



The Evolution of Regional Deterrence Strategy in the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Mohammad Fayyaz Faroojy¹ | Ali Zare² | Hossein Mohammadi Sirat³

Abstract

The Islamic Republic of Iran's strategic environment has long been shaped by its unique geoeconomic and geopolitical position, surrounded by adversarial actors and subjected to external pressures. Throughout its modern history, Iran has contended with threats emanating from the sustained presence of the United States in West Asia, the aggressive nationalism of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and various transnational terrorist organizations. These challenges have underscored the imperative for Tehran to bolster its national security posture. Consequently, Iran has invested heavily in nuclear, missile, and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) capabilities, as well as the regional transfer of advanced weaponry, to construct a multifaceted deterrence apparatus. This study seeks to chart the evolution of Iran's regional deterrence strategy since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Grounded in the theoretical framework of regional deterrence, it asks: In what direction have Iran's deterrence policies and capabilities developed over the course of the Islamic Republic's existence?

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, document-based methodology. Primary and secondary sources—including government statements, defense white papers, and academic analyses—were collected through library and archival research. Theoretical foundations were established by reviewing seminal works on deterrence theory, notably the Cold War-era literature on mutual assured destruction and its adaptation to regional contexts. The study then traces Iran's strategic trajectory across four "order-defining" conflicts in West Asia: the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), the Second Gulf War (1990–1991), the campaign against the Islamic State (2014–2017), and

- 1 Master's Graduate in Political Science, Faculty of Islamic Studies and Political Science, Imam Sadiq University, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran (Corresponding Author).
m.faroojy@isu.ac.ir
<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0481-1200>
- 2 Ph.D. Candidate in International Relations, Faculty of Islamic Studies and Political Science, Imam Sadiq University, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran
alizareh@isu.ac.ir
- 3 Assistant Professor of Political Science (Iranian Affairs), Faculty of Islamic Studies and Political Science, Imam Sadiq University, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7998-2937>
mohammadisirat@isu.ac.ir



Operation Al-Aqsa Storm (2023–2025). Through a comparative-historical analysis, the research identifies how Iran’s deterrence approaches—conventional, indirect, and networked—have been conceived, institutionalized, and operationalized. Key evaluative criteria include the trio of deterrence components: **communication** (the signaling of resolve and red lines), **capability** (the actual military and technological capacity), and **credibility** (the demonstrated willingness to act).

Result and Discussion

The analysis reveals that Iran’s deterrence strategy has matured into an integrated, tripartite model combining **conventional**, **indirect**, and **networked** forms of deterrence. Each dimension has been informed by the shifting regional security landscape and calibrated to address evolving threats.

1. Conventional Deterrence

- **Missile and UAV Programs:** Starting in the late 1980s, Iran accelerated its indigenous missile development, culminating in a diverse arsenal capable of precision strikes across the Gulf and Levant. Simultaneously, Tehran pioneered the use of combat drones for surveillance and strike missions, signaling its ability to threaten adversary assets with minimal risk to its own personnel.
- **Demonstrations of Resolve:** Military exercises, publicized test launches, and the issuance of stern public warnings have served to communicate Iran’s intent to retaliate against aggression. These measures have sought to raise the perceived cost of direct military action by external powers.

2. Indirect Deterrence

- **Proxy Networks:** Iran has cultivated relationships with non-state actors—Hezbollah in Lebanon, various Iraqi militias, and Houthi forces in Yemen—to project power beyond its borders. By equipping and advising these groups, Iran creates a networked threat that complicates an adversary’s operational calculus: any strike on Iran risks triggering retaliatory strikes through proxies.
- **Network Resiliency:** The decentralized nature of these affiliate groups enhances deterrence by introducing ambiguity into potential targets of reprisal, thereby increasing the perceived risk for anyone contemplating an attack on Iranian territory or interests.

3. Networked Deterrence

- **Normative and Ideological Bonds:** Beyond mere military assistance, Iran has fostered shared narratives of resistance and anti-hegemony that bind diverse actors into a cohesive

deterrence network. Concepts such as “defending the oppressed,” martyrdom, and opposition to colonialism underpin this solidarity, providing an ideological glue that sustains collective deterrence.

- **Diffusion and Localization:** Tehran actively supports the indigenization of its deterrence model among partner groups, encouraging them to adapt strategies to local contexts. During Operation Al-Aqsa Storm, for instance, Iran framed the Palestinian resistance as possessing “fully Palestinian” capacities, thus emphasizing autonomous agency while still benefiting from Iranian support.

Evolution Across Four Conflicts

- **Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988):** Constrained by limited national resources and isolation, Iran’s deterrence emphasis was largely defensive, relying on human-wave tactics and rudimentary missile deployment to signal willingness to absorb and retaliate against Iraqi offensives.
- **Second Gulf War (1990–1991):** The U.S.-led coalition’s display of overwhelming conventional superiority highlighted Iran’s vulnerability and motivated its clandestine pursuit of asymmetric capabilities.
- **War Against ISIS (2014–2017):** Tehran’s rapid deployment of Revolutionary Guard Corps advisors and allied militia formations showcased the potency of indirect deterrence, deterring further territorial encroachments by extremist groups.
- **Operation Al-Aqsa Storm (2023–2025):** This latest conflict epitomized Iran’s networked deterrence at its zenith. By facilitating cross-border missile and drone strikes against Israeli positions, mobilizing allied militias in Iraq and Syria, and amplifying a pan-Islamic narrative, Iran demonstrated the synergistic effect of its tripartite model.

Throughout these phases, the interplay among **communication**, **capability**, and **credibility** has deepened. Public declarations of “second-strike” readiness, advancements in precision munitions, and the visible cohesion of the “resistance front” have collectively solidified Iran’s reputation as a formidable regional power whose red lines are increasingly respected.

Conclusion

Over the nearly half-century since the 1979 Revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran has navigated an increasingly complex security environment by forging a **composite deterrence model**—one that integrates conventional firepower, proxy warfare, and an ideologically infused network of allied actors. This model has enabled Iran to offset the substantial conventional asymmetries

with the United States and its regional partners, mitigate the impact of economic sanctions, and entrench itself as a pivotal security actor in West Asia. Crucially, Tehran's approach has not been static; it has evolved in response to external shocks and internal assessments of efficacy, culminating in a highly adaptive deterrence posture.

The findings of this study suggest that Iran's tripartite deterrence framework has succeeded in constraining adversarial plans for regime change or punitive military campaigns by elevating the anticipated costs of such actions. Moreover, the exportation and localization of Iran's deterrence paradigm among proxy groups may serve as a blueprint for non-nuclear states seeking to defend against superior foes. Future research should explore the durability of networked deterrence in the face of shifting regional alliances and technological innovations in missile defense and counter-drone systems. Nonetheless, Iran's strategic journey underscores the potency of marrying traditional and unconventional instruments of power under a unified deterrence doctrine—a doctrine that will likely continue to shape West Asian geopolitics for years to come.

Keywords: Deterrence; Iran's Foreign Policy; Networked Wars; Conventional War

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