



NATO Foundation
Defense College



What remains of Israel's deterrence after the 7th of October?

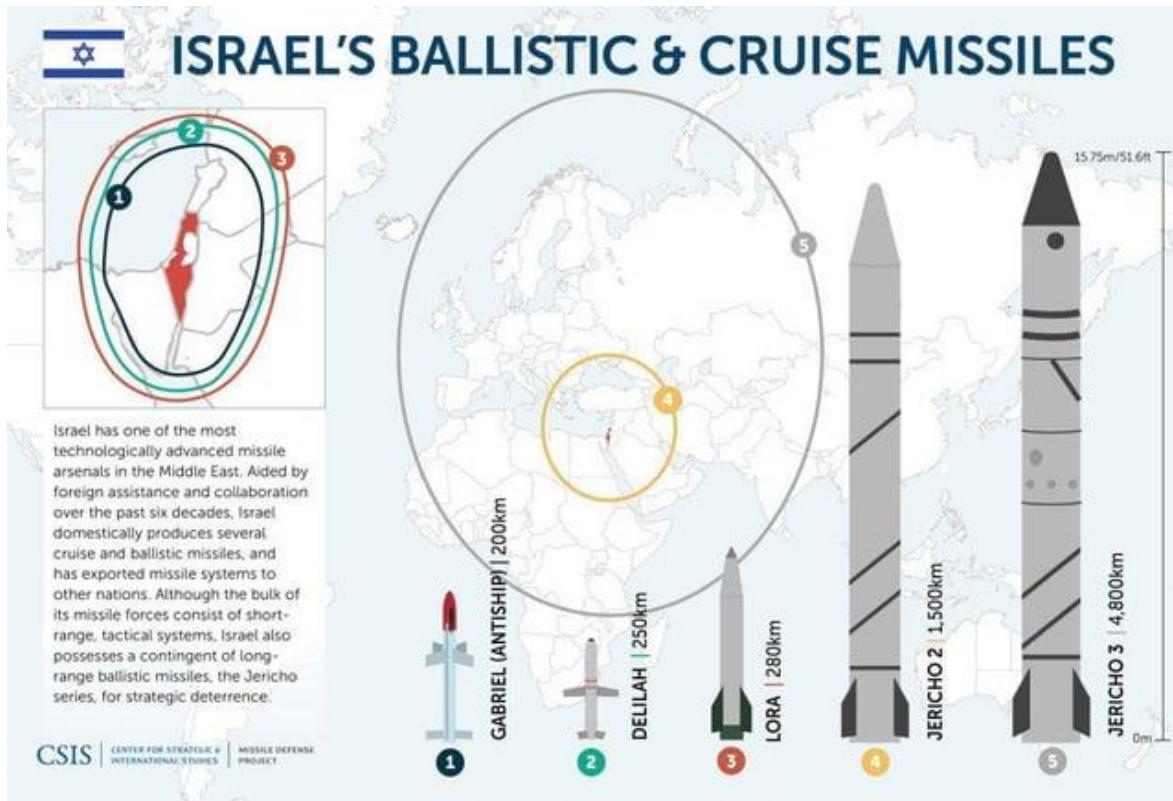
Francesco Salesio Schiavi

Freelance research specialist in international relations of the Middle East

Deterrence has been a crucial pillar of Israel's security doctrine for several decades. Still, Hamas' attack "Al Aqsa Flood" raised serious questions about its effectiveness now and in the future. The attack marked Israel's worst strategic and tactical surprise since the 1973 Yom Kippur War and resulted in the greatest loss of Israeli lives since 1948. Israel's swift military response led to the near destruction of Hamas in Gaza, significant damage to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and strikes in Syria and Yemen.

Despite battlefield successes, Israel is grappling with a complex situation, lacking a clear political vision for the future of Gaza and the region, despite the appearance of a strategy (essentially manoeuvring on internal lines). The active fronts are multiplying, and the threat of a conventional confrontation with Iran is looming closer, compounding regional uncertainty. These events have heightened scrutiny of Israel's nuclear deterrence, as the state faces both asymmetric threats from groups like Hamas and Hezbollah and the perceived existential challenge of a near-nuclear-capable Iran.

Since decades, Israel's deterrence faces two key challenges. First, non-state armed actors like Hamas, Hezbollah, and other members of the "Axis of Resistance" continue to pose a formidable asymmetric threat. Second, Israel may face in future a potential direct (catastrophic) confrontation with a nuclear-capable Iran. Both scenarios underscore the need for a coordinated and tailored response to these threats



Source: CSIS

Deterrence is often measured by the manifest adversary's reduced capability and, more importantly, its decreased hostile intent. On the first count, Israel's recent military campaigns succeeded in significantly damaging Hamas, Hezbollah, and their infrastructure and command chain. The IDF killed many senior and mid-level commanders and thousands of fighters in Gaza, depleted Hamas' rocket stockpiles, and demolished vital infrastructure. In Lebanon, Israel launched extensive military and intelligence operations against Hezbollah, decimating its high command, striking arms depots, and preparing for a possible operation in southern Lebanon. The deaths of key figures like Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh further weakened the "Axis of Resistance" at top level.

