

A War Without a Name

The Iran-Israel Relationship in Historical Perspective, Parts One and Two

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June 2024

Introduction

Not twenty years since the end of the Great War, in 1936, the British novelist Rebecca West stood on the balcony of Sarajevo Town Hall. She turned to her husband and remarked, “I shall never be able to understand how it happened”.¹ The extraordinary unravelling of Europe’s peace in 1914 has been described as an episode of “sleepwalking”: a layer-cake of incidents, suspicions, and animosities built up over decades, acting in effect to a heap of tinder, lying in wait of the single spark that turned it into a blazing pyre. That spark, it is generally agreed, was the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Habsburg throne, in Sarajevo—within view of the balcony on which West stood. The assassination did not “cause” the war. Rather, it gave occasion for an event that had played on the minds of Europeans for well over a decade. A great European war was the hypothetical scenario that preoccupied war planners, fuel for the vivid imaginations of fiction writers, and a perennial source of consternation for Europe’s most experienced statesmen. All that was needed was the right spark to light the fire.

The defining tension in Middle Eastern politics today—and the most combustible pile of tinder—is between the State of Israel and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The antagonism between the two countries has existed for more than forty years. It has played out across the region for more than twenty years within the context of the Middle East’s wider tumult. It has not been restricted to diplomacy, either, but has played out through various means: covert, proxy, political and psychological warfare. Observers of this conflict have as a result tended to describe this state of affairs with obscure terms: “cold” war, “shadow” war, or other words that allude to the existence of an active and geopolitically consequential antagonism but imply an ambiguity that plain old “war” never could. Perhaps controversially, I argue that this terminology is used to avoid any substantive discussion of the *nature* of what is being discussed. It similarly precludes any attempt to describe what is clearly a discernible pattern of events which by the day appears to be snowballing into an unambiguous and extremely dangerous war. This paper seeks to introduce that discussion. In so doing, it aims for clarity about the nature of the Middle East’s current crisis.

With this paper, I try to answer two questions.

The first is this: If this is a war, what is its nature? In other words, insofar as we can speak of different “kinds” of war, what kind of war are Iran and Israel fighting? This demands a discussion of means and ends, a discussion of how Iran and Israel have arrived at those ends, and a discussion of how they have chosen and employ the means at their disposal.

The answer to the second and arguably more important question—Is this a war? – emerges through my attempt to answer the first. However, it is necessary to first put some effort into clarifying what we mean by war, as the experience of the Cold War has eroded the clarity that the term used to have.

In answering these two questions, the ultimate goal of this working paper is to build a scaffolding with which to answer a third question that is top of mind for many and increasingly urgent: At what point should we expect it to take a more recognizable form? In other words, at what point does our cold war go ‘hot’? Or should we assume that it never will?

This paper proceeds in ten sections—each of them short essays—that are distributed over two parts.

The first part considers the nature of the war. Part One considers the linguistic implications of the term and the enduring intellectual impact of the Cold War on our way of thinking about warfare, particularly as it pertains to the Middle East. Part Two considers political warfare and the ways in which certain dimensions of ‘Cold Warring’ are visible in the struggle between Israel and Iran. Part Three considers the ideological dimension of the antagonism, with an extended discussion on what the unique political forms at play—a Jewish state and an Islamic republic—mean for the conflict. Part Four is a brief meditation on the Phony War and the resemblance it bears to the conflict before October 7. Part Five considers the phenomenon of “state death” and the prospects of Iran going down without a fight. Part Six does the same with Israel.

The second, shorter part considers more technical problems. Part Seven considers the Axis of Resistance, Iran’s main strategic construct to fight a “war without a war”. Part Eight considers Iran’s own strategy in the aftermath of October 7 with reference to the Soviet technique of ‘reflexive control’. Part Nine considers Western approaches to the conflict, particularly diplomatic approaches, giving historical

parallels for their consistent failures. Part Ten argues that it is a failure of credibility, distinct from the failure of “deterrence”, that has led to an unravelling of the region’s security situation. The paper concludes with some conclusions on the nature of the war and a meditation—admittedly a pessimistic one—on the direction of this war without a name.

Part One: Language and Self-Deception

“A point in space is a place for an argument.” – Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*²

In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein undertook no smaller task than to examine the relation that language bears to reality. Perhaps the most famous assertion of the *Tractatus* is that the limits of one’s language are the limits of one’s world. If isolated from Wittgenstein’s dense logical scaffolding, this idea might be approached in one of two ways. In the first, the limitations inherent *in* language inhibit one’s ability to express one’s experience: a person is trapped inside “their world” without the ability to express it. In the second, one’s very experience is limited without the power of abstraction that only language can offer.³ In the realm of strategy, the challenge of terminology is to render in words phenomena that exist in the liminal zone between the abstract and the real. Words must describe processes and states of being that are either physical, psychological, or a combination of the two. “War” is such a term. More than ever, the term is now often modified with an adjective “war” is never simply “war”, but is “total”, “limited”, “cold”, “hot”, “psychological”, or “political”. This speaks to the complexity of the modern world as well as to the healthy trauma we assign to that word, the historical experience of the last century having played no small role. But because of that fact, and because “war” is a term loaded with profound legal, political, and social implications, the use of that word requires a decision in and of itself.

In the Middle East, the conflict between Iran and Israel has long been referred to by observers as a “cold” war. Part Two fully considers the extent to which the term “cold war” can be applied to the Israel-Iran relationship insofar as that particular term reflects a subliminal comparison with the relationship of the United States and the Soviet Union between 1945 and 1991. There are some broad structural similarities to that relationship: the distance of the protagonists, the importance of the missile, the heuristics of deterrence and escalation, the use of proxies as a means, constant war in liminal zones, and meaningful ideological obstacles to any comprehensive formal reconciliation between the two countries. One wonders, however, the extent to which this term is used not because this comparison is so great—but because there is simply no formidable competitor. The two countries are

not at “war” in any legal or traditionally-understood sense. There is no “competition” or “rivalry” (as we will discuss later, they are not competing for the same objects). “Conflict” is sufficiently generic but frustratingly imprecise. The obscurity of our terminology, then, reflects the difficulty we face in conveying the *essence* of this conflict: what it is, and what it means.

Perhaps the greatest of the Cold War’s intellectual relics is the idea that war takes place along a sort of sliding scale: this is distinct to the ‘total’ and ‘limited’ war discussed by Clausewitz in *On War*, in the sense that for Clausewitz, these genres of warfighting were defined with respect to their *ends* as opposed to by their *means*.⁴ Limited war came about to limit not the *objectives* of warfighting, but the *means* with which they were fought. This inversion took place over the course of the Cold War, the logic being that a war in which means are unrestricted would preclude the pursuit of any “ends” besides thermonuclear Armageddon. More immediately, the idea of limited war replaced “wars of limited objective”, a relic of the Korean War. The goal was to introduce a new idea of a war with the “essential objective” of “terminating the conflict rapidly and decisively in a manner best calculated to prevent its spread to general (nuclear) war”.⁵ The U.S. Army’s 1962 Field Service Regulations defined cold war as “a power struggle between contending nations”, although “the dividing line between cold war and limited war” was seen as being “distinct nor absolute”. Where cold war was “essentially a peacetime posture with a heightened state of tension”, limited war entailed “a wartime posture involving actual hostilities”. Harry Summers, one of the post-Vietnam era’s most influential strategic soul-searchers, blamed this juridical, terminological, and intellectual grey zone as a critical reason for the failure of the Vietnam War.

Terminological obscurity, per Summers’s charge, often results in conceptual confusion, which has a direct impact on the planning of war. It frustrates conceptions of means and ends, and on occasion causes the conflation of the two. It can inadvertently produce ideas of “victory” that are so soaringly abstract that a war becomes unwinnable from the outset; or so low a bar for defeat that capitulation is nearly automatic. It can lead to a misinterpretation of reality that manifests itself in naïve vulnerability or paranoiac belligerence. Conceptual clarity matters a great deal. Herein lies the problem with the ephemerality of “cold war” as an idea: the use of that term *betrays a fear of war more than it successfully describes a concrete reality*. The

intellectual detritus of the Cold War is a confusion about what war is and what it means. The idea of ‘cold war’ is, in the context of 1945 to 1990, structured around an essential anxiety about might happen in the future. Per this logic, the avoidance of war becomes an end in itself. The *ends* of the “Cold War”, writ large, were unclear (although they were clear in the context of specific theaters). The Soviet Union did not have any specific medium-range intentions towards the United States, and vice versa. Plans to break up or otherwise destroy the rival were hypothetical and broadly inconceivable without an impossible war. One could therefore argue that the Cold War entailed the pursuit of two ends: the pursuit of specific regional ends, and to do so below a threshold that would cause a massive global war. As we will discuss, the Middle East, the desired ends—the destruction of the State of Israel and the overthrow of the Islamic Republic—are at once conceivable and actively pursued. In the modern spirit of “limited war”, however, it is the *means* that are restricted.

