



Wearing Out the Iranian Tiger

Eran Ortal

The fundamental order of the Middle East has changed. The old Arab order, based on oil wealth and nationalism, has broken down over the past decade (Schueftan 2020). It was replaced by a series of interreligious and intertribal struggles for control, survival campaigns by Arab regimes, and Iran's pursuit of regional hegemony.

Iran is guided by an ancient history of regional dominance, clear geopolitical interests, and religious, nationalist, and imperialist self-perceptions (Nasr 2021). Together, they are a potent mix for meddling beyond the country's borders. Many in the region and beyond look to Israel as a regional power that can curb Iran's destabilizing role. This expectation, based on a perception of Israeli military, intelligence, economic, and cultural power, has led directly to a blossoming of Israel's diplomatic relations.

Israel is unquestionably a powerful country, but with all its strengths, it is still not the regional heavyweight it is perceived to be by some, including many Israelis. There is an asymmetry that works in Iran's favor in the conflict between the two countries. Jerusalem is forced to pursue a long-term strategy as there is no nation that can replace Israel in its regional role, and it has no option other than to confront Iranian aggression. It should do that with a realistic recognition of its asymmetric position.

ISRAEL'S ORIGINAL REGIONAL STRATEGY: THE SECURITY CONCEPT AND THE "IRON WALL"

A term that surfaces repeatedly in the contemporary strategic discussion is "great-power competition," which is a source of inspiration for the "regional strategic competition" framework adapted by many, including the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Both terms come from the idea of "competitive strategy" (Adamsky 2020).

Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, may not have used the term, but at the heart of Israel's traditional defense concept lay the idea of long-term competitive strategy. One should, however, recognize a big difference between the great-power competition and

Israel's regional strategy. Global powers compete for influence, but Israel's defense policy was never about competing for influence or dominance. It was and still is, literally, about defense. In the twentieth century, Israeli-Arab asymmetry meant that while Israel would never end Arab hostility through a military victory, the Arab aim—which was not unrealistic—was to solve the Israeli problem in exactly this way. The Israeli response was based on decisive military power, made up of reserves and a qualitative edge (Finkel and Friedman 2016) that would transfer the war to enemy territory, quickly defeat an Arab attack, and remove the threat (Tal 1996), thus avoiding a long war of attrition in which the small nation would be defeated. The strategic vision underlying this approach was what the Zionist thinker Ze'ev Jabotinsky called the "Iron Wall," according to which Arab hostility would repeatedly crash up against Israel's walls until Arab leaders finally gave up and accepted Israel's existence.

At seventy-five years old, it seems like that vision has succeeded. Egypt, Jordan, and recently the Abraham Accords nations have come to terms with Israel's existence. A clear, simple, and consistent operational concept, anchored in a realistic strategy and a long-term vision, has proven itself. Accepting and working with Israel's fundamental disadvantage have led to a brilliant strategy of building a decisive military power to ensure conclusive short wars, together with long-term domestic nation building.

NOT BY MILITARY POWER ALONE: THE PERIPHERAL ALLIANCE AND AMERICAN BACKING

Self-reliance, meaning Israel will defend itself by itself, was at the heart of that strategy. At the same time, the Iron Wall was not, of course, composed solely of Israel's military might. Two other principles were the pursuit of backing by a global power, which was the US-Israeli special relationship as it developed in the 1960s, and a regional framework of weakening the Arab coalition by cooperating with their non-Arab adversaries, also known as the *peripheral alliance*. The northern edge of this alliance was made up of the Shah's Iran and a secular Turkey. In both cases, the relationship included exports of Israeli arms, technology sharing, and more. There was also support for Kurdish rebels in Iraq in the 1960s and 1970s.

To the south, Israel supported Sudanese factions, the Ethiopian government, and Yemeni royalists at different periods as a counterweight to Egypt. Israel has, therefore, a legacy of sophisticated—albeit limited—regional involvement (Alpher 2015).

"INSIDE OUT": THE BIG REGIONAL REVERSAL

As always, the peak of a strategy is also the moment of its demise. When the regional Arab order collapsed, the old imperial ambitions of the now radical Iran emerged. What began in the 1980s as a nuisance in the form of Iran's efforts to export the Islamic Revolution to Lebanon has grown to be an aggressive strategy to surround Israel and the Gulf states in a ring of kinetic ranged firebases designed to bring about their strategic paralysis and regional Iranian dominance (Amidror 2021). Iran's ultimate aim, as it has proclaimed

repeatedly, is the destruction of Israel. As Iran became the regional threat, Arab states that were once enemies have now allied themselves with Israel. The relations were further cemented by America's declining interest in the region and increasing unwillingness to play a strategic role.

