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## Rethinking 'Deterrence' in the Conflict between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Zionist Regime

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### Extended Abstract

With the victory of the Islamic Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran, the perspective toward the Zionist regime underwent a fundamental transformation. This regime had regarded Pahlavi Iran with particular attention within the framework of Ben-Gurion's doctrine. The Ben-Gurion doctrine was based on the assumption that, in order to contain and counter its neighboring countries, the Zionist regime was compelled to establish strategic relations with the peripheral states of those countries. Accordingly, Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia held prominent positions in the foreign policy of the Zionist regime. Specifically, the relations of this regime with the Pahlavi system in Iran were developed and expanded in multiple areas,

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including the military and intelligence domains.

While the relations between the Pahlavi regime and the Zionist regime were expanding and deepening, the Islamic Revolution triumphed on February 11, 1979. One of the earliest and most symbolic events connected with foreign policy in this revolution was the handover of the Zionist regime's embassy in Tehran to the Fatah Movement. For those familiar with the values of the Islamic Revolution, however, this event was by no means surprising; throughout the years of struggle of Imam Khomeini (RA) and his companions against the Pahlavi regime, one of the central pillars of their protest was the occupation of Palestine by the Zionist regime and the ties of the Pahlavi monarchy with it. Imam Khomeini (RA) analyzed the very nature of Israel within the framework of a broader hegemonic design and did not recognize any form of relations with this occupying regime, striving fundamentally for its eradication. His well-known statement that "Israel must be erased from the page of time" clearly reflects the full spectrum of his ideological and strategic outlook on the Zionist regime.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, with such a perception of the Zionist regime, formulated its foreign policy. This was not, however, a one-sided hostility; from the very beginning, the Zionist regime also sought to advance its enmity toward Iran through multiple instruments and in diverse fields. Indeed, this hostility traces back to the years prior to the triumph of the Islamic Revolution, when the regime, through its interactions with the Pahlavi system, sought to facilitate Mohammad Reza Shah's efforts in suppressing Iranian revolutionaries.

Throughout these years, the confrontation between the Islamic Republic of Iran—or, more broadly, the axis of resistance—and the Zionist regime has remained a central subject of analysis. The Islamic Republic, relying on the "ideal of liberating al-Quds al-Sharif," has sought, alongside capacity-building within the Islamic world, to employ available means to weaken and ultimately dismantle the Zionist regime. Conversely, the regime, through extensive exploitation of international capacities and discourses aimed at overthrowing the Islamic Republic, has actively pursued the weakening of Iran and openly placed regime change on its agenda.

Within Iranian political and strategic discourse, one of the recurring themes in the confrontation with the Zionist regime has been "deterrence." This concept has frequently appeared not only in the rhetoric of political and military officials but

also in scholarly discussions addressing strategies for countering Israel.

In elite debates that emerged after October 7, 2023, with the initiation of Operation Al-Aqsa Storm by Hamas against the Zionist regime, deterrence became a highly salient theme. Some argued that the deterrent capacity of the Islamic Republic had been undermined, while others—particularly before October 27, 2024, when the Zionist regime attacked Iran—emphasized the preservation of Iran's deterrent power. Hence, it may be concluded that deterrence is a central and recurrent option within the Iran–Israel confrontation.

At present, however, deterrence may be approached from a different perspective: does deterrence, in its theoretical sense, truly possess the sufficiency and conceptual validity to explain the confrontation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Zionist regime? This article raises this question as its primary research inquiry and seeks, through a theoretical approach enriched with empirical illustrations, to reconsider the centrality of deterrence in this confrontation. In response to the aforementioned question, the hypothesis is advanced that deterrence, in its theoretical and classical sense, lacks the necessary explanatory adequacy for analyzing the Iran–Israel conflict.

To evaluate this hypothesis as a possible answer to the central question of the study, the article employs a descriptive–analytical approach. It first conceptualizes deterrence and then assesses its validity in light of the environmental exigencies of the Iran–Israel confrontation. Accordingly, while emphasizing theoretical foundations, the study is also practical in orientation, as it focuses on a current problem with the aim of organizing responses to future challenges arising from this conflict. Data collection relies on library-based and documentary methods. Ultimately, this article seeks, through the lens of deterrence, to offer a conceptual framework for understanding the Iran–Israel confrontation. The significance of this endeavor lies in the fact that clarifying deterrence and its place in the confrontation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Zionist regime can conceptually organize Iran's offensive and defensive actions within a framework that is more coherent and effective.

Based on the analytical assessment conducted, deterrence in its maximalist form does not provide comprehensive explanatory power for the Iran–Israel confrontation. This is because both actors fundamentally seek the weakening,

containment, and eventual elimination of each other, and they consider offensive policies as the most central and defining layer of their strategic outlook, with defensive strategies designed subordinate to that offensive orientation. In this framework, deterrence is not a purely defensive policy aimed at preventing war and preserving the status quo; rather, it serves as a means of ensuring survival as a prelude to offensive action against the adversary.

Accordingly, and in line with the reciprocal field dynamics of recent years, a conceptual framework of “deterrence in motion” can be proposed. While the detailed parameters of this framework require further precision and elaboration, at a general level, its premise is that deterrence does not entail the absolute prevention of enemy attacks. Given the offensive postures of both sides, which are rooted in strategic and ideological imperatives, avoiding aggression against the adversary holds little practical meaning. Under “deterrence in motion,” offensive actions may influence and shape enemy attacks rather than halt them outright: they may reduce their frequency and intensity, redirect their focus, or shift their domains. Thus, responding to an attack in one domain does not end the confrontation but merely transfers it to another arena. This cycle will persist so long as offensive strategies remain central and both sides retain the capacity for aggression.

Naturally, with the logic of “defense for survival as a platform for offense,” the development of defensive mechanisms remains crucial, as they may restrict or halt certain types of enemy attacks. However, as noted, this does not terminate the conflict; hostilities between the two sides will continue in other domains. The offensive orientation on both sides of this struggle—though at times influenced by variables such as Iran–U.S. negotiations—cannot, for strategic and ideological reasons discussed in the article, be eliminated. Understanding this reality underscores the growing necessity for Iran to respond to the Zionist regime’s diverse and pinpoint attacks on its interests and national security.

**Key words:** Deterrence, War, Islamic Republic of Iran, Zionist Regime.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.