In 1984, William F. Buckley wrote that after Hiroshima, there came about the assumption that “*the declaration of war brings with it the tacit determination to use every weapon necessary in order to win that war*”. Looking back, he explained that this was the reason “we didn’t go to war against North Korea, North Vietnam, or Cuba”. But perhaps, he continued, this was a mistake: “To declare war is not necessarily to dispatch troops, let alone atom bombs. *It is to recognize a juridically altered relationship and to license such action as is deemed appropriate.* It is a wonderful demystifier...”⁶

Buckley’s insistence on a binary concept of war in which one is either “in” or “out” has obvious implications which, certainly in the context of the Cold War, instinctually feel irresponsible. It raises an essential question, however, about the commitment of military force. His argument, that the declaration of war, if it is a declaration of a competition, carries with it clear rules, clear objects, and a full commitment to “winning”—certainly in the contexts he described, wherein the United States was not in combat with nuclear powers. In other words, he argues for the redefinition of war *by its ends rather than by its means*. Should the desired ends be expansive—the end of the Castro regime or the destruction of Communism on the Korean Peninsula—this constitutes a war and should be labeled as such. Perhaps the same could be said of the expansive aims pursued by Iran and Israel?

The historian Hew Strachan writes, during the Cold War, “deterrence and dissuasion were the essence of strategy... where reciprocity was played out, but *it was a field of*

activity devoid of actual fighting". The wars which actually occurred were defined, in the jargon of the 1960s, as "limited wars" or "low intensity conflicts": in other words, *they were not assimilated into mainstream thinking about war, but were treated as exceptions to the rule*".⁷ In the Middle East, especially following the upheaval of the Arab Spring, the opposite is perhaps the case: low-intensity conflict is seen as the region's new normal. Airstrikes in Syria, insurgency in Iraq, and civil war in Yemen tend to inhabit the middle rather than front pages of international broadsheets: there has been no peace in the region that might be compared to Europe's post-1945 peace since 2011, although there has never been a regional war large enough to yield a post-war settlement that could establish any analogy to Europe's balance of power: instead, there has been a series of interlocking regional conflicts, none of them large or important enough to produce an explosion commensurate with the scale that "escalation" implies; many have not been deemed important enough to bother solving.

In Cold War Europe, the term "war" meant an event on the scale that Europe had lived through. As a result, it had been sublated in large degree to the level of abstraction: war gaming, exercises, and the like. In the Middle East, there is no notion of what "major war" would look like insofar as such an event has never occurred. Certainly to the Western mind, a Middle Eastern "major war" is perhaps subliminally synonymous with a war in which the United States would be compelled to intervene, following the experience of Iraq One and Two. Strachan continues: "Notions of victory seemed irrelevant at best and often obscene, since victory in European warfare would not, it seemed, be secured without the use of nuclear weapons and that would involve catastrophic destruction".⁸ In the Middle East, the supposed absurdity of victory is derived from a different historical experience: the expectation of conventional failure.

In many regards, "war" in the Middle East is heuristically linked a century of failed counter-insurgency (Algeria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, Libya, Syrian Kurdistan, and the Palestinian Territories). In almost none of these cases can a state point to victory: the list is a litany of failures. It is, therefore, hard to call the confrontation of two Middle Eastern states a "war": such a war has not occurred since 1991 and many "wars" have occurred in the interim.⁹ The problem for us is that today, such a scenario stares analysts in the face; its fulfillment would have

disastrous consequences—arguably due to the lack of suitable terminology. Here, a lack of words—or a lack of direct historical experience—should not blind us to a new reality. It is here that the role of history is to expand our historical experience: the act of comparison serves to expand our sense of the possible. In this sense, the application of history mirrors Bertrand Russell’s definition of philosophy: “it is not a theory, but an activity... [which] consists essentially of elucidations”. It serves not to propose “‘philosophical propositions’, but to make propositions clear”. Like philosophy, history “should make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred”.¹⁰ Like philosophy, history can be misunderstood for indolent self-indulgence but can, at its highest form, offer indispensable clarity. And in the Middle East today, clarity truly is indispensable.

Part Two: Cold War, Political War

“War is not a mathematical exercise. It is a psychological contest, despite the physical trappings of weaponry and fortifications, in which the priceless commodity of morale is ever the issue. It is because warfare possesses this fundamentally intangible nature that war has been considered an art as well as a science.”¹¹

- Robert Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver*

As we have discussed, the phrase “cold war” inevitably conjures up memories of the fifty-year-long competition for influence between the Soviet Union and the United States. That competition had especially high stakes, having been waged under the ultimate Damocles’ sword: the possibility of nuclear apocalypse. Enter here another assumption: that because “*the*” Cold War is within living memory, it ended—happily—without a thermonuclear paroxysm. Perhaps because of this happy ending, great faith is placed in the concepts conveyed by the jargon of the Cold War: deterrence, escalation, and the like.¹² This, it is assumed, is the conceptual arsenal of responsible statesmanship, with which miscalculation was avoided. This is perhaps a mistake, insofar as it transports the contingent variables of the Cold War—and an intellectual apparatus designed to address it—to entirely different situations in which protagonists behave according to an entirely different set of parameters, with entirely different long-range goals.

Aristotle preferred science to poetry—of which history was a subset in Ancient Greece—because science could offer insight that applied to all times and places. “Political science” seeks to fit this definition: it is nomothetic, rooted in the discovery of laws such that it can meet the stringent criteria of “science”. But by attempting to create a conceptual apparatus that applies to all times and places, the discipline perhaps suffers from an apophenic tendency: motives are asserted, not discerned, “small” details are elided, and the caprice of agency is seen as inconvenient.¹³ History therefore offers a more flexible tool precisely because it recognizes contingency. For that reason, the term “cold war” should not be subject to a historical is-ought fallacy, in which the end-state of a present is perceived—implicitly or explicitly—from a trajectory or a historical analogy. All comparisons and analogies are imperfect: making them comes with a risk of procrustean (and

therefore, analytically fraught) thinking. Nevertheless, there is some value that might redeem thinking through what the “cold war” could tell us about the structure of the Israel-Iran relationship and how the current crisis ends.

In comparing the “Cold War” with the current crisis, then, there are four vectors worth considering.

First, there is the geopolitical character of the conflict. Like the Soviet Union and the United States, Israel and Iran do not share a border. During the Cold War, Central Europe was the axis of the conflict, meaning that military planning on both sides of the Berlin Wall was centered around the prospect of a massive clash of armor and mechanized infantry. In the Middle East today, a number of points serve as the fulcrum of crisis: Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria, among others. Of course, neither the Soviet Union nor the United States faced a real conventional threat to the homeland during the Cold War. The distance of the two countries, though, is an important similarity as it structures another key fact: the nature of the threat.

Second, as in the Cold War, a conflict between Israel and Iran is nearly unthinkable without the ability to conduct long-range airborne or missile strikes: as in the Cold War, the missile is the central and transformational technology that gives the antagonism of Israel and Iran its essential character. The nature of the threat that Israel and Iran pose to one another is the familiar threat of the Cold War: accurate long-range strikes on the enemy homeland, capable of inflicting huge damage on civilian and military sites. Nuclear long-range strike capabilities were also the vital elements of *deterrence* and *escalation* as heuristics for Cold-warring. To this end, there are redeemable aspects in these ideas: they describe the lead-up to total war, including military actions that are carefully calibrated to avoid a certain scale of retaliation. These words describe a psychological phenomenon, a receptiveness to threats: however, like the term ‘cold war’, they belong in the realm of the hypothetical in that they describe a *conjectural* trajectory. For Israel and Iran, the nightmare scenarios involve enormous economic destruction and civilian loss of life incurred by long-range strikes.¹ There is, therefore, as in the Cold War, a desire to

¹ As we will discuss later, Iran’s attack on Israel on April 14 marks an important point in the conflict for precisely this reason: it erases one of the key characteristics that make the so-called ‘cold war’ of the two countries ‘cold’, further blurring the distinction between a ‘cold’ war and a ‘hot’ one.

achieve political goals without a test of brute strength. This leads to the widespread use of proxies.