Yet unlike Egypt and Syria in the past, Iran is far from being a super-power protégé. In the 1970s, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat sought a way to move from the Soviet bloc to the American, and the road to Washington passed through Jerusalem. The Ayatollahs' regime has nothing of Sadat's pragmatism, and it is far from being anyone's protégé, especially not after playing a supporting role in Russia's war effort in Ukraine.

SIZE DOES MATTER: THE NEW ASYMMETRY

Israel's defense concept was all about avoiding attrition by way of a quick, decisive war of maneuver. Yet Israel has been in a war of attrition with Iran for at least a decade. This war is conducted across the Middle East and involves Iran moving its forces and bases toward Israel ("ring of fire"), Iranian attacks on Gulf countries and US bases, and containment efforts by Israel, especially in Syria, alongside an accelerated arms race between the two sides. Further, the endless rounds of fighting in Gaza and the growing tensions on the Lebanese border are other instances of Iran's efforts to wear down its foe.

Still, Israel is a key power in the Middle East, and the IDF is undoubtedly the strongest and most advanced military in the region. Israel's GDP hovered around \$488 billion in 2022, while Iran, with its population of 87 million, boasted a GDP of about \$230 billion (Trading Economics 2022). Despite these advantages, Israel suffers from a clear asymmetry in the regional game compared to Iran.

What constitutes a regional power is first and foremost geographic expanse, which dictates the geopolitical footprint of the state. Second is population size, which represents economic and military potential. Third is strategic depth. But the most important parameter of all is the ability to project military power. Detlef Nolte (2010) offers three definitions of a regional power. In all of them, the ability to project power is a central element. Steve Rosen also emphasizes "power projection" as a key characteristic of a regional power (Rosen 2019). In all the relevant dimensions, Iran enjoys significant advantages over Israel.

We will focus on the two most critical dimensions that influence this asymmetry: strategic depth and the ability to project power.

STRATEGIC DEPTH

The long imperial legacy of Iran (including ancient Persia, Parthians, Sassanians, Persians-Mongols, and the Pahlavis) indicates that it is a natural regional geopolitical center. Iran is vast, located at the seam between Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Arabian Gulf. Its

population is about 87 million and includes an educated middle class that represents industrial and technological potential, as reflected in Iran's well-prioritized defense industries.

An oft-heard claim in the 1990s was that modern firepower would allow Israel to defend itself regardless of geography. Could the missile age have done away with the importance of geography and made Israel a competitor of Iran?

Sadly, that was an unfounded claim. Israel, which is spread over about 22,000 square kilometers, with the bulk of its population and economy crowded into a narrow coastal strip, is highly vulnerable to missile attacks. A precision strike on just a few dozen targets could paralyze Israel militarily and economically for many years.

Strategic depth is one dimension of national resilience. The degree of a state's vulnerability impacts directly on its ability to maintain a policy of power projection over time without flinching. Iran enjoys such natural depth. Israel, whose security concept is designed to compensate for the lack of strategic depth, has become even more vulnerable in the missile age.

POWER PROJECTION

The lack of strategic depth severely limits Israel's ability to carry out a policy of power projection. But what exactly is power projection?

Israel has long-range attack capabilities that can reach Iran itself. Its leaders have declared many times, and according to foreign publications, that it is currently working on improving these capabilities. Is this the capability of a regional power? If so, is everyone who possesses long-range attack capability a regional power? The Saudis possess such capabilities, as do the Gulf states. Why, then, do they look to Israel to lead the fight?

For our purposes, we will define the projection of power as the potential to intervene by force in places far from one's borders, and to maintain this intervention over time and from a position of advantage. Power projection can be implied, as in the case of a carrier fleet showing the flag in a contested region.

Military nuclear capability meets the above definition. But the experience of the Cold War illustrates the limits of nuclear deterrence. The bar to use nuclear weapons is simply too high to be effective in most cases. Israel's image as a nuclear power certainly keeps the Iranians busy, but it alone is not sufficient.

