



# PROCEEDINGS

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE ISRAEL-HAMAS CONFLICT AND IMPLICATIONS FOR DETERRENCE

*The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Lessons Learned from the Israel-Hamas Conflict and Implications for Deterrence” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on January 10, 2024. The symposium examined deterrence lessons that may be learned from Israel’s experience in combatting Hamas after the October 7, 2023 terrorist attacks and from repeated Iranian-backed attacks on U.S. assets in the region. It also considered what those lessons learned might suggest more broadly for other U.S. deterrence goals and strategies.*

### **David J. Trachtenberg**

***David J. Trachtenberg is Vice President of the National Institute for Public Policy and served as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy from 2017-2019.***

Since the horrendous October 7 terrorist attacks by Hamas on Israel, the Israel Defense Forces have been conducting a military campaign in Gaza (code-named “Operation Swords of Iron”) to destroy Hamas. The extensiveness of this campaign has led the Biden Administration to call on Israel to exercise greater restraint in its military operations in order to avoid civilian casualties. And the longer the conflict has gone on, with its attendant human toll, the more world public opinion has turned against Israel, with Israeli military strikes being criticized as “excessive,” suggestions that Israel is responsible for “war crimes” in Gaza, and growing international calls for an immediate cease-fire, which would grant Hamas breathing space to regroup and possibly avoid being eradicated as a terrorist force.

In addition to Hamas’ actions, Hezbollah has fired rockets from Lebanon into Israel. Houthis in Yemen have attacked commercial merchant ships in international waters. And Iranian-backed militias have launched more than one hundred thirty missile attacks against U.S. personnel and bases in Iraq and Syria.

The implications of this conflict for deterrence are profound, yet poorly understood. The Biden Administration has responded to Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps-inspired attacks on U.S. military personnel with occasional, limited strikes in an effort to deter further Iranian-linked aggression and has warned the Houthis against further attacks. Yet the threat stubbornly persists. After the United States and its allies delivered a so-called “final warning,” the Houthis responded by blowing up an unmanned surface vessel near a U.S. Navy ship. And just yesterday, they launched their largest barrage of drones, ballistic, and cruise missiles against commercial shipping in the Red Sea.<sup>1</sup> What does this say about the credibility of American deterrent threats?

Last week, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated that President Biden has “accelerated the rate of decay of our deterrence” as a result of the U.S. response to multiple

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<sup>1</sup> John Gambrell, “Yemen’s Houthis launch their largest Red Sea drone and missile attack, though no damage is reported,” *Associated Press*, January 10, 2024, available at <https://apnews.com/article/yemen-houthi-rebels-red-sea-attacks-israel-f820b848eb76fa3ecc8056ca332cabae>.



crises, including the Middle East conflict.<sup>2</sup> And a former USCENTCOM commander wrote that the U.S. response has been “tentative, overly signaled and unfocused” and that making escalation avoidance the top priority “sends an unhelpful signal to our adversaries as well as our friends and allies.” He concluded that “it is the U.S. that is being deterred, not Iran and its proxies.”<sup>3</sup>

These comments raise troubling questions. Among the questions I hope we will address today are:

- Is U.S. support to Israel adequate to deter provocations from other regional actors such as Iran?
- How do U.S. adversaries, including Russia and China, perceive this conflict, and what lessons are they drawing from it?
- How do the different value structures of opponents affect the working of deterrence?
- Does an approach to the conduct of warfare, in line with the Law of Armed Conflict and the Just War tradition, weaken deterrence, especially against those who seek advantage by rejecting Just War principles?
- Does the “civilian casualties” narrative lessen the credibility of U.S. and Western deterrent threats?
- What lessons can we learn from Israel’s experience in this current conflict that can be applied to strengthen deterrence generally?
- And, what lessons, if any, can be drawn regarding nuclear deterrence vis-a-vis great powers?

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### **Keith B. Payne**

***Keith B. Payne is President of National Institute and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Forces Policy***

The current Middle East war suggests broad lessons for great power nuclear deterrence. My remarks today focus on two lessons, based on a preliminary understanding of events.

First, this war demonstrates that the failure to anticipate threats can contribute to the lack of preparations to counter them, and the consequent failure of deterrence.