Third, there is the ubiquity of proxy warfare. The Cold War was, of course, not so cold in the so-called Third World. On the contrary, much of it became collateral damage of the great power show-down. In January 1961, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and KGB Chairman Aleksandr Shelepin resolved to employ “national liberation movements and the forces of anti-imperialism” in order to humiliate and stretch the United States, defined as the “Main Adversary”¹⁴ in the Third World” as a way to fight the United States through surrogates and to do so at a low cost.¹⁵ This alternative to direct confrontation meant indirectly participating in contests fought not only for geopolitical advantages such as basing rights or political and economic influence, but also part to demonstrate *capability* and *resolve* to adversaries—in other words, war defined as a contest of wills.¹⁶ Proxy war in the Middle East has been a preferred form of fighting since at least the 1950s, possibly because insurgency has proven to be such a stubborn nut for state power to crack and because the Middle East so lends itself to insurgency movements due to frequent mismatches of sectarian, tribal, ethnic, or other cleavages and the boundaries that mark the remit of state power (among a great many other issues). The congenital weakness of state power lends itself to a strategy that might be called “provide and conquer”. By supporting one group over another, a state can acquire influence within a state, thus acquiring economic and political leverage, all while developing real *military* leverage that can be used at a distance from the ideological or political “mothership”. The similarity to the Cold War, then, is the high incidence of indirect conflict; the use of vacuums and liminal zones; hiding behind implausible deniability; and the use of ideological cleavage as a geopolitical recruiting tool. This brings us to our fourth vector: ideology.

Fourth, there is the role of ideology. One need pose the theoretical question of what drives a state’s foreign policy to observe that the Cold War was, to some extent, a competition between two distinct systems of governance. Beyond the undeniable geopolitical drivers of the conflict—Russian land power versus American sea power, the Rimland versus the Heartland, and a struggle for global domination—ideology mattered in the search for alignments, while also acting as a psychological apparatus to attract support for foreign policy, both at home and abroad. Perhaps even more

importantly, ideology functioned as a theoretical prism for understanding the conflict: what it was, how to win it and, most importantly, what victory was. Soviet doctrine was heavily informed by the dialectical materialism of Marx and Lenin. American doctrine arguably drew from scientific rationalism and classical economics. Perhaps the most important aspect of this ideological point, though, is that the essential claims of the Soviet Union and the United States about the very nature of justice and freedom limited the *extent* of reconciliation possible between the two sides. At a fundamental level, both sides denied the legitimacy of the other's claim to sovereignty. Marxism and liberal democracy advance completely different essential claims about the sources of sovereignty, the meaning of freedom, and the image of justice. Notably, however, while each side poured scorn on the ideology of the other, there was never an active call by the Soviet Union to take down the United States—or vice versa. There was, similarly, never an attempt to organize regime change. Ideology, as we will see, matters a great deal in the clash between Israel and Iran. There is, though, no satisfactory answer to the problem that ideology poses in this conflict, namely, the *unrestricted* aim of regime change advanced explicitly by Iran and implicitly by Israel. This brings with it the possibility that the restrictions on the *means* of conflict could slowly slide into irrelevance.

Soviet doctrine openly cited a “historical imperative that the future of communism and its eventual victory depends on success in the Third World”, a thesis originally advanced by Lenin himself.¹⁷ Iranian doctrine similarly cites an ideological basis for its strategy, namely Islamic solidarity and the role of the *mostazafin*, the downtrodden. This family resemblance to Marxist thought is not coincidental but was mediated into Iranian political thought through the figures of Ali Shariati, a hugely influential Marxist figure who believed that “the victory of the revolution was historically determined”, a fact that in turn demanded “[objection] to object to the status quo and [negation] of the ruling systems and values”.¹⁸ Elements of third-worldism also entered the Islamic Republic's vocabulary and intellectual register through the Islamist anti-colonialism of the Islamist Sayyid Qutb, who Khomeini translated into Farsi, Jean-Paul Sartre, who had a deep influence on Khomeini¹⁹, and the more distant Franz Fanon, who Shariati reinterpreted in Islamic terms: Islamic reformation is not merely spiritual or intellectual, but is distinctly political; the Islamist alternative to Third Worldism or left-wing internationalism is an

international Islamic solidarity—although it has the same end point.²⁰ Just as the Soviet Union put its hope on the unity of the world’s workers, the Islamic Republic sets its sights on the unity of the Islamic world, viewing it as a resource with which to achieve its broader goal.

This point requires further explanation. Like the Soviet Union, Iran seeks the long-term metaphysical goal of “liberation”, which rests on a teleological end-state that has already been determined. The Soviets saw that end point as the aftermath of a global proletarian revolution, which Marx surmised would be a sort of worker’s paradise. The end state of the Islamic Republic is more explicitly theological: liberation is either a step towards, or a product of, the coming of the *Mahdi*. The Soviets came to their conclusion based on Marxian dialectics. Iran’s dominant form of Islamism arrives at this conclusion from a politicized interpretation of scripture, in which the “end of history”—with all its apocalyptic trappings—is at once an absolute certainty and a key pillar of the faith (*rukn al-imaan*). As with the Soviet Union, the Islamic Republic has “an understanding of political life that has the idea of struggle as its centerpiece”.²¹ The narratives of martyrdom, resistance, and conspiracy is all-pervasive and emerge completely naturally from the Shi’a corpus of the Islamic Republic’s ruling ideology. Holy war serves an expedient function in the worldview, a fact that, as Ali Alfoneh writes, “maintains the Islamic Republic in a permanent state of crisis... and maintains a permanent state of emergency in Iran” which in turn, “paves the way for the involvement of the IRGC, the primary agent of jihad, in the domestic politics of Iran”.²² Israel, like the United States, has less universal ambitions. Its theology is, in effect, secular. These ideas are taught at the heart of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).²³ There is no end state: as we will discuss, Zionism is unique in that it has accomplished its goal so long as Israel exists as a Jewish state. Insofar as the existence of a Jewish state is its essential task, however, the threat resides not in a teleological constituting vision but in a deontological one: *a duty to protect*. We will revisit this theme in Part Three.

An addendum: it might be said that, like the United States, Israel views itself primarily as an exception as opposed to the basis for a rule. It is a scholarly debate whether the United States is primarily messianic or insular in its international orientation, Israel and the United States share a basic idea—the shining city on a hill, a *sui generis* country that cannot be replicated. Of course, Israel does not have the

luxury of continental insularity, which is the most defining geopolitical feature of the United States. The very option of messianism does not exist for Israel for simple reasons of geography and demography. In the Zionist narrative, the existence of a Jewish state means that ipso facto liberation *from the oppression of exile* has been achieved. Ideationally, there is no desire to create *another Jewish state* or even to spread democracy throughout the region (surely the Arab Spring tempered whatever desire there might have been to do so). For all these broad structural similarities, though, there are even more differences to account for.