However, subsequent attacks from Gaza, southern Lebanon, and even Yemen suggest that these groups' strategic resolve remains unchanged. Hamas, though weakened, retains its capacity for guerrilla warfare and rocket attacks, posing a persistent threat. Hezbollah, despite suffering leadership and operational setbacks, continues to operate with significant missile capabilities from central and southern Lebanon. The group's asymmetrical tactics challenge Israel's conventional defence strategies, making long-term deterrence difficult. The problem, clearly recognised by Israeli Likud military

thinkers, at least since the Nineties of the past century, is that, while military capabilities are reduced or annihilated, the fighting and resistance spirit remains largely unaffected.



Source: CSIS.

Meanwhile, Yemen's Houthis demonstrated their ability to breach Israel's anti-missile defences with actions such as the September 2024 ballistic missile targeting Tel Aviv. Though intercepted, the missile penetrated deep into Israeli airspace, signalling the group's capability to project power over long distances. Earlier, the 18th of July, a modified Shamad-3 drone (Everlasting) managed to hit a palace in Tel Aviv, killing one person and injuring another. Israeli airstrikes on Yemeni targets, including Hodeida, failed to deter further Houthi aggression, underscoring the limitations of Israel's traditional deterrence model. Moreover, the strategic airbase of Nevatim was hit by some 30 Iranian ballistic missiles, damaging infrastructure and probably several essential air-refuelling aircraft (1/10/2024).

These losses and damages, together with Hamas' attack shattered the assumption that military power alone could deter non-state actors committed to Israel's destruction. Rather than deterring Hamas, Israel has now shifted its strategy to eliminating the group as a political and military entity, no matter

the civilian casualties. Yet, even if Hamas will be defeated in Gaza, the underlying dynamics of hostility will likely persist, raising the prospect of new adversaries or regrouped factions.

Hezbollah, similarly, remains a serious threat, despite recent Israeli successes. The group's entrenched position and vast missile stockpile continue to endanger northern Israel. While Israel's military campaigns have been effective in degrading the operational capacities of these groups, they fall short of addressing the long-term challenges. In these cases, deterrence does not seem to prevent future hostilities but instead prolongs a cycle of retaliation and escalation.

Compounding these asymmetric threats is the looming confrontation with Iran. This possibility, years in the making, has been made even more possible by the recent escalation between the two actors, with Israel launching multiple special assassinations against the leadership of the Axis of Resistance (including senior officers of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, Pasdaran) and the resulting response from Tehran with two bombardments against the Israeli territory with hundreds of ballistic and cruise missiles and drones, respectively on April and October 2024.

In this framework, Tehran recognizes that it cannot equal Israel in conventional terms. In recent months, Iranian missile and drone programs, despite posing solid challenges, have not been sufficient to deter Israeli actions. The weakening of its capabilities versus Israel could induce Tehran to accelerate nuclear weapons programmes as a way to offset Israel's superiority across the board.

Over the past year, Tehran has accelerated its nuclear activities, by increasing its stockpile of weapons-grade uranium and acting to bring it possibly closer to producing a nuclear device unsuitable for real military use. Iran's advancements (possibly with some Russian assistance) have significantly shortened the timeline for a nuclear breakout, in terms of accumulated weapons-grade material. US intelligence assessments do not see a present development of a deliverable nuclear weapon.

For Israel, this represents a very serious, possibly existential threat, far beyond the asymmetric risks posed by Hamas or Hezbollah. While Israel has relied on conventional military force to suppress these groups, a nuclear-capable Iran would fundamentally shift the regional balance of power.

Historically, Israel's counter-proliferation efforts have been aggressive under the Begin Doctrine, trying to prevent Iraq and Syria from developing nuclear capabilities, with varying degrees of success. Israel has in the past taken action against Iran's nuclear program through sabotage without permanently setting back Tehran's enrichment efforts. Should Iran achieve nuclear capability, Israel

would have to redefine substantially its entire deterrence posture. This scenario may prompt Israel to consider different alternatives: from a new mutual deterrence (like that between India and Pakistan) up to pre-emptive strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities or other covert operations, risking a broader regional conflict with unpredictable and potentially catastrophic outcomes.

Bottom line: the traditional reliance on overwhelming military force may no longer suffice in a region where the risks of miscalculation and escalation are ever-present. As the threat landscape evolves, Israel probably may have to change its political and strategic vision first and hence its security doctrine to account for these new realities, ensuring that its deterrence strategies are robust and flexible enough to address immediate and long-term challenges.