

Israel, Iran, and the Failure of Irregular (and Conventional) Warfare in Gaza

Description

On April 1, 2024, an [Israeli attack on the Iranian consulate](#) in Damascus killed several Iranian military advisors, including a senior [revolutionary guards](#) commander. The world awaited Iran's response and feared the worst. About two weeks later on April 13, Iran [launched a barrage of missiles, rockets, and drones](#) directly targeting Israel, both from Iranian territory and through proxies in Iraq and Yemen. [And Iran hardly made it a secret](#), announcing its intentions in the hours and days leading up to the attack, issuing a public statement while its weapons were still in the air, and declaring an end to any additional escalation once it became clear that a combination of Israeli air defense systems and American, British, and French aircraft and warships [destroyed the vast majority of Iran's salvo](#). Rather than continuing up the [escalation ladder](#), and under [significant pressure](#) from the United States and other regional players, Israel took a [measured strike](#) in response, utilizing small drones to target an Iranian Air Force base near the city of Isfahan. Iran [downplayed the event](#) and the threat of a broader regional war between Iran and Israel abated.

Despite the possibility that the war in Gaza spirals into a regional conflict, it has yet to happen. While Israel and Iran have certainly used violence in an attempt to alter the behavior of the other, the fact that neither has been able to do so highlights the limitations of the irregular and conventional warfare approaches that Israel and Iran can bring to bear. Both sides are essentially at the limit of their ability to use violence to achieve their desired political ends. Further Israeli escalation would require American support and the acquiescence of Arab states to allow Israeli overflight—neither seems likely. Further Iranian escalation would require similar support from Arab states to permit the movement of Iranian forces through their territories and for Iran to expose itself to the risk of a disastrous conflict with the United States—these seem equally unlikely. This stalemate underscores the inherent challenges within the Israeli and Iranian approaches to warfare. It also suggests that neither will achieve a decisive outcome in Gaza apart from leveraging a broad swath of irregular and conventional military capabilities paired with diplomatic power—both their own and that of their supporters—to broker a negotiated settlement.

Gaza as an Inflection Point for Israel (and Iran)

Since the Hamas cross-border attack into southern Israel on October 7, 2023, and Israel's subsequent invasion of Gaza, the threat of general war at least between Israel and Iran has loomed

large. Granted, Iran and Israel have been engaged in [a decades-long irregular conflict](#). Iran leverages its [axis of resistance](#) in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Gaza to launch attacks against Israel itself and US forces in the region as part of what it views as a deterrence strategy. Meanwhile, Israel focuses on targeting those Iranian proxies and the means by which Iran supports them, including through [periodic major military operations](#) in Gaza.

However, both sides have recognized a general set of rules meant to reduce the likelihood of direct military confrontation between the two; namely, Iran and Israel refrain from directly attacking each other, with the Israel Defense Forces and Iranian proxies and partners serving as the principal parties in the conflict, supported by Israeli intelligence and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps respectively. In fact, it would be difficult to conjure a more applicable example than the Israel-Iran conflict to accompany the US military's new [definition for irregular warfare](#) as "a form of warfare where states and non-state actors campaign to assure or coerce states or other groups through indirect, non-attributable, or asymmetric activities, either as the primary approach or in concert with conventional warfare."

For decades, Israel very much paired "indirect, non-attributable, and asymmetric activities" [against Iran's nuclear program](#) with conventional warfare against Hamas and [Palestinian Islamic Jihad](#) in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon and its forces and logistics infrastructure in Syria. Israel has executed most of these operations with its own forces, rather than third parties. On the other hand, Iran has mostly relied on its network of proxies and surrogates to attack Israel and has supplied materiel and training to the same groups upon which Israel has focused its large-scale military operations. The October 7 attacks demonstrated to both sides the failure of their respective strategies of warfare—both irregular and conventional—and the limited tools Iran and Israel have available to change the behavior of the other.

Iran and Israel have been keen to avoid war over Israel's ongoing military operations in Gaza. Recognizing the failure of its [mowing the grass](#) strategy along its borders, Israel changed tact from its traditional focus on attacking Iranian proxies to a strategy of attacking Iranian forces directly. As such, Israel has [killed 18 members of the Quds Force](#)—the branch of the revolutionary guards responsible for Iran's proxy operations abroad—in addition to those killed during Israel's attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus last month. And it was not until that latter attack—nominally against Iranian territory and breaking an unwritten rule of the irregular conflict—that Iran decided to respond, not through proxies, but on its own accord. This exchange has done little to change the situation in Gaza, and public opinion in [Iran](#) and [Israel](#) seems to indicate that neither side is particularly interested in confrontation with the other beyond the status quo.