The most salient geopolitical factor that structures the conflict of Israel and Iran is the distance between those two countries. From the onset of the conflict, there was never a specific object of dispute, or, to use a legal term, a *res controversa*. At their closest points, Israel and Iran are separated by nearly 600 miles and two countries. They share no land or sea borders. Their capitals, Jerusalem and Tehran, are more than 950 miles apart—a distance greater than that of Rome from Istanbul. They are also enormously mismatched in terms of size: Iran is over seventy times larger than Israel and has a population more than nine times bigger. Such factors of scale by themselves contribute a great deal to the ‘coldness’ of the conflict. In this regard, it cannot feasibly be construed as “great power competition”, “great power rivalry”, “near-peer competition”, or in similar Cold War-era/post-Cold War-era terms. As in the Cold War, distance means that war can only be fought by proxy or by an unmistakable long-range stand-off. The events of the last decade have turned the space between the two countries into a sort of no man’s land. Like the Third World theaters of the Cold War, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon are the sites of proxy war and intervention, the arenas in which leverage is built and destroyed (here the absence of formal alliance structures allowing for greater fusion, due to the role of proxies). The end-goal of this strength of wills, however, involves the homeland: an aspiration the Soviet Union or the United States never truly entertained. “Forward defense”, therefore, carries an existential connotation. For Iran, Iraq constitutes its essential strategic depth; Syria is another critical buffer. For Israel, it is the West Bank and arguably Jordan that constitute that geopolitical depth (facts that carry with them their own profound political problems). For both Israel and Iran, the transfer of these territories into “enemy” hands would present a genuine existential threat, a fact

widely acknowledged on both sides.²⁴ This brings us to the second salient factor: is the rationality of avoiding massive confrontation—at least for the time being

As was the case throughout the Cold War, this premise that broadly holds for both sides because of the destruction that such a war would entail. Iran's size means that it would be impossible for Israel to physically 'destroy' Iran through conventional means. While we must speculate on the size of Israel's nuclear arsenal, it seems fair to imagine that Israel could 'destroy' Iran with its nuclear arsenal; although any Israeli use of nuclear weapons would entail a Catch-22 in that such a dramatic move would at once trigger a total war and empty Israel's bank of political capital that could endanger Israel's continued existence as a Jewish state owing to international pressure and sanctions. Israel's alliance with the United States, however, massively expands Israel's conventional options—witness the U.S. forward deployment in the aftermath of the October 7 attacks and imagine the implications that the use of massive U.S. force on Iran's regional forward positions would have. Yet Israel remains limited by the fact that the United States has little domestic or strategic incentive to pursue a major war with Iran as a first course of action. Iran, conversely, has the ability to pose a massive conventional threat to Israel through its arsenal of loitering munitions and medium and long-range ballistic missiles, spread out across the region—witness the attacks of April 14. Continuous barrages of missiles launched from around the region could result in tens if not hundreds of thousands of casualties as well as billions of dollars in damage. This is in addition to the additional threat of a ground invasion, which Iran could in theory carry out through its regional proxies: October 7 brought this threat into stark focus.²⁵ Such a bold course of action would risk either Israeli nuclear retaliation or an overwhelming conventional response from the United States. As a result, both sides have placed their hopes in a kind of attrition. As the Russian strategist Aleksandr Svechin, one of the greatest theorists of attrition warfare, writes:

“One kind of attrition is very close to a strategy of destruction... the opposite kind may involve the formula "neither war nor peace"—the mere avoidance of a peace treaty accompanied by a mere threat of military operations. There is an entire range of intermediate forms between these two extremes. A strategy of destruction is unified and allows for only one correct decision. In a strategy of attrition the intensity of armed conflict may vary, and thus each level of intensity may have its own correct decision. One can determine the

level of intensity required by a given situation only through very careful study of economic and political conditions... A strategy of attrition in no way renounces in principle the destruction of enemy personnel as a goal of an operation. But in this it sees only a part of the mission of the armed front rather than the entire mission".²⁶

It is the *difference* between *the* Cold War and *our* "cold war" that is most useful in our attempt to understand the nature of this conflict. Israel and Iran do not contest a specific geopolitical goal, such as a natural resource or a border. The two countries were close partners until 1979 and, in a limited and clandestine way, during the Iran-Iraq War.²⁷ The same might be said of the Soviet Union and the United States, which were allies during the Second World War until distrust arose over post-war questions of European and Near Eastern security.² This is where ideology is a useful heuristic in spelling out the nature of today's conflict. Once again, besides rhetorical bursts against the moral bankruptcy of capitalism, at no point did the Soviet Union demand or seriously plot the collapse of the United States or vice versa. In our case, though, the question of political form is central to understanding the nature of the conflict. As the strategist Bernard Brodie wrote, "good strategy presumes good anthropology and sociology. Some of the greatest military blunders of all time have resulted from juvenile evaluations in this department".²⁸ It is, then, worth considering the protagonists in our "cold war"—and the character of that war—to better understand the nature of the conflict and how it might develop.

² Notwithstanding the "rivalry" of the United States and the Soviet Union, including American participation in the Russian Civil War from 1919, and the enmity of the two countries during the Soviet Union's alignment with Nazi Germany—facts like this greatly complicate analogies!

Part Three: The Indignation of Difference

“Who can I recognize as my enemy anyway? Obviously, only the one who can *call me into question*. By recognizing him as an enemy, I recognize that he can call me into question. And who can really call me into question? Just myself. So be careful: don't speak carelessly about the enemy. You classify yourself through your enemy. You classify yourself by what you recognize as enmity... The enemy is our own question as a gestalt.”

– Carl Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus*³

The study of “ideology” in international relations is often conflated with a kind of amateurish psycho-analysis, or the anthropomorphic projection of human feelings or “thoughts” onto states. For this reason, it perhaps makes more to consider *political form*, a term that encompasses ideology—as a prism of thinking that demonstrably seeps into strategy and military doctrine—as well as the institutional make-up of states, which forms the apparatus of decision-making. Like any other factor in considering the drivers of a state's behavior, political form cannot be the subject of independent consideration as it interacts with other factors, geopolitics being chief among them. However, to understand a state's interests, geopolitics is a necessary but insufficient condition. The destruction of a state is not merely “physical”, but pertains equally to the destruction of a *state form*. If the United States splinters into multiple countries without the loss of a single life, or transforms into a single-party authoritarian state, has the United States been destroyed? The Soviet Union was destroyed by its implosion into non-communist successor states. East Germany was

³ Carl Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus: Erfahrungen der Zeit 1945/47*, Greven Verlag Köln, 1950, p.89-90. “Wen kann ich überhaupt als meinen Feind anerkennen? Offenbar nur den, der mich in Frage stellen kann. Indem ich ihn als Feind anerkenne, erkenne ich an, daß er mich in Frage stellen kann. Und wer kann mich wirklich in Frage stellen? Nur ich mich selbst... Vorsicht also, und sprich nicht leichtsinnig vom Feinde. Man klassifiziert sich durch seinen Feind. Man stuft sich ein durch das, was man als Feindschaft anerkennt. Schlimm sind freilich die Vernichter, die sich damit rechtfertigen, dass man die Vernichter vernichten müsse”. The phrasal verb “in Frage stellen”, which I literally translate as “put into question” is often translated as “challenge” although the English word “challenge” seems closer to the German *herausfordern* (“to contest”), *bestreiten* (“to deny”), or *anfechten* (“to contest”). To “put into question” captures the more existential meaning that Schmitt sought to convey—made clear by his almost Freudian final sentence: “the enemy is our own question as a Gestalt” (“Der Feind ist uns're eigne Frage als Gestalt”).

destroyed by unification with the West. Even though both countries retained their political independence after the fact, the term “destruction” can of course be sensibly used. This is arguably even more-so the case for Israel and Iran, for which political form—as Jewish state and Islamic republic respectively—are everything.⁴

A state posits its right to decide on behalf of the political community on a theory of legitimacy. Liberal democracies tend to articulate this claim implicitly rather than explicitly, insofar as the liberal claim is made through the relegation of decisions to the private sphere. In other terms, the *project* of liberalism is to contract the responsibilities of the state and its ability to determine the ends of life; it does so by expanding the citizen’s control over the means of self-preservation: land in the Lockean formation, money in the Smithian. The social contract is premised more on rights than responsibilities: the task of the state is to protect more than it is to enforce. Autocratic states have the opposite arrangement: the state exists to pursue an ideational goal, and citizens are auxiliaries of that vision.²⁹ Defined in this way, Israel is a liberal democracy while Iran is an autocracy. It is not that simple, however. Israel and Iran, as a Jewish state and an Islamic republic respectively, have *sui generis* political forms based on unique claims about the arc of history and the basis of political sovereignty:

- i. Israel’s express function is to undo exile (*galut*), the defining (and for millennia *constitutive*) historic condition of the Jewish people. It is meant to serve as the manifestation of Jewish sovereignty in state form. It is meant to be a nation-state, with the function of making the Jewish people “like all [other] nations” (*k’chol am*). The intellectual genealogy of Zionism stretches from Jewish emancipation in the late 18th Century through the various nationalist movements of the 19th Century.³⁰ Zionism transformed from an ideational political movement to a politically feasible