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<sup>2</sup> Tara Suter, “Pompeo claims Biden administration has ‘accelerated the rate of decay’ in US deterrence,” *The Hill*, January 3, 2024, available at [https://thehill.com/policy/defense/4387553-pompeo-claims-biden-administration-has-accelerated-the-rate-in-decay-of-us-deterrence/?utm\\_campaign=dfn-ebb&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=sailthru&SToverlay=2002c2d9-c344-4bbb-8610-e5794efcfa7d](https://thehill.com/policy/defense/4387553-pompeo-claims-biden-administration-has-accelerated-the-rate-in-decay-of-us-deterrence/?utm_campaign=dfn-ebb&utm_medium=email&utm_source=sailthru&SToverlay=2002c2d9-c344-4bbb-8610-e5794efcfa7d).

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., “Lesson of the Strike That Killed Soleimani,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 5, 2024, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/lesson-of-the-soleimani-strike-quds-iran-deterrence-war-gaza-attacks-on-americans-5c9bbfa1>.

Israel apparently failed to anticipate and adequately prepare for Hamas' October 7 attack. This failure demonstrates that—even when the deterrer has great familiarity with an opponent—that opponent can behave in ways that defy expectations, and as a consequence, deterrence fails.

The lesson here is that Washington should never discount the possibility of an opponent's surprising aggression—no matter how accustomed U.S. leaders are to the soothing belief that an opponent would “never dare” attack. This belief often is the convenient and self-serving rationale for not preparing adequately for a threat, which is a recipe for deterrence failure.

Instead, hedging against unexpected threats simply is prudent because attacks deemed implausible by the target are not unusual in history, and preparedness helps deter. Washington should be very careful about which threats it conveniently shelves and declines to prepare for, and thus essentially decides not to try to deter.

This is an important point because the Biden Administration's *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) actually eliminated “hedging” as a U.S. deterrence requirement—a requirement in place for many years. This is a dangerous policy mistake.

For example, many Western officials still appear to consider a nuclear attack against the United States or its allies to be “unthinkable.” After all, Putin and Xi have agreed that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.”

Yet, what Putin actually appears to deem unthinkable is the continued independence of Ukraine, and for Xi, unthinkable is the continued independence of Taiwan. These beliefs hold dark implications for expanding Russian and Chinese nuclear threats and employment, and the failure of deterrence. Hedging against these threats now is critical.

In addition, rapidly increasing Russian and Chinese military cooperation points to the real potential for a coordinated Sino-Russian attack. Yet, the 2022 NPR says of this threat only that a simultaneous Sino-Russian attack “would constitute an extreme circumstance,” and then falls silent. This apparent lack of recognition and hedging against a looming threat is another recipe for deterrence failure.

A second lesson from the current Middle East conflict is that the high value liberal democracies rightly and laudably place on the welfare of their citizens can create an extreme deterrence disadvantage because it will be exploited by less scrupulous opponents.

Hamas shows a reckless disregard for the lives of the general population of Gaza while Israel consistently demonstrates the high value it places on Israeli lives. This familiar asymmetry in political values can determine a leadership's vulnerabilities, and the will and options available to each side—and thus the functioning of deterrence.

For example, Hamas clearly expected that taking hundreds of civilian hostages would provide a powerful tool to constrain Israel's post-attack options and actions. This very likely contributed to Hamas' calculation that the October 7 attack entailed acceptable risks, and to the consequent failure of deterrence. Israel does not have a comparable coercive tool to control Hamas' behavior and options given Hamas' obvious willingness to sacrifice the lives of the Gaza population.

The lesson for Washington today is profound. America's opponents are tyrannical authoritarian leaderships or dictatorships. Their exploitation of the asymmetry in political values will likely shape Washington's will and options in crises, and provide a potentially powerful coercive tool for opponents that does not exist for the United States.

Yet, most classic and contemporary nuclear deterrence analysis is essentially apolitical. It ignores the significance of such factors as asymmetrical political values and treats nuclear deterrence as a mechanistic balancing act based on the size and composition of nuclear arsenals. The question of which side possesses superior capabilities virtually always overshadows which has the strongest will. This apolitical approach is, again, a prelude to deterrence failure.

A mechanical conceptualization of deterrence is reflected in the current push by some academics to move U.S. deterrence policy back to the intentional targeting of civilians—as if targeting opponents' civilians holds the same deterrent effect for tyrannical foes as it does for Washington. It almost certainly does not and was rightly rejected as the basis for U.S. deterrence policy five decades ago.

