost of either realizing it or not realizing it? The effectiveness of red lines – whose very nature precludes flexibility in an environment subject to rapid change – is doubtful. It would be unwise to grant the enemy the ability to determine when to act and when not to act. The strategy of a blurred red line, which allows for flexibility in selecting the time, force, and nature of the response, can also achieve a significant measure of deterrence.

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## Notes

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