The obvious conventional way to project power remotely is through a naval fleet carrying an expeditionary force. China became threatening as it developed a navy capable of moving forces, under protection, through the Taiwan Strait. The British Empire and America as superpowers both relied on these two elements of power. In the American case, there is also a strategic aerial force capable of operating anywhere in the world and maintaining that effort for a prolonged period of time.

Israel does not have a large navy or the ability to send an expeditionary land force far from its borders. The Israeli air force can operate in Iran, but it is doubtful whether it can sustain the operation over time and from an advantageous position. In any case, the degree of damage that air power, even in combination with long-range missile strikes, can cause a huge country like Iran is limited.

In contrast, Iran projects power through its proxies. It uses both local forces, such as Lebanese Hezbollah or the Houthis in Yemen, and mercenary militias in Iraq and Syria. This is a relatively cheap force that also keeps the conflict away from Iran itself, reduces the risks, and greatly facilitates Iranian regional military involvement.

Use of proxies is a capability that Israel does not possess. Shared identity between patron and proxy is a crucial factor. Iran struggles to gain a stable foothold in Sunni regions despite investing millions there. The heart of Iran's influence in the region is Shiite communities and others closely affiliated with them. The Jewish state can establish regional cooperation frameworks to aid, arm, and even station some limited capabilities in distant countries. But using outside forces as mercenaries or rebels is not a realistic option. There are no minorities in the region with a deep ideological affinity toward Israel. Even countries that see their interests intersecting with Israel's and are ready to engage in military cooperation will be reticent to be used as a springboard for Israeli forces openly targeting Iran.

So, while the Iranians certainly have the potential to expand the "ring of fire," Israel is limited to mainly covert and defensive alliances. The asymmetry is obvious.

KENNAN, KENNEDY, AND A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STRATEGY

The beginning of wisdom in humans as well as international affairs was knowing when to stop.

—Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987), 408

Israel's interest in containing Iran is existential. Israel will not be able to maintain its economy and way of life over time under the shadow of missiles, drones, and a nuclear weapon. Such a threat will erode deterrence while encouraging unrest within its borders. As was the case when it gained its independence, Israel must develop a long-term strategy that flips the asymmetry and creates strategic depth against the missile threat. In the long term, this strategy must be the new Iron Wall, bringing about the decline of the threat from Iran. Such a strategy can succeed in the long run if the conflict is diverted to the areas in which Israel enjoys a relative advantage and Iran's fundamental weaknesses are exposed (Adamsky 2020).

There are two theoretical underpinnings for such a strategy: a policy of *aggressive containment* and the idea of exploiting a *strategic overstretch*.

AGGRESSIVE CONTAINMENT

In 1946 Washington had to contend with a threat to the postwar world order. Unlike the Israel vs. Iran case, the US was stronger than the USSR in terms of power projection, but there was a generally strong will in the US to avoid a direct military confrontation with the USSR.

In his famous “long telegram,” George F. Kennan formulated the theory of containment that guided the US during the forty years of the Cold War. In short, it called for an uncompromising, protracted offensive campaign, directed at Soviet expansion. Ultimately, it was believed that focusing on containing Soviet expansion would lead to its disintegration or at least significantly weaken it.

OVERSTRETCH

In his 1987 work, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, Paul Kennedy developed the notion of *imperial overstretch*, according to which the decline of great powers throughout history is traceable to the overstretching of their military commitments in relation to their economic capacity (Kennedy 1987). A complementary theme described the tendency of superpowers at the height of their power to close themselves off culturally and economically out of a sense of arrogance, therefore accelerating their decline. Kennedy was, in effect, pointing out the tendency of empires to exhaust themselves.

Iran maintains an aggressive foreign policy while relying on an economy that is shaky at best, and a social system with deep oppression at its core. What’s more, its revolutionary Islamic ideology makes the Iranian leadership particularly vulnerable to the risks of cultural closure and arrogance. Kennan pointed out similar weaknesses in the Soviet system.

Israel is a strong and rapidly developing technological and economic player. If we follow Kennedy and Kennan, the way to defeat giants like Iran is to let their overstretch weaken them from within, while at the same time confronting their aggression without stretching one’s own forces too thin.