An apolitical, mechanical conceptualization of deterrence also underlies the frequent suggestion by supposed experts that the Chinese nuclear buildup is not an urgent concern because the United States still retains more strategic nuclear weapons—as if China's current lack of strategic nuclear "parity" equates to a less capable and threatening strategic deterrent, and thus Washington need not take urgent action.

This mechanical conceptualization of deterrence simply ignores the reality that a relatively smaller Chinese nuclear arsenal will have outsized coercive effect on Washington given the asymmetry in political values.

In addition, when leadership values are highly asymmetrical, the notion that a "parity" or "essential equivalence" in nuclear capabilities will ensure comparable, mutual deterrence is hollow.

A parity in capabilities sounds balanced in a mechanical sense, but deterrence is not mechanics, and a parity in nuclear capabilities simply may not provide Washington the necessary deterrent effect when political values are asymmetrical. Yet, for decades, Washington's conceptualization of strategic deterrence and arms control has been built on the proposition that "parity" is the answer to "how much is enough" for nuclear deterrence.

In short, the Middle East war has again demonstrated the asymmetry of values separating liberal democracies from tyrannies. The broad deterrence lesson for Washington is that it must pursue credible deterrence effect, not according to the mistaken presumptions that China must reach nuclear parity before it poses an urgent nuclear threat, or that "parity" provides an informed standard of adequacy for U.S. forces.

In conclusion, the current Middle East war offers some deterrence lessons: 1) A presumption that deterrence will work can instead lead to its failure, because opponents often behave in ways that defy expectations and defeat deterrence; and 2) the conflicting values separating liberal democracies and authoritarian tyrannies can have greater effect on the functioning of deterrence than the balance of nuclear forces.

These realities must be acknowledged and taken into account as Washington seeks to simultaneously deter two great nuclear powers.

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## **Ilan Berman**

***Ilan Berman is Senior Vice President of the American Foreign Policy Council.***

On October 7, 2023, the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas carried out a campaign of terror against Israel left more than 1,200 dead and resulted in the largest slaughter of Jews to take place since the Holocaust more than eight decades earlier. In response, Israel has launched a large-scale military offensive in the Gaza Strip with two concurrent (and potentially contradictory) goals: to remove Hamas from power in the Gaza Strip, and to secure the return of hostages remaining in Hamas captivity. In tandem with its military offensive against Hamas, however, Israel has experienced a deeper strategic shift, driven by the errors and miscalculations that made the atrocities of October 7<sup>th</sup> possible.

What were those? During the 1990s, hopes had run high that some form of a durable settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation was in fact possible. But over time, those expectations and successive Israeli governments focused less and less on the Palestinian “arena” in favor of other political and strategic priorities. The result was an “outside in” approach, in which Israel worked to forge bonds with multiple regional states. While this resulted in breakthroughs like the “Abraham Accords,” it also led to the “Palestinian question” receding in urgency, and Israeli governments adopting a policy relying on extensive surveillance and the assumption of eventual political moderation to manage the Palestinians.

The October 7<sup>th</sup> attacks underscored the bankruptcy of both of these assumptions, and in their aftermath Israel has begun to formulate a new strategic concept entailing a number of features:

***Proactive defense*** – In recent years, the country had gravitated to a campaign of tactical operations designed to delay full-on conflict while eroding the capabilities of non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah. In the aftermath of October 7<sup>th</sup>, such a strategic posture is untenable, and the Israeli government is contemplating a reoccupation of Gaza as well as the need for conflict with Hezbollah to protect its northern cities.

***Manpower needs*** – Historically, Israel has excelled in short, intense conflicts, and the protracted nature of the current war has exposed serious shortcomings in its military posture, including a need for greater sustained manpower. The resulting solutions being contemplated by the Israeli government (including a draft of Israel’s ultra-orthodox community, which historically has been exempt from national military service) has the power to reignite significant societal tensions.

***Wartime economic footing*** – In the wake of October 7<sup>th</sup>, Israel’s government was forced to reconfigure the country’s budget, and plan for a state of perpetual war for the foreseeable future. Such an economic “war footing” will dramatically alter the country’s spending

priorities, and leech resources away from key sectors such as housing and infrastructure. It also has the potential to erode Israel's global economic standing.

