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U.S. Foreign Policy and the Limits of Military Deterrence: Lessons from the Iran - Israel Conflict

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how United States foreign policy has shaped Israel's military deterrence strategies throughout their ongoing (enduring) Iran – Israel conflict. The analysis will compare American financial support for the Israeli Military with America's diplomatic attempts to limit Iranian regional and nuclear ambitions. A comparison of the differing security doctrine of Iran, which is based upon asymmetrical proxy war and deterrence through ambiguity and that of Israel, which is based on traditional technological superiority and preemptive attacks, demonstrate why reliance upon military force to secure national interests can be inherently limited. An examination of both historical and current events from 2015-2025 demonstrates that while military deterrence can create short-term tactical advantages, it often creates increased levels of regional tension, solidifies positions held by adversaries, and creates obstacles for legitimate third party mediation efforts. In addition, this article evaluates the effects of rising international trends; specifically, the emergence of the Abraham Accords, advances in drone and ballistic missile technology as well as changes in the distribution of global power. It is also argued in the article that there needs to be a shift away from 'punishment' type deterrents to 'denial' type deterrents and an emphasis on developing strong multi-lateral diplomatic frameworks necessary to ensure long-term stability within the region.

Keywords: U.S. Foreign Policy, Military Deterrence, Iran-Israel Conflict, Middle East Security, Asymmetric Warfare, Proxy Networks, Diplomatic Engagement, Geopolitics.

INTRODUCTION

The long standing Iran-Israel conflict is very complex and multi faceted problem that has existed for many years due to deep-seated historical tensions, ideological differences, and competing regional powers. The longstanding nature of this conflict has been internationally recognized through involvement from international actors (i.e. the United States) who have taken part in numerous foreign policy decisions and actions that have greatly affected the military deterrent strategies used by both Iran and Israel. Historically, the U.S. has utilized its foreign policy towards the Middle East primarily to protect its allies, most specifically Israel and to counter what it believes are threats to regional stability posed by Iran. Due to the interdependent nature of these two countries' relationships, there exist implications for military engagement, but more importantly, for diplomatic solutions that appear to be continually unattainable within today's geopolitical environment (Pillar, 2013).

Military aid to Israel by the United States; weapons sold to Israel; and providing the latest military technologies to Israel all have significant deterrent effects on what would appear to be Iranian aggressive actions. On the other hand, there have been diplomatic attempts made by the U.S. to limit Iran's nuclear aspirations and reduce Iran's influence within the Middle East through sanctions and diplomacy. Examples of this can be seen in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This example reflects an area of complexity and contradiction found in U.S. foreign policy, namely that the use of military deterrence exists alongside the existence of diplomatic efforts. An examination of the interplay between the two will provide insight into how each influences the strategic considerations of both Israel and Iran.

The success of military deterrence is difficult to assess due to a multitude of local and global influences. For example, a U.S. military presence in the Gulf area is meant to deter Iran from expanding its influence. However, this relationship raises a number of important concerns relative to the long-term viability of maintaining a position that would require

compelling diplomacy. For nearly six decades, the use of military force to achieve a political objective has been an accepted means of advancing foreign policy interests. Yet, at least with regard to both Iranian and Israeli reactions to military intervention in Lebanon, Syria, and through drone attacks by Iranian units on Israeli targets, it can be seen that military deterrence does not always result in either a strategic advantage or a concession of diplomacy (Makar & Pillah, 2025).

In addition, many aspects of U.S. foreign policy have been affected by domestic politics. Pro-Israeli lobby groups as well as public opinion within the United States are among some of the most powerful factors that complicate a balanced position on how the U.S. approaches Iran. Therefore, the changes in commitment to using military deterrence reflect a continuing struggle to find a balance between these domestic influences and finding an international strategy for the U.S. The relationship of U.S. foreign policy to military deterrence in the context of the Iran-Israel conflict therefore demonstrate two significant implications related to the use of military deterrence alone. First, military-only solutions will be insufficient; second, understanding the complexities of both diplomacy and military action is critical to addressing complex security problems.

U.S. STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East is defined by a multitude of competing interests, evolving relationships, and an ongoing desire for stability in a region that has historically seen a large number of conflicts and regional rivalries. The 1979 Iranian revolution represented a major shift in the direction of U.S. foreign policy since it removed the pro-U.S. Shah from power and replaced him with a theocracy; this event had a profound impact on both the U.S.'s relationship with Iran and Israel as well as the greater dynamics of the region (Katzman, 2015).