The Use of Violence and Its Limits

Americans are often quick to assume that engaging in conventional warfare against a distant state is a feasible option. Again, [using the most recent US military definition](#), conventional warfare is “a violent struggle for domination between nation-states or coalitions and alliances of nation-states, fought with conventional forces.” Following the 9/11 terror attacks, the inevitability of the United States invading Afghanistan was basically unquestioned; it was going to happen. The United States could then, and can now, uniquely move and sustain an army anywhere in the world and can rely upon a network of states either happy to help or happy to acquiesce to American demands for access. Therefore, when the United States engages in irregular warfare, as has been the case with [Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution](#), conventional war is always an option. The United States can also meter its escalation in a very precise way on a spectrum between irregular and conventional warfare, such as the January 2020 [targeted killing](#) of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad in [response to attacks by the Iranian proxy Kataib Hezbollah](#) on US forces in Iraq and Syria.

Most states simply do not have this option in the employment of violence to achieve political ends, especially against adversaries that are geographically distant. The United States assassinated arguably the [second most powerful person in Iran](#) after the Ayatollah and one who enjoyed the popular support of [eight in ten Iranians](#). In response, Iran launched a series of [ballistic missiles](#) against US forces and facilities on al-Asad Airbase and a base in Erbil. Neither resulted in US fatalities, let alone against someone as significant as Soleimani.

Therein lies the problem for Iran—irregular warfare only takes you so far. At some point, circumstances demand the overt use of military forces, either to demonstrate capability and resolve to an adversary, or as a means by which to communicate to domestic political audiences. In that way, there is a discernable difference between a Kataib Hezbollah operative firing a rocket at a US base in Iraq and the Iranian military launching a series of intermediate range ballistic missiles at that same base. The latter signals the severity of the American strike on Soleimani and the willingness of Iran to escalate, while demonstrating overtly to the Iranian population that their government has ways to impose cost on the United States—even if the [proxy attack would have been more effective](#). Unfortunately for Iran, this does not play to its strengths. In fact, it does quite the opposite. There is a point at which the United States has [escalation dominance](#) over Iran in the conventional space—that is, the further away from irregular warfare, the worse for Iran.

Iran faces a similar problem with Israel, but against an enemy far less capable than the United States. Unlike the United States, Israel cannot realistically fight a conventional war with Iran. After all, such a war between Israel and Iran would not look much different than what is happening now: mostly an irregular warfare campaign—as the primary approach—with conventional military actions peppered throughout. Israel cannot put together an army and invade Iran, and the same goes for Iran. Israel

cannot launch a sufficiently large air campaign to compel Iran to stop assisting its proxies along Israel's borders, just as Iran cannot do the same to compel Israel to change its behavior in Gaza. The best Israel can do through violence is degrade Iran's ability to support Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, and other groups bent on the destruction of Israel. Conversely, the best Iran can do through violence is use those groups to threaten Israel in a way that maintains the status quo and gives Iran influence throughout the Levant, mostly through irregular warfare. Both are deeply unsatisfying to the [Israeli](#) and [Iranian](#) populations, who expect from their respective governments something beyond "mowing the grass" on the one hand and foreign adventurism at the expense of domestic improvements on the other.

What do you do with a problem like Hamas?

Turning to the conflict between Iran and Israel, exacerbated by the actions of Hamas, for which the violence available to each side is insufficient or ill-suited to yield a favorable outcome. The repercussions of the October 7 attack have been disastrous for all involved. Israel is fighting an entrenched enemy in a space as [densely populated as London](#), faces [increasing international isolation](#) due to civilian deaths related to its operations, and [lacks a plan](#) for a viable alternative to Hamas governance in Gaza. Iran, [surprised by the initial Hamas attack](#), faces the grim reality that it lacks the capability to change Israeli behavior, must constrain the actions of its more zealous proxies to avoid confrontation with the United States, and is [simply unwilling](#) to risk its own security for Hamas. Israel's conventional war against Hamas will not destroy the movement or the idea of radical opposition to the existence of Israel and its policies regarding Palestinians. Iran's irregular war against Israel will not change outcomes in Gaza or alter Israel's policies writ large, and its reliance on proxies exposes Iran to unintended escalation with the United States.

This conflict shows the importance of both irregular and conventional warfare without relying too heavily on one or the other. In that way, the United States is bringing its weight to bear—using both conventional and irregular capabilities to assist its allies and weaken adversaries, while also using its diplomatic influence to encourage a negotiated settlement between Israel and Hamas. That may be little solace for those affected by the conflict but is perhaps the only hope for a resolution.

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Main image: Swords of Iron war. (IDF via Wikimedia)

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