AGGRESSIVE CONTAINMENT

The Israeli strategic community is united in viewing Iran as an aggressive tiger with sharp claws, but it is divided between “head” and “paws” factions. The former claims that the tiger’s head must be prioritized. The latter points to the limits of Israel’s power and claims that the paws are much more dangerous and must be dealt with first. Both present only a partial strategy that leaves the challenge unanswered.

The “head” faction ignores the limits of Israeli power. A military strike by Israel can cause temporary damage to the Iranian nuclear program and slow it down. The cyber, intelligence, and sabotage campaigns that Israel has allegedly conducted highlight the limits of Israeli power. Alone, they can’t stop Iranian aggression and the nuclear project.

The “paws” faction correctly identifies Iran’s dependence on the missile bases it has built on Israel’s borders. Israel has a clear military advantage in using force near its own borders, on clear display during the now-famous Campaign Between the Wars—or Mabam—in Syria. Furthermore, it is these bases that constitute the more serious military threat to Israel, even in the age of missiles and long-range offensive capabilities from Iran itself. However, this faction too does not offer an overall concept of victory in the Israel-Iran conflict.

As with the original Iron Wall, in the fight against Iran the solution to the inherent Israeli disadvantages must be found in the full exploitation of Israel’s relative advantages. The first of these is time. This stands in stark contrast to the perception that time favors Iran. Israel and its partners have an advantage in strategic resilience due to their technological and economic advantage. Israel still cannot withstand long wars of conventional attrition. But unlike in the past, today’s wealthy Israel can compete with Iran and endure a series of short decisive wars aimed at taking the paws out of the equation, and a long-term policy of aggressive containment throughout the region. The financial burden of that containment will be shared by the wealthy economies of the Gulf nations, in sharp contrast to Iran’s economic limits. Iran’s presumption that it can maintain offensive efforts across the region only serves this strategy.

THE NEAR-RANGE EFFORT: CUTTING OFF THE PAWS

The first element in the strategy is cutting off the tiger’s paws. One reason for that, laid out by Gen. (Ret.) Yaakov Amidror in the *Dado Center Journal* (Amidror 2021) is the link between the ring of fire being built on Israel’s borders and the Iranian strategy, including the emerging nuclear threat. Putting aside the nuclear threat, Iran’s greatest leverage over Israel is the threat posed by Hezbollah in Lebanon. A decisive military capability to remove that threat quickly and directly will severely undermine Iran’s deterrence toward Israel. That includes a possible action against Iran’s nuclear program.

Despite its clear military advantage, over the last three decades, Israel has proved unable to fulfill the principles of its defense doctrine—that is, transferring the battle to enemy territory and directly removing the threat. Israel’s hesitance is not primarily the product of poor decision making but is mainly the result of a military force poorly suited to its missions. This problem gained official recognition, as did possible solutions, in former chief of staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi’s Operational Concept for Victory in 2019. Defeating *fire-centric terror armies* on Israel’s borders and removing the fire threat is no trivial issue and demands significant force design and preparation efforts.

The second element involves Israel’s regional posture. As long as Israel allows Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon to cast a deterrent shadow over it, the perception of Israeli power is compromised. The quiet yet obvious disappointment of Arab leaders with Israel’s poor performance in the 2006 Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in 2008–2009 made that point. The very existence of Hezbollah and Hamas militaries on Israel’s borders, and their continued growth, undermines Israel’s posture, rendering it unsustainable.

Third, Iran's dependence on Syria and Lebanon is a vulnerability. No other territories could threaten Israeli defenses, other than Iran. Being that it is crucial to its overall strategy, Iran will be forced to try and rebuild Lebanese Hezbollah even after a possible war in Lebanon. That effort will have to be conducted under a watchful Israeli eye that remembers the lessons from the recent past. Israel will not likely undertake a preemptive war. Nevertheless, if war erupts, one aim of it would be to drag Iran into an uphill resource-draining effort of rebuilding its proxy force in the face of an Israeli determination to correct its past mistakes.

THE REGIONAL EFFORT: EXHAUSTING IRAN

To take advantage of Iran's overstretch without falling into the same trap is the aim. It is necessary to accelerate Iran's demise by a strategy of a thousand small cuts. Still, to curb Iran's efforts across the Middle East and to make it bleed, some kind of Israeli power projection capability is needed. How can Israel mitigate the asymmetry laid out here?

Examining both the intensity of resistance to Iran's regional expansion and its depletion of resources shows clearly that the Iranians are getting closer to what Carl von Clausewitz would have termed the "culmination point." What can hasten that?