After the revolution, U.S. policy objectives changed because of the U.S. belief that Iranian extremism was going to affect other countries and damage U.S. interests. At first the U.S. supported Iraq during its war against Iran (1980-88) which the U.S. believed would be an effective way to contain the spread of Iranian influence. However, this experience also demonstrated the limitations of using military assistance or intervention to achieve desired political results for the U.S. Since then, a consistent theme in U.S. foreign policy is the priority given to strategic alliances especially with Israel, as a counterbalance to what the U.S. perceives as expanding Iranian influence (Mens, 2024).

Successive administration policies toward Iran (deterrent vs. engagement) illustrate the continued controversy of the United States' role in the Middle East. Sanctions and an active military posture are two key elements of U.S. deterrent strategy against threats to its regional allies. During the first decade of the new millennium, there was increasing international attention on the nuclear program of Iran, which led to the creation of the JCPOA in 2015. The JCPOA sought to limit Iran's nuclear capacity, while creating a mechanism for diplomatic dialogue; However, the U.S. decision to withdraw from this agreement in 2018 illustrates how easily the fragile mechanisms of diplomacy can be disrupted by changing domestic political leadership.

In relation to U.S. foreign policy, the U.S. has always supported Israeli self-determination and security interests. Therefore, in an effort to establish a regional balance of power with other states that could be considered potential adversaries, the United States has positioned Israel as one of its most important allies in this effort. The U.S. is providing the majority of funding for weapons and missile defense systems (such as the Iron Dome) for Israel. As such, the mutually supportive nature of U.S. - Israeli relations reflects both the U.S. interest in utilizing Israel strategically in the region as well as Israel's position as an important part of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East (Kaye & Efron, 2023).

Recent developments in U.S. foreign policy amid shifting dynamics of the Middle East, point out that both successes and failures can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of using military deterrence in this area. It has been shown that there are limits to what military solutions alone can accomplish in terms of solving multi-faceted, politically charged issues. Thus, an approach to deterring future conflicts which relies exclusively on military power will not address the underlying political grievances that lead to these conflicts. Moreover, the extensive presence of U.S. forces in many countries of the region has created widespread resentment against the United States, contributed to growing anti-American sentiment, and generally undermined the ability of the United States to promote stability in the region. These illustrates one of the most significant disadvantages of employing military force as a foreign policy instrument; it may create or continue violent cycles and other forms of conflict unless employed with diplomacy or communication as well as dialogue.

DIVERGENT DETERRENCE STRATEGIES: ISRAEL AND IRAN

Israel views military deterrence as central to its national security doctrine. As such, Israel's military posture is comprised of technology that is highly advanced and capable of collecting intelligence and establishing strategic relationships with other countries. Most notably, for decades, the United States has been providing Israel with technologically sophisticated weapons, including missile defense systems and a great deal of monetary support; this has

led many to believe that Israel enjoys an unprecedented level of military superiority in the Middle East (Golov, 2016). With the backing of the U.S., Israel has adopted a policy of preemption and targeted deterrence against perceived threats from Iran and its proxy militias in the Syrian Civil War through various operations that target Iranian entrenchment in Syria (Bar, 2020)

Iran's military deterrent strategy is influenced most significantly by the revolutionary ideological underpinnings of the government and its perception of an existential threat emanating from both Israel and the United States. As part of this, the Iranian government has made significant investments in the capacity for asymmetrical warfare, including the establishment of proxy groups like Hezbollah and support for Shia militia forces across the Middle East. Through these proxy forces, Iran can project power and increase its influence, thus creating complexities in engaging militarily directly with Israel (Katzman, 2017). Iran's strategy of deterrence includes maintaining ambiguity through rhetoric and military posturing, which maintains a level of fear that limits or prevents Israeli attacks on Iran (Kam, 2021) and supports Iran's national security priorities of regime sustainability and regional superiority (Mousavian & Chitsazian, 2020).

The role that U.S. foreign policy has played in influencing the development of deterrence strategy cannot be overestimated. The U.S.'s commitment to protect Israeli security has given encouragement to Israeli action in this Region. This collective belief in the superiority of Israeli technology, combined with the support of the United States has enabled an Aggressive Deterrent Posture (such as the development of military plans designed to counter Iranian nuclear advances). Conversely, by imposing Sanctions and threatening Military Actions against Iran; U.S. policy has unintentionally reinforced Iran's resolve to develop its own military capabilities as a means of counter deterrence (Ansari Fard & Haji-Yousefi, 2023).