⁴ In a 1956 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Henry Kissinger contended that the essential value of a paradigm for foreign policy is that it allows a policymaker to comprehend the implications of an event across different relevant dimensions of a competition. A lack of conceptual depth ultimately leads to confusion, incoherence, and paralysis. American foreign policy tends to a more managerial than an intellectual style. His warning echoes true today: “The contest between us and the Soviets has had many of the attributes of any contest between a professional and an amateur: even a mediocre professional will usually defeat an excellent amateur, not because the amateur does not know what to do, but because he cannot react sufficiently quickly or consistently... Reading Lenin or Mao or Stalin, *one is struck by the emphasis on the relationship between political, military, psychological and economic factors, the insistence on finding a conceptual basis for political action...* To our leaders, policy is as a series of discrete problems; to the Soviet leaders it is *an aspect of a continuing political process*”. Henry A. Kissinger, "Reflections on American Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 35, no. 1, October 1956, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1956-10-01/reflections-american-diplomacy>.

course of action in the aftermath of the First World War. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire created a geopolitical opening for the Zionist project to take root. The ascent of the right of national self-determination as the organizing principle of the Wilsonian post-war order made Zionism relevant: every people needed a state of their own; it followed that the Jews would have one too. This intellectual provenance, tempered by the crushing destruction of the Holocaust, explains Zionism's preoccupation with the *particular* sovereignty of the Jewish people. The Islamic Republic is too based on a political theory concerned with a problem of exile—but not that of a people.

- ii. The Islamic Republic is based on a completely novel interpretation of the political implications of the *ghayba*, the disappearance of the Twelfth Imam in 874CE. The political thought of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini overturned the near-millennial assumption that the *ghayba* had but limited political implications. Khomeini's novel argument was that in the absence of the Imam—who, following in the line of Mohammed, is the legitimate representative of divine sovereignty on earth—it is the *clergy* that should act as the custodian of this sovereignty for the duration of the theological state of emergency.³¹ This is strikingly similar to medieval Catholic claims that the Pope—a figure then outfitted with massive temporal authority—was “Vicar of Christ” (“*vicarius Christi*”), acting literally a substitute for Jesus until the supposed Second Coming.³² As a result, the *republican* element of the Islamic Republic is downplayed in the works of Khomeini and in the Iranian constitution: it follows naturally that the *vali-e-faqih* is explicitly posited by the constitution as the ultimate arbiter and decider.³³ Per this formula, the Islamic Revolution represents one of few instances in history that a political theorist has been propelled to power, acquiring the ability to turn an entire country into a laboratory in which to observe the outcomes of his political theory in real life.³⁴

Both Israel and Iran base their legitimacy on a claim to manifestation: Israel's sovereignty is a manifestation of *the right of the Jewish people to exist as a nation among others*; that of the Islamic Republic is based on the *manifestation of the sovereignty of God*, imparted in the Twelve Shi'a Imams, in the custodianship of the clergy. Both ideas have a universal strand: the principle of self-determination—a state for every nation—logically applies across the board, and Israel loses its coherence without it. Likewise, the idea of divine sovereignty is necessarily universal: the legitimacy of

God's sovereignty cannot conceivably end with a border.³⁵ And yet, these claims are ultimately more solipsistic in their character in that they speak to the historical experience of the Jewish people and of the Shi'a. Without Israel, there is complete and unrestricted *exile*. Without the Islamic Republic of Iran, there is complete and unrestricted *ghayba*. To be sure, there are both Jews and Shi'a who reject the intellectual underpinnings of both states. There are Jews who accept *galut* as a "problem" but reject a secular, temporal solution, others who outright extol the virtues of cosmopolitan exile, and others who do not care at all. There are Shi'a for whom the *ghayba* is an irresolvable mysterium that exceeds the grasp or treatment of secular politics, or who reject the Islamic Republic's claim to theological *necessity*, or who do not care at all. There remains, though, a critical mass of people in both Israel and Iran who see it as their duty to preserve these unique state forms because the preservation of those forms is seen as an existential, civilizational imperative such that their loss would result in indescribable civilizational crisis. It is at this juncture that that political theory bleeds into geopolitical reality.

Iran seeks a Middle East safe for an Islamic Republic. Israel seeks a Middle East safe for a Jewish state. Already before the Islamic Revolution, the founders of the Islamic Republic determined that Israel served little purpose besides anchoring the United States in the region as a corrosive and pernicious influence on Iran in particular and the Islamic world more broadly. That premise has been baked into the doctrine of the Islamic Republic since its founding. Similarly, Iran believes in the feasibility of ending the State of Israel altogether, but not necessarily through military means. This is a critical point: the object of Iranian strategy is not the physical destruction of the State of Israel but *the end of Israel as a Jewish state* and its replacement with a single Arab-majority state.^{5 36} This is a vitally important point.

⁵ It is worth quoting Khomeini in full: "In the statements of Imam [Khomeini] and in the statements of the officials of the Islamic Republic, the elimination of the State of Israel has been mentioned repeatedly. Our enemies misinterpret this. The elimination of the State of Israel does not mean the elimination of the Jewish people. We have nothing to do with them. *The meaning is the erasure of that government, the erasure of that imposed regime...* the Palestinian people, who are the true owners of that land... should choose the main owners of their own government... eliminate [foreigners] from among themselves, expel them, run the country by themselves, the destruction of Israel means this. And it will happen." Mehr News Agency, "The solution of the Palestinian issue in the eyes of the Supreme Leader" (Persian), June 3, 2020. <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/4930678/> راه-حل-مسئله-فلسطین-در-نگاه-مقام-معظم-رهبری-ارکان-مقاومت-فلسطینی

In 2011, Ayatollah Khamenei published an edited volume, *Palestine from the Perspective of Ayatollah Khamenei*, a distillation of his speeches and comments on the Palestinian issue made over the two preceding decades. The book contains several arguments that are borne out in Iranian policy. Israel is explicitly defined as part of a scheme to “create serious obstacles to the power and integrity of the Islamic world”, with Israel being a “tool in the hands of America... to carry out its orders in the Middle East: Conquering Palestine will provide a gateway to the conquering of the Islamic world”.³⁷ This hinges on a specific interpretation of history:

“The goal of establishing a government in this sensitive part of the world of Islam was to maintain the hegemony of the colonialist powers of the time, headed by the English government, over the world of Islam. This region is the heart of the Islamic world in a sense, and it connects the western part of the world of Islam, Africa, to the eastern part... The idea was that in the future, powerful Islamic governments – such as the Ottoman Empire during certain periods – had to be prevented from presenting an obstacle to colonialist powers such as England, France and others that wanted to enter this region... many of the Jews believed that there was no need for such a government... this was not a Jewish idea and wish. It was more a colonial idea by the English... when America took over the advantage of global domination and arrogance from the English, this idea was among the things they inherited from the colonial era... The Americans made the best of this idea, and they are still doing so. Therefore, saving Palestine and wiping out the usurping Zionist regime is an issue that is related to the interests of the regional nations, including our dear homeland.”³⁸

To be sure, the idea of creating a Jewish state in the Levant gained traction as a result of the so-called Eastern Question. The seemingly-impending collapse of the Ottoman Empire caused European British interest in the Levant due to British interests in India and Russia’s long-held designs on the Eastern Mediterranean. These arguments were made by Chaim Weizmann and prominent British Zionists, particularly David Lloyd-George and Arthur Balfour, during the First World War.³⁹ But Zionism did not emerge as a plan to destroy the Ottoman Empire: on the contrary, the goal was to *prevent* predation against the Ottoman Empire with the creation of national states (as in the Balkans). To that point, the Ottoman Empire was not a “powerful Islamic government” (and was already on a secular, nationalist trajectory prior to the First World War). No “powerful Islamic government” existed

in the Middle East at any point in the 19th or 20th Centuries. To be sure, there is a geopolitical continuity between British and American policy in the Middle East: both are sea powers engaged with the rimland, which prefigures a policy to contain Russia as a heartland power—not, *pace* Khamenei, because of a desire to dominate the Islamic world *per se*. Certainly before the Balfour Declaration and probably in the lead-up to the Second World War, the majority of world Jewry did not politically militate for the creation of an independent Jewish state in Palestine. This fact, however, crumbles in the face of the *fait accompli* that today, around half of the world's Jews now live in Israel, a simple demographic fact that means that, quite as Jewish history's "owl of Minerva" dwelled in Eastern Europe, the fate of the State of Israel is inextricable from that of the Jewish people (insofar as a "collective fate" can be conceived of in a secular register).