**Stockpiling** – To keep pace with ongoing combat needs, multiple branches of the Israeli military are now dramatically ramping up their procurement efforts. This is intended not only to fully resource the country's current war with Hamas, but also to ensure the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are properly equipped to prosecute a future conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon.

These new priorities have profound implications for the future of Israel's strategic partnership with the United States. Already, the demands of Israel's new security realities have put pressure on the political *status quo* between the two countries in new and profound ways. Time will tell whether this will result in a fundamental reconfiguration of the long-standing bonds between Washington and Jerusalem.

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### **Ari Cicurel**

***Ari Cicurel is the Assistant Director of Foreign Policy at the Jewish Institute for National Security of America (JINSA).***

Thank you for including me on this impressive panel. I'll focus my remarks on the absence of deterrence against the Iran-backed Houthis in the Red Sea and more broadly the absence of deterrence against Iran-backed groups from targeting U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria as well.

Safeguarding the global freedom of navigation through international waterways, in particular, through critical Middle Eastern maritime chokepoints, is a core U.S. interest as a maritime nation and is crucial to the global economy. Approximately twelve percent of global trade transits the Red Sea, and 8.2 million barrels of oil per day travel through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.<sup>4</sup> The Ever Given container ship's blockage of the Suez Canal in 2021, costing an estimated \$9.6 billion daily, gives a clear indication of how disruption at a Middle Eastern maritime chokepoint can have an immense effect on global markets.<sup>5</sup>

Reflecting this importance, a core principle of the 2022 *National Security Strategy* was to "not allow foreign or regional powers to jeopardize freedom of navigation through the Middle East's waterways."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Eavis and Keith Bradsher, "Red Sea Attacks Leave Shipping Companies With Difficult Choices," *The New York Times*, January 6, 2024, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/06/business/red-sea-shipping-houthi.html>; Marwa Rashad, Robert Harvey and Natalie Grover, "How would the Red Sea attacks affect gas shipping?" Reuters, December 19, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/how-would-red-sea-attacks-affect-gas-shipping-2023-12-19/>.

<sup>5</sup> Justin Harper, "Suez blockage is holding up \$9.6bn of goods a day," *BBC*, March 26, 2021, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-56533250>.

<sup>6</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy*, October 2022, p. 42, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

Yet, on at least 39 occasions since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, the Houthis have engaged in maritime aggression involving firing over 100 missiles and drones at commercial vessels, illegally seizing them, and harassing U.S. Navy and coalition ships in Middle Eastern waters.<sup>7</sup> Initially, this focused on ships with ties to Israel, but the Houthis have since expanded their attacks to ships that have no apparent ties to Israel.<sup>8</sup> The approximately 32 incidents of Iran-linked maritime aggression in December alone surpassed the 20 incidents throughout the rest of 2023 combined.<sup>9</sup> These attacks in the Red Sea have had a deleterious effect on global commerce, with insurance premiums for commercial ships sharply increasing and major firms like BP, Maersk, and other shipping companies at least temporarily suspending travel through the Red Sea.<sup>10</sup>

The United States has deployed military assets to the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East, including extending the deployment of the Ford Carrier Strike Group and deploying the Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group. These have helped protect ships, but the United States has not deterred the Houthis from attacking anything.<sup>11</sup> Initially, U.S. Naval vessels assisted commercial vessels in distress from Houthi attacks and intercepted incoming projectiles but did not launch strikes to target the Houthis at sea or on land who were responsible for the attacks. Therefore, the Houthis faced practically no cost for their attacks.

The creation of Operation Prosperity Guardian to better protect the Red Sea was an important measure to organize partners around concerted action to protect against Iran-backed maritime aggression.<sup>12</sup> U.S. Navy vessels and the task force have helped protect commercial shipping in Middle Eastern waters. However, Houthi attacks have continued. The task force offers better protection, but it is still a defensive, reactive posture.

Then, on December 31, U.S. helicopters returned fire and sank three Houthi vessels that had attacked them and a commercial ship in the Red Sea on multiple occasions, marking the first instance of the United States using military force to target Houthi fighters.<sup>13</sup> While this

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<sup>7</sup> "US says it shot down four drones in southern Red Sea launched from Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen," *The Guardian*, December 23, 2023, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/24/us-says-it-shot-down-four-drones-in-southern-red-sea-launched-from-houthi-controlled-areas-in-yemen>.