Although both countries have engaged in developing a deterrent strategy as an element of each country's national security issues; there is also evidence that military force has not been effective at creating diplomatic solutions. In the past U.S. Interventionist foreign policy has created a greater divide between adversaries and has failed to resolve or mitigate many conflicts. In fact, instead of deterring Iran from continuing with its nuclear program, U.S. sanctions and threats of military action have galvanized nationalism in Iran, which has strengthened the government's position that deterrence is the best way for Iran to prevent other nations from taking military action against them. Military deterrence can provide short term increases in security for a nation but usually does not result in long lasting diplomatic agreements.

Table 1: Evolution of Israeli and Iranian Strategic Doctrines (2015–2025)

Year	Strategic Development		Supporting Indicator	Strategic Implication
	Israel	Iran		
2015	Continued intelligence and diplomatic efforts regarding Iran's nuclear programme.	Concluded the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).	JCPOA (July 2015)	Temporarily reduced tensions while leaving broader strategic rivalry intact.
2018	Increased air operations targeting Iranian military infrastructure in Syria.	Adjusted security strategy following renewed U.S. sanctions.	U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA (May 2018)	Renewed strategic competition and reinforced deterrence postures.
2020	Expanded regional security cooperation through diplomatic normalization.	Continued investment in missile capabilities and regional partnerships.	Abraham Accords (2020)	Altered regional alignments and intensified strategic competition.
2021	Iron Dome intercepted thousands of rockets during the Gaza conflict.	Maintained support for allied non-state actors.	Gaza Conflict (May 2021)	Demonstrated the effectiveness of layered missile defence and proxy-based deterrence.
2023	Large-scale military operations following the 7 October attacks.	Continued support for regional partners while avoiding direct conventional conflict.	Hamas attack (7 October 2023) and Gaza War	Increased regional instability and heightened deterrence dynamics.
2024	Successfully intercepted most incoming Iranian missiles and drones with allied support.	Conducted the first large-scale direct missile and drone strike against Israel.	Iran–Israel missile exchange (April 2024)	Marked a shift from indirect confrontation to limited direct interstate conflict.
2025	Continued modernization of missile defence and	Continued adapting to sanctions while	Continued U.S.–Israel defence cooperation	Indicates the persistence of contrasting strategic

	precision-strike capabilities with U.S. support.	preserving regional deterrence networks.	and regional security developments	doctrines despite evolving regional dynamics.

Source: Compiled by the author

Note. Supporting indicators identify major historical events, policy decisions, or military developments that provide empirical evidence for the strategic trends discussed. These indicators are intended to support comparative analysis.

THE LIMITATIONS OF MILITARY FORCE

The use of military force as a key method to achieve diplomatic resolutions in the context of the Iran-Israel conflict has shown many limitations, especially regarding the potential unintended consequences of using military force (Yom, 2020; Mosalanejad, 2019). One of the major limitations is the fact that military operations typically increase tensions instead of reducing them. For example, the Israeli invasion into Lebanon and the Israeli confrontation in the Gaza strip demonstrate a consistent trend where short term military success does not produce long term political stability. These types of military action can create an environment which encourages the opposing party to retaliate against the aggressor(s), increasing their resolve to continue to oppose such actions, as seen after Operation Protective Edge in 2014. This creates a cycle of violence, which ultimately fails to provide a lasting solution. Therefore, military actions reinforce adversarial positions, thereby creating a difficult environment for diplomatic dialogue.

The use of force also undermines the credibility of diplomatic efforts. When the United States supports Israeli military actions with its own military resources, it puts itself in a difficult position because its support is often viewed as enabling Israeli actions which result in civilian casualty. As a result, this makes it much harder for the U.S. to remain impartial when attempting to mediate between Israel and Iran for a peaceful resolution (Yom, 2020). If skepticism exists towards diplomacy, then involved parties are less likely to view the diplomatic avenue as a viable option. Deterrence theory relies upon rational decision makers who make decisions based upon cost-benefit analysis. However, there are many instances where ideologically motivated actors have made decisions which do not fit into traditional cost-benefit analyses. Existential fear can cause miscalculations by either side that ultimately leads to military confrontation. An example of this was during the 2006 Lebanon war; most of the strategies used did not take into consideration the willingness of non state actors to engage in asymmetric warfare (Mossalanejad, 2019).