The final problem with this argument is the complete elision of Israeli agency. Despite their frequent coincidence, Western and Israeli interests are not identical: despite extensive security ties, there are no American bases in Israel (unlike Bahrain, Qatar, or the UAE) and it has no formal alliance with Israel (unlike Turkey); it arguably acted against American interests via its dealings with Russia over the last decade; and despite receiving American support, it clearly has agency and resources of its own. Khamenei's historical account, then, is especially contrived. It is nevertheless important to be acquainted with this argument inasmuch as its key elements—the absoluteness of the Israel-U.S. relationship and the unforgiveable original sin of Israel—are borne out in the Islamic Republic's strategic calculus. The term "Zionist" does not refer merely to Israelis, but the "Zionists" in "international centers of power—the financial and economic superpowers—are mainly controlled by the Zionists and great capitalists" as well as the "news agencies and mass media".⁴⁰ There is no small element of antisemitic conspiracy in this argument, the corollary of which is that Israel's existence and American financial and cultural power as being inextricably linked.⁴¹ To that end, the decline of Israel and the decline of the United States are inextricably linked: Israel represents a local battlefield against the "global arrogance" of the United States, and the decline of one augurs the decline of the other.⁴² The collapse of Israel is a teleological certainty and must occur sooner rather than later.⁴³ Iran and its partners can expedite that outcome by two means: tying Israel down "within the borders of occupied Palestinian lands,

constraining its economic and political breathing space and severing its links with its surrounding environment” in the meantime “Helping the Palestinian people resist and struggle within their own homeland... until they achieve ultimate victory”. There is a mechanism at play: Khamenei is against “classic war”, preferring irregular war (in Farsi, *jang-e-gheir-e-klaskik*: literally, non-classic war).^{44 45} Israel is meant to go out with a whimper rather than a bang. The aim is specifically to reduce Israelis’ quality of life through constant, gradually-escalating warfare and political-economic pressure in order to facilitate mass emigration and political capitulation.⁶ The mechanism for the destruction of Israel has been well defined.

The practical implication of such a plan is an enormous bloodbath. Iran denies this, likely out of cold indifference more than passionate malice: a sort of “*fiat iustitia ruat caelum*”. The pursuit of this goal through a range of means has led Israel to unofficially adopt a mirror-image policy, albeit unofficially: Israel’s object is increasingly clearly to topple *the Islamic Republic*, as its unique anti-Western theocracy is perceived as the key driver of the threat to Israel.⁴⁶ In other words, the *nature of the conflict* and the *ends for which it is fought* aim at the uniquely *political* object of regime change. Put differently, no one treaty could end the conflict or neatly delineate spheres of influence. If anything, the lesson of history would seem to be that such treaties only emerge in the aftermath of destructive wars. The alternative to such a war, which would lead either to destruction and capitulation or destruction and co-existence, is a waiting game.

Both sides believe that the other is doomed to collapse due to its internal contradictions, so the basic goal of both states is to outlast the adversary until it implodes by itself. This lends itself to a footing similar to the Soviet-American Cold War. That antagonism was based, in many ways, on two competing theories of political economy: Marxism is political economy masquerading as political

⁶ This is worth quoting in full: ““We have proposed conducting a referendum with the participation of all Palestinians, a proposal fully aligned with contemporary global standards... We do not advocate for the classic war involving Islamic countries’ armies, nor for the expulsion of Jewish immigrants into the sea, and certainly not for reliance on the United Nations or other international organizations for arbitration. Instead, we propose a referendum for the Palestinian people... All indigenous inhabitants of Palestine... must be allowed to participate in a transparent and orderly referendum within Palestine, including within refugee camps, to determine Palestine’s future system.... Subsequently, this system and the government formed by it will define the responsibilities of non-Palestinian immigrants who have settled in the country in recent years. This plan represents a fair and logical approach that the global public opinion can understand and that can garner the support of independent nations and governments.” Mehr News Agency, *ibid*.

philosophy, while liberalism is the obviation of political philosophy through political economy. Neither philosophy is “stoic” insofar as liberalism—certainly its Fukuyaman variant—trusts in the power of markets and in the depth of the human desire for freedom and Marxism is a fallen apple from Hegel’s tree. The antagonism of Israel and Iran lacks this economic dimension: it is purely political and therefore contains the seeds of impatience. It is not enough to survive. There is a constant incentive to actively expedite the destruction of the other using all means short of war. The increasingly existential character of the war lends itself to a far more dramatic risk of escalation. Here is an important difference between *the* Cold War and the cold war in the modern Middle East. Unlike the United States and the Soviet Union, Israel and Iran do not have diplomatic relations and openly contest the other’s moral right to exist. The two countries instead use every available means short of war—political, economic—to strain and stress the system of the other *internally*. As a result, today’s ‘Cold War’ in the Middle East is fought out through proxy, in the lands between Iran and Israel as well as through a shadow campaign of political and economic pressure.

Existential Angsts

The second difference, then, stems from the first: the uniquely existential dimension to the conflict. Geography, ideology, and the possibility of existentially-threatening retaliation structure the Israel-Iran conflict such that it is rational to refer to it as a ‘cold war’. Unlike *the* Cold War, though, the actual threat that conflict would pose to both the Israeli and Iranian homelands is far easier to imagine. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union could realistically entertain a purely *conventional* first action against the other’s homeland, owing to their geographic separation and the extreme risk of mutually-assured destruction. Not so in our case, as demonstrated by Iran’s April 14 attack on Israel and Israel’s demonstrative retaliation at Esfahan five days later. A non-nuclear first strike on Iran is equally an option for Israel, as made clear by its numerous abortive plans to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities.⁴⁷ It also bears mentioning that which has perfected the use of proxies behind a veil of ‘implausible deniability’. Hezbollah in Lebanon is the most logical instrument for a conventional *first strike* in the fullest sense of the term. As we will later discuss, it might be said that the attacks of October 7 represented such a first move in a broader conflagration.⁴⁸ This fact makes their relationship more volatile and further increases the possibility

of a direct confrontation, despite the geographical obstacles and the risks of massive and destructive escalation. Attrition may be the rational default policy, but this does not exclude the prospect of a change in this approach. As recent events show, in such a context, credibility and deterrence matter a great deal.

On April 14, the ‘cold war’ in the Middle East went hot, shattering the illusion—for some the *delusion*—of “deterrence” with a Cold War theme. From its own territory, Iran launched a massive drone and missile attack against Israel as a response to an Israeli airstrike on senior Iranian officers in Syria on April 1. Israel’s April 1 attack was one of dozens that Israel has conducted against senior Iranian officers in Syria over the last decade: none of those attacks triggered a serious Iranian response. To be sure, the attack killed a greater number of Iranian officers than “typical” strikes, and provocatively struck the Iranian consulate in Damascus—this “attack on Iranian territory” was supposedly the straw that broke the camel’s back. Israel nevertheless had little reason to expect such an expansive retaliation. Far more surprising than Israel’s strike was Iran’s act of retaliation. But more surprising than the character or the scale of Iran’s retaliation was Tehran’s decision to attack Israel directly. Insofar as a decision reflects an actor’s assessment of reality, Iran could have only resolved to take such a risk after ruling out the possibility that its cold war with Israel—and indeed, its ‘cold war’ with the United States—could turn “hot” as a result of its daring. Due to good luck, impressive calculation, or a combination of both, Iran’s assessment proved to be correct.