<sup>8</sup> Aziz El Yaakoubi, "Israeli-managed vessel hit by suspected Iranian drone, US official says," Reuters, November 25, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-managed-vessel-hit-by-suspected-iranian-drone-us-official-says-2023-11-25/>; Anna Coobin, "Houthi attacks close vital Red Sea route for Maersk's container ships," *CNN*, January 5, 2024, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/05/business/maersk-red-sea-shipping-suspended/index.html>.

<sup>9</sup> For the latest number of maritime incidents, see JINSA's Iran Projectile Tracker, available at <https://jinsa.org/iran-projectile-tracker/>.

<sup>10</sup> "Maersk will continue to pause all Red Sea shipments," Reuters, January 2, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/maersk-will-continue-pause-all-red-sea-shipments-2024-01-02/>.

<sup>11</sup> Luis Martinez, "Exclusive: US to bring back aircraft carrier from eastern Mediterranean," *ABC News*, December 31, 2023, available at <https://abcnews.go.com/International/exclusive-us-bring-back-gerald-r-ford-aircraft-carrier-eastern-mediterranean/story?id=106021259>.

<sup>12</sup> "What is U.S.-led Red Sea coalition and which countries are backing it?" Reuters, December 22, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-red-sea-taskforce-gets-limited-backing-some-allies-2023-12-20/>.

<sup>13</sup> Jacob Gronholt-Pedersen and Ahmed Elimam, "US sinks 3 ships, kills 10 after Houthi Red Sea attack," Reuters, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/maersk-pauses-red-sea-sailings-after-houthi-attack-container-ship-2023-12-31/>.

was an important transition from the United States only taking defensive measures to protect commercial vessels after the Houthis launched attacks, it also failed to deter further Houthi aggression in the Red Sea.

Moreover, the Iran and Houthi aggression at sea has been part of a widespread deterioration in deterrence against the Iranian regime. Iran-backed groups in Iraq and Syria have launched at least 130 attacks on U.S. personnel since October 17.<sup>14</sup> Yet, the United States has launched only nine rounds of strikes against Iran-backed groups in Iraq and Syria. The frequency and strength of these strikes have increased over time, in particular with the recent strike against a senior Iran-backed militia commander in Baghdad, but they have neither degraded the ability of the Iran-backed groups to launch attacks nor deterred them from conducting further strikes.

So how does the United States move toward deterrence? What is needed is both having the capabilities and a clear demonstration of will, and right now the Iranian regime and its proxies clearly question the U.S. willingness to use stronger and more frequent military force.

Contrary to fears from U.S. officials that more U.S. strikes against the Houthis or other Iran-backed groups could expand the Israel-Hamas war to the rest of the region, U.S. restraint has encouraged the Iranian regime and the Houthis to continue their aggression, as well as further undermined deterrence against the Iran-backed groups in Iraq and Syria.

Instead, deterring these groups requires a clear U.S. willingness to launch consistent, strong strikes that target the fighters in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq who are responsible for attacks and hold the Iranian regime directly responsible for the aggression it enables.

As former U.S. Central Command commander Gen. Frank McKenzie said this month, “there’s a fine line between avoiding escalation and inviting continued opportunities for Iranian and Houthi attacks, based on a perceived fecklessness on our part” and “sometimes you’ve got to throw a pitch.”<sup>15</sup>

So far, the United States has mostly limited itself to playing defense amid the escalation of Iran-backed attacks. Unless that changes, Iran and the Houthis will stay on the offensive.<sup>16</sup> Thank you and I look forward to the rest of the conversation.

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<sup>14</sup> For the latest number of projectile attacks, see JINSA’s Iran Projectile Tracker, available at <https://jinsa.org/iran-projectile-tracker/>.

<sup>15</sup> Lara Seligman, “Former Mideast commander calls on Biden to respond to Houthi attacks,” *Politico*, December 8, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/12/08/u-s-needs-to-respond-to-houthis-after-red-sea-attacks-former-middle-east-commander-says-00130852>.

<sup>16</sup> Mark I. Fox, John W. Miller, and Ari Cicurel, “To deter Houthi strikes in Red Sea, US must turn from defense to offense,” *Breaking Defense*, December 28, 2023, <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/12/to-deter-houthi-strikes-in-red-sea-us-must-turn-from-defense-to-offense/>.