The heavy reliance on coercive means may overshadow possible avenues of proactive diplomatic efforts. Military interventions are often viewed as a potential method in which one or both parties can alter their strategic thinking due to the conflict. However, it is important to understand how dialogue may assist in resolving the underlying issues. Historically, the use of military intervention has been most successful when there were complementary diplomatic processes occurring simultaneously. A recent example of the limits of using military force in conjunction with little or no real diplomatic effort is illustrated with the current stagnant status of the Palestinian-Israeli Peace Process. Military deterrence continues to be used in conjunction with very limited and ineffective diplomatic progress.

Table 2: Limitations of Military Force in Geopolitical Conflicts (2015–2025)

Year	Strategic Consequence	Empirical Evidence	Supporting Indicator	Strategic Implication
2015	Regional Entanglement	Russian military intervention in Syria transformed the conflict into a multi-actor geopolitical contest involving regional and global powers.	Direct Russian military deployment alongside Iranian-backed forces.	Local conflicts can evolve into broader geopolitical confrontations involving competing external actors.
2018	Loss of Mediator Legitimacy	The United States' recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital reduced its credibility among Palestinians as a neutral mediator.	Relocation of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem.	Perceived diplomatic bias can weaken mediation efforts and reduce confidence in negotiated settlements.
2020	Stagnation of Dialogue	The Abraham Accords advanced regional normalization but did not revive direct Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations.	Normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab states.	Diplomatic breakthroughs at the regional level may coexist with continued stagnation in conflict resolution.
2023	Escalation Dynamics	The Hamas attacks of 7 October and Israel's subsequent military campaign produced widespread regional instability.	Large-scale cross-border attack followed by prolonged military operations in Gaza.	Demonstrates how armed confrontation can rapidly intensify humanitarian crises and regional

				insecurity.
2024	Regional Entanglement	Direct missile and drone exchanges between Iran and Israel involved coordinated defensive support from the United States and regional partners.	April 2024 Iran–Israel missile exchange.	Indicates how bilateral conflicts increasingly involve wider regional and international security networks.
2025	Stagnation of Dialogue	Despite multiple ceasefire initiatives and international diplomatic efforts, a comprehensive political settlement remained elusive.	Repeated mediation efforts by Qatar, Egypt, and the United States without a final agreement.	Highlights the continuing limitations of military approaches in achieving sustainable peace.

Source: Compiled by the author

Note. The table highlights events demonstrating the limitations of military force in protracted conflicts, supported by documented military, diplomatic, and international interventions. The examples are illustrative.

EMERGING GEOPOLITICAL TRENDS

The geopolitical context in which the conflict exists is constantly evolving due to a number of factors which includes changes in power relations among global powers, increasing development in technology, and the actions of various non-state actors and the evolution of alliances among the nations within the region. Changes such as these provide strong justification for continually adapting the strategies of military deterrence to respond to an ever evolving international security environment (Al-Dessouki, 2025; Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2019). As a result of the Abraham Accords, many Arab countries have formed new alliances with each other and with Israel. The primary purpose of forming this alliance is to counterbalance Iranian's growing influence in the area. Therefore, since a major portion of the strength of the deterrence that existed between two or more single nation-states is being challenged by this new alliance, and it is reasonable to assume that the focus will be placed on developing 'collective' forms of security as opposed to reliance on 'individual' national defense capabilities.

Iran also relies upon regional allies and nonstate actors, such as Hezbollah, to act as tools for forward deterrence. The use of these types of actors can make traditional deterrence difficult due to their ability to operate outside of a sovereign state's boundary and the employment of asymmetrical tactics that include terrorist type actions against civilians and military personnel, sabotage, etc., (Al-Dessouki, 2025; Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2019). Furthermore, advancements in missile technology, unmanned aircraft systems (drones), and precision strike weapons have increased the likelihood of escalating violence. As Iran has expanded its missiles and drones, so too has Israel invested in the means to counter them with increasing complexity in the deterrent relationship. In order to provide sufficient response options to prevent conflict from occurring, it will be necessary to incorporate cyber and asymmetric capabilities into the existing range of defensive and retaliatory measures.