POWER PROJECTION AND THE NEW STRATEGIC DEPTH

Israel has already built the most capable military force in the region, but further buildup is required. Nonetheless, the strategic potential of Israeli direct force projection will remain limited. The Israeli Air Force (IAF) alone, even if increased in size and capabilities, will not be able to fundamentally change the aforementioned asymmetry. An IDF expeditionary force is also not a real option. One can also rule out the possibility of an Israeli blue-ocean maritime fleet. Such significant force design and investment would in any case contradict the essence of the strategy proposed here—making the tiger bleed without falling into the same trap of overreach.

FORWARD AIR DEFENSE

As before in the case of an Arab mechanized invasion, the missile threat also calls for a forward defense approach, distancing Israel's fragile home front from the fight. At his speech at the 2021 Herzliya Conference (Albo 2022), then IAF commander Maj. Gen. Amikam Norkin described air defenses as a new strategic depth. Strategic depth is a commodity that should ideally be expanded. Norkin has called for the formation of a national, rather than local, air defense system and regional cooperation in that field. Indeed, the better the chances of detecting and stopping threats far from Israel, the less bargaining leverage Iran has. More importantly, the more regional detection and interception systems are deployed, the more sophisticated and expensive the Iranian strike challenge will have to become. Air defenses are expensive, yet the challenge of combined regional defensive efforts versus one national Iranian missile program is an arms race that should be in Israel's favor.

Strategic depth of a regional air defense system will ultimately serve as a denial by deterrence strategy. It will greatly reduce the chances of success of Iranian attacks, while the expected cost will remain similar (Adamsky 2017).

COVERT WAR

The intelligence and cyber worlds give Israel a comparative advantage since distance is no obstacle. Indeed, Israel has been known to be exploiting those fields and enhancing its investment there (Levinson 2017).

POLICY OF RETRIBUTION

Iran must know that its proxy-based strategy will not provide it with immunity on its home front. Furthermore, Iran's home front contains not only the lingering trauma of the 1988 missile war, but also deep domestic tensions. Retributions do not have to take the form of visible military attacks, but they should pose a threat of direct escalation. Covert and overt threats will force Iran to further deepen its defense expenditures. The need to defend a huge country like Iran, and an extremely dispersed nuclear program, is another place where an advantage can become a disadvantage.

PARTNERSHIPS AND ALLIANCES

As the diplomatic, economic, and military ties between Israel and the region increase, Iranian expenditures will also have to grow. One must be careful, however, not to overestimate the prospect that regional actors might stand up against Iran. Nevertheless, Iran's determination to expand in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Africa also means that even partial counter-efforts will go a long way to contribute to Iran's overstretch. Better regional coordination and indirect assistance will greatly enhance that effect.

ECONOMIC WAR

Iran is enmeshed in an intractable tension between a radical ideology combined with regional aggression and the desire to maintain a modern state. Iran is not willing to deteriorate into a Middle Eastern North Korea. International economic sanctions are therefore crucial, and the role of Iran's regime in Russia's war in Ukraine is an opportunity to push them forward. Furthermore, Israel's new position as an energy exporter allows it to play an increasing role in the Mediterranean and Europe—this is a role that Israel must leverage.

SUMMARY

Israel's defense concept rests on solid foundations, but adjustments are urgently needed. Its former partner—Iran—became its major enemy. The foreign policy that was previously a relatively secondary component—the periphery alliance—should occupy a much more central place today in a regional partnership against Iran.

A comprehensive strategy is needed. Israel's aggressive containment strategy will consist of two complementary efforts.

The first, along Israel's border, involves a clear military orientation. Defeating Hezbollah and Hamas, or even having the credible threat of doing so, will remove the main Iranian deterrent hanging over Israel and interrupt the constant war of attrition Israel faces there.

The second effort, a regional one, is both political and defensive. It should include forward air defense systems to create strategic depth and deterrence by denial. Punitive actions in Iran itself can be part of this, together with regional containment efforts against its proxies.

Both efforts will aim to accelerate Iran reaching its culmination point. The Iranian strategy, deprived of its assets, built at great effort, will increasingly demand greater investment, and at the same time pose a reduced threat.

To some extent, Israel is already following the outlined strategy. Putting it into words can increase clarity and contribute to long-term determination as well as identify points of weakness.

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