For a variety of reasons, including the failure of many Iranian projectiles and the interception of many more, Jerusalem responded to the attack with almost surprising restraint. At the time of writing, there have been no more tit-for-tat strikes between the two countries, and it would seem that Jerusalem and Tehran hope to avoid a more direct conflict for the time being. The two countries’ restraint in this round is not, however, any guarantee for the future. On the contrary, April 14 is evidence for the very variables that make a future conflict so chillingly feasible: unpredictability, misinterpretation, opportunism, and miscalculation. The controls on escalation are, moreover, hardly unreliable. International pressure can give way to the demands of domestic politics, especially where homeland strikes are concerned. One party’s “red lines” can become intolerable for the other, leading to their violent contestation. Perceived weakness can lead to excessive offensive opportunism, posing yet another

risk of spiral. Herein lies the essential instability of our contest—and another important difference between the 20th Century's Cold War and today's so-called cold war in the Middle East. Alternatively, we can mark this event as a break: the transformation of the 'cold war' into a 'phony war', akin to the one waged by France and the British Empire against Nazi Germany prior to the extraordinary tumult of 1940.

Part Four: A Phony War?

“Did you think the lion was sleeping because he didn’t roar?”

– Friedrich von Schiller, *Fiesco’s Conspiracy at Genoa*⁴⁹

Israel’s approach to Iran may have a historical parallel in the early British approach to the Second World War. In many ways, Israel is in a “phony war” with Iran—a charge levelled by many in the Arab world, who see themselves as the collateral damage of a geopolitical Kabuki dance.

The Phony War– the "Bore War", as contemporary British observers joked– was an eight-month period in which neither side took decisive action against the other. Formal war plans had been drawn up by Britain and France as early as March 1939. When war arrived in September, a certain deterrence prevailed on both sides—and French military doctrine made a real incursion into west Germany psychologically impossible. Air raids were avoided by both sides, for fear of retaliation against their own. The British briefly pursued daylight bombing, with the goal of avoiding civilian casualties, but with little success. Suggestions for decisive action were shot down: take, for instance, the proposal of L.S. Amery to burn down Germany's historic Black Forest as to take out German ammunition reserves, to which Air Secretary Kingsley Wood replied that the forest was "private property". Other similar suggestions include attacking German factories, which was swatted down for fear of retaliation, or Operation Royal Marine, a proposal to place mines in the Rhine River in May 1940, which France vetoed—again for fear of retaliation (ironically, France was invaded shortly after). The majority of the allied war effort was, in its early months, concentrated on the sea. On September 4, Germany was blockaded again, although to little avail (thanks to Soviet support). When the Soviet Union, then allied with Nazi Germany, invaded Finland, plans to dispatch a Franco-British expeditionary force were scrapped due to various political considerations. On April 3, 1940, Neville Chamberlain claimed that Hitler had “missed the bus” for European domination. On April 9, in a classic irony of history, Germany invaded Norway. On May 10—the day that Germany invaded France –Chamberlain resigned, thereby dissolving his twenty years in politics to a singular failure. His tragic place in history is as a synonym for appeasement and failure.⁵⁰

The Anglo-American strategist Colin Gray surmised that the problem of the Phoney War came in part because British policymakers were “overimpressed with the achievements of the economic blockade of the Central Powers from 1914 to 1918”. Their assumption, no doubt tinged by the raw memory of the First World War, was that the war would be a war of position but it would be possible to slowly choke off the German economy through a blockade, followed by an “orderly peripheral war of position against Axis targets of opportunity”, thereby avoiding heavy troop losses. Military stalemate combined with economic downturn would ultimately produce the downfall of Hitler and the concomitant end of the war.⁵¹ It is doubtful that Israeli policymakers entertained the hopes of their American and European counterparts, that the Islamic Republic’s behavior could be *moderated* through economic and political sanctions. Rather, Israel’s logic is that of a waiting game. The essential weaknesses of the Islamic Republic—its internal contradictions—will, in this logic, eventually bear out and lead to the collapse of the regime or its transformation. Iran—no doubt emboldened by Israel’s internal political quarrels put on public display for well over a year—believes the same.⁵²

The same criticism that Gray waged of the British strategy can perhaps be levelled at Israel: this “theory of relatively cheap war was, to be polite, unfeasible”. There was, as late as mid-1940, “no plausible theory of victory pertaining to extant political and strategic conditions”. The collapse of Norway and Denmark, the sudden shock of the French collapse in the following two months, and the humiliation of the British Expeditionary Force shortly afterwards “reduced the British theory of (victory in) war to hanging on until Hitler made a fatal error”.⁵³ Peace was not, of course, an option: instead, “Britain had to hold out until German errors catalyzed a second antihegemonic coalition”.⁵⁴ The collapse of the Middle East’s “first coalition” came about primarily through the successful application of military pressure on the part of Iran combined with deft diplomatic maneuvering. Iran’s most consequential antagonists—Saudi Arabia and the UAE—bowed out of the conflict—in part a consequence of a second trend, namely the return of the Biden administration to the conciliatory approach of the second Obama administration.⁵⁵

Since March 2023, Israel has fought Iran more or less alone and has, in turn, absorbed the majority of the shock from the Iranian alliance. Israel’s anti-Iran coalition, actual and presumed, has in large part withered away due to shifting

interests. The elusive “Middle East NATO” pursued by the Trump administration would have perhaps ended up with the function of keeping “the Americans in, the Russians out, and the Iranians down”, to paraphrase NATO Secretary-General Lord Ismay. This does not preclude the resurrection of that condition, although it creates a dangerous window. To be sure, in the absence of any clear strategy towards Iran, the “hope for the best” strategy has been preponderant. Various Israeli officials have waxed lyrical about the inevitable auto-emancipation of the Iranian people. Iranian officials preach the liberation of the *Palestinian* people. The difference, however, is that Iran clearly articulates its desired ends and is in a position to provide the means. Palestinian militias, quite unlike the Iranian opposition are well-organized, well-established, and well-armed. Israel has no such partner. Therefore, in reality, Israel has little other choice than to wait for the emergence of a second coalition, owing to an Iranian misstep—or to rely, as Britain did in 1942, on American supplies of weapons and the long-range hope of a *deus ex machina* intervention.

The historian Dave Palmer writes: “Attrition is not a strategy. It is, in fact, irrefutable proof of the absence of any strategy. A commander who resorts to attrition admits his failure to conceive of an alternative. He rejects warfare as an art and accepts it on the most non-professional terms imaginable. He uses blood in lieu of brains”.⁵⁶ Its antithesis is preemption. The term derives from the Latin *praeemere*, literally “to buy beforehand” or in a more modern twist, “to seize for oneself before others”. In the military sense, this pertains to opportunities that can arise, and the seizure of an opportunity that is not expected in the mind of the enemy: the decisive approach is overwhelmingly superior: tactically, it prioritizes speed. It is a search for the intangible aspects of war which are immune to quantification: “psychology, morale, surprise, and fear.”⁵⁷ At one level, attrition, considered in its purest form, is the absence of a decision, founded upon the presumption that current trends are acting in one’s favor. No thought is given to expediting those trends, accelerating them or otherwise turning them into an advantage.⁷ Preemption, by contrast, necessarily

⁷ The Soviet General Aleksandr Svechin, argued in his classic *Strategy* that “a war is a war of attrition if its center of gravity lies on the economic and political fronts, while a war becomes a war of victory by destruction if its center of gravity lies on the military front... one should look for the boundary between a victory by destruction and a victory by attrition within rather than outside the military front. The concepts of a victory by destruction and a victory by attrition apply not only to strategy, but to politics, economics and boxing, to any form of conflict, and should be explained in terms of the dynamics of the conflict themselves”. Aleksandr Svechin, *Strategy* (East View Information Services: 1991), 84.

requires an awareness of both an opportunity and the conditions (internal and external) that allow it to be exploited: to arrest a negative development or to conduct a confident experiment by introducing a new parameter into the mix of considerations. It is natural, then, that many intuitively consider preemption a higher form of warfighting. This does not chime, however, with the reality of politics, in which decisions are made according to different parameters. In the language of maneuver theory, the goal is “dislocation”: mass is not the target, but the elusive “critical vulnerability” of the enemy. As the American military theorist Robert Leonhard writes, the goal is “not result merely in the reduction of his capabilities, but rather in the paralysis of his forces”.⁵⁸

In our specific case, this requires the complete elision of all the particular features of the conflict between Israel and Iran. There is no reason to believe that a nuclear weapon would lead Iran to abandon its claim that Israel’s existence is illegitimate. There is no reason to believe that a nuclear weapon would move Iran towards a more conciliatory policy, either towards Israel or the United States. There is likewise no reason to believe that a nuclear weapon would lead Iran to abandon its proxies—if anything, it would likely redouble its support for them, given that a nuclear deterrent would grant it further immunity from the consequences of their actions. Iran’s acquisition of a nuclear weapon would not make it more likely to acquiesce to the fact of Israel’s existence but would embolden it to push harder for the end of it. Iran would not need to resort to a nuclear attack but could opt for a far more aggressive version of the proxy-based strategy it has pursued for years. Nuclear weapons would likely grant Tehran immunity from American retaliation and would add yet another layer of immunity to its proxy strategy. As Colin Gray reminded us of the Soviet Union, “...one should not refer to ‘the nuclear deterrent’. Whether or not nuclear weapons deter is a matter to be resolved only in the minds of Soviet leaders and the processes of Soviet government”.⁵⁹ Iran has in the last year launched direct attacks on three nuclear-armed countries—Israel, Pakistan, and the United States. Would the United States or any other country feel able to act so bold towards a nuclear-armed Iran?