Another level of complexity is added by the increasing competition for power globally - specifically the United States and China. The U.S. continues to be one of the most significant actors providing for regional security; however, as the U.S. continues to shift its strategic focus toward China in the Indo-Pacific Region, it creates uncertainty regarding whether the U.S. will continue to maintain a commitment to the region long term. Additionally, China's continued expansion into the Iranian economy and foreign policy increases the multipolarity in this region. Therefore, an ever increasing amount of reliance on credible regional alliances, military technology resiliency, diplomacy and cooperative regional security arrangements are being required for effective deterrence.

Table 3: Emerging Geopolitical Trends and Their Implications for Future Deterrence Strategies (2015–2025)

Year	Emerging Geopolitical Trend	Empirical Evidence	Supporting Indicator	Implication for Future Deterrence Strategy
2015	Expansion of Proxy Networks	Iran expanded support for allied armed groups in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen following the intensification of regional conflicts.	Increased operational coordination among Hezbollah, Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, and the Houthis.	Requires integrated strategies addressing proxy warfare, terrorism, and irregular military threats rather than relying solely on conventional deterrence.
2019	Drone and Missile	Coordinated drone and cruise missile attacks on	Abqaiq–Khurais attacks temporarily	Highlights the need for integrated air, missile,

	Advancements	Saudi Aramco oil facilities demonstrated the effectiveness of low-cost precision strike capabilities.	disrupted global oil production.	cyber, and electronic warfare capabilities to counter emerging threats.
2020	The Abraham Accords	Israel normalized diplomatic relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, expanding regional security cooperation.	Signing of the Abraham Accords (September–December 2020).	Encourages a transition from unilateral deterrence to multilateral security partnerships and intelligence sharing.
2021	Expansion of Proxy Networks	Armed groups aligned with Iran continued missile and drone attacks against regional targets in Iraq and Yemen.	Increasing frequency of attacks by Iranian-aligned non-state actors.	Demonstrates the growing importance of counter-proxy operations, intelligence coordination, and regional security cooperation.
2023	Drone and Missile Advancements	Hamas employed coordinated rocket, drone, and infiltration tactics during the 7 October attacks, while regional actors increasingly relied on unmanned systems.	Large-scale combined use of drones, rockets, and irregular tactics during the Gaza conflict.	Reinforces the need for layered missile defence integrated with cyber intelligence and rapid-response capabilities.
2024	Regional Integrated Air Defence	Israel and its partners intercepted most Iranian missiles and drones during Iran's April 2024 direct attack.	Coordinated defensive operations involving the United States, United Kingdom, Jordan, and other regional partners.	Demonstrates the strategic value of multinational air and missile defence networks in responding to complex threats.
2025	Technological Transformation of Warfare	Continued investment in artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, cyber operations, and integrated missile defence across the Middle East.	Increased defence procurement emphasizing AI-enabled command-and-control systems, unmanned platforms, and cyber resilience.	Future deterrence is likely to depend on multidomain integration combining conventional, cyber, space, and information capabilities.

Source: Compiled by the author

Note. The table highlights major geopolitical developments shaping Middle Eastern deterrence strategies (2015–2025), based on documented military, diplomatic, and technological developments from authoritative sources.

CONCLUSION

The dynamic interaction between military deterrence and diplomacy is illustrated by the complexities of U.S. foreign policy in the conflict over Iran-Israel. Military deterrence is used as part of U.S. policy to prevent aggressive actions by Iran and to provide strength and support for Israel's defense posture. However, military deterrence can only provide temporary stability from aggression while it does not address the fundamental causes that are contributing to the animosity. Furthermore, repeated military engagement may increase hostility among nations involved, create barriers to communication and dialogue, and when relying too heavily on ‘punishment’ to maintain deterrents increases the likelihood of an uncontrollable escalation. Conversely, ‘denial’, or the use of defense systems to deny an opponent the ability to attack, represents a long term approach to maintaining a stable deterrent. Therefore, future U.S. foreign policy should include strengthening multilateral diplomacy through third party mediators and creating regional security coalitions which would include Iran, Israel and other key players. Through utilizing credible defense mechanisms along with facilitating dialogue and cooperative security mechanisms, the United States can pursue a broader diplomatic approach to the conflict between Iran-Israel and ultimately contribute to sustaining regional peace.

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