Perhaps the only true parallel with the ‘original’ cold war resides in the fact that the antagonism between the two protagonists will only end—along with the attendant possibility of war—with the collapse of one of the two state forms, or in the words of

the great Italian military thinker Giulio Douhet: “with exhaustion, tiredness, *with the rebellion of one people against a state of prolonged pain and excessive anguish*”.⁶⁰

Part Five: *Persia Sovietica?*

“Political genius lies in extracting success even from the people’s ruin.”

– Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

For decades, Israel’s express preference has been for political warfare: the pursuit of options that reduce the economic and military resources available to Iran to attack Israel and which force the Islamic Republic towards retrenchment. The key instrument here is economic sanctions, imposed by the United States and other Western partners. Politically, Israel works closely with the Iranian opposition to delegitimize the Islamic Republic and to carry out covert operations inside the Iranian homeland.⁶¹ The goal is straightforward: to raise the ‘guns or butter’ trade-off for Iran, forcing it to choose between supporting its regional network of proxies or domestic prosperity (read tranquility); to isolate it globally and in the wider Middle East; and to take advantage of the widening intellectual and demographic gap between Iran’s population and its ruling ideology. In this regard, Iran is often compared to the Soviet Union: some Israelis hope in the eventual decline and collapse of the Islamic Republic and its replacement by a less hostile regime. Does this bear out?

Iran’s economic strength continues to flag at a rate markedly similar to that of the Soviet Union. Per the IMF, Iranian growth was just 3% in 2023 and is expected to sag further, to 2.5% in 2024 and to 2% in 2025.⁶² The vast majority of growth is powered by hydrocarbon exports; the government controls a significant portion of the economy (likely to an irreversible extent); and numerous sectors of the economy have suffered from systematic under-investment.⁶³ Poverty is estimated above 30% and inflation is well over 50%.⁶⁴ The implications of these economic trends are unclear, although it is difficult to see how *perestroika à l’Iranienne* would function given the distinctly *moral* incentives the Islamic Republic has to greater insulation from the Western global economy. It is similarly helpful to point out the effect of Iran receiving considerable support from the People’s Republic of China, namely in the export of hydrocarbons and natural gas at a discounted rate, allowing it to skirt around Western sanctions and eke out sufficient revenues to fund the core of the regime.⁶⁵ Without this support, it is hard to see how the Iranian economy would avoid complete collapse.

There is also the question of political legitimacy. Political ideas are not perennial: they are contingent upon a social, cultural, and technological *Zeitgeist*, and arise in response to the conditions of a given time and place. A revolutionary regime that grows distant from the moment of inception begins to lose its coherence: the zeal that characterizes its first few years wears off, which leads to either a search for alternative sources of domestic legitimacy or an attempt to revitalize the ideological vitality of the initial years (which must often be backed up by coercion). Iran has had to contend with a growing trend of secularization that eats at the very heart of the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic as an ideological project.⁶⁶ Low voter turn-out by itself speaks to a lack of enthusiasm with the system, as do the Islamic Republic's demographic data, which tend to correlate with growing secularization: rising tertiary education, female employment, and urbanization.⁶⁷ This is in addition to the problem of the Iranian diaspora: there exists an alternate "universe" of Iranian cultural life, connected to the Iranian homeland through family and cultural ties. It is Western-oriented and often highly secular.⁶⁸ This might also be said to exert a detrimental effect on the longevity of the Islamic Republic and its ability to withstand long-term "intangible" pressure.

Beyond the disorganization of the Iranian opposition, perhaps the key barrier to regime change in Iran is the fact that the regime's institutional design is deliberately tailored for continuity. As a purely analytic comparison, the IRGC might be compared to SS in Nazi Germany: it began as a group of revolutionary gangs, was consolidated by years of war, and is highly indoctrinated. Like the SS, promotion is based on exams designed to gauge ideological suitability (there are plenty of IRGC equivalents to the *SS-Schulungsamt*, which served as the ideological-political training base for the organization). It swears fealty to a charismatic leader as opposed to the state, has its own courts and intelligence services, is responsible for internal order, and has a huge if not dominant remit in the realm of foreign policy. On paper, the IRGC is meant to exist outside of domestic politics, but its interventions in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, extreme social conservatism, and proximity to the Supreme Leader have put it at odds with reformists. Moreover, the IRGC is Iran's most powerful economic actor, giving IRGC veterans access to top jobs in the private and public sectors. IRGC members also receive economic privileges, including discounts on imported goods and housing subsidies.⁶⁹ It also controls the Basij, a paramilitary

organization with over 200,000 active members and more than two million reservists. It represents a very clear, well-defined political elite class which, as the scholar Afshon Ostovar has convincingly demonstrated, depends on the system of *veleyat-e-faqih* to survive.⁷⁰

Despite the tumult of recent years, the regime's various security forces remain highly indoctrinated and well prepared. They have shown no sign of splintering in any recent rounds of protest. Beyond the Guard, Iran's political class has stayed seemingly unified. In 2022, during the so-called Mahsa Amini Protests, 227 of 270 members of Iran's parliament—dominated by hardliners—signed a letter asking the government to “show no leniency” towards protesters.⁷¹ Over the course of those protests, the IRGC rose in the standing of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who praised the Guard as a source of “young, pious, revolutionary youth”.⁷² IRGC commanders and their political allies are using this political capital to attack their moderate opponents. Publications close to the Supreme Leader have criticized demands to ease religious law and calls for a new nuclear deal, describing supporters of such policies “ignorant, oblivious traitors” and “instruments of the Zionists and Americans.”⁷³ Huge numbers of reformist politicians, journalists, and activists were arrested and a blanket social media ban—popular with IRGC insiders—was upheld.⁷⁴ Iran's political system, as a result, is becoming less of a strange parliamentary theocracy and more like a straightforward military dictatorship.⁷⁵ The return of the KGB's *Siloviki* to power in post-Soviet Russia should be a lesson to the optimists of regime change: “change” can often prove to be cosmetic. Flags and titles change; people—and the contours of their outlook on politics and the world—less so. Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote in the *Social Contract*, “The death of the body politic... is the natural and inevitable inclination of the best constituted governments. If Sparta and Rome perished, what state can hope to last for-ever?”⁷⁶ The entropy of political systems is a historical fact. States are worn down by the friction of social, technological, and political changes that they were not designed to withstand: some go out with a bang, others with a whimper. No state has ever lasted forever. It is fair, then, to assume that eventually the Islamic Republic in its current form will “expire”. One could certainly say the same of the State of Israel. It is trickier to speak of the how, and virtually impossible to speak of the “when”. In the case of the Islamic Republic, many scholars seem to agree that the next station for the locomotive of

Iranian history is a sort of Bonapartism, whereby the revolutionary regime crystallizes in a military form. The institution of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, analogous to a Praetorian Guard in Rome (notwithstanding Afshon Ostovar's very well-founded quibble with that specific terminology⁷⁷), is well placed to gradually subsume greater parts of the state. Perhaps a military dictatorship would give way to a more pragmatic approach to foreign affairs? Or perhaps it would more aggressively pursue? It could well be that a future Supreme Leader opts for a more liberal or conciliatory course: it is within the power of the Supreme Leader to make supreme decisions. At present, the system is designed to produce the contrary outcome, but such a change cannot be ruled out. In a less likely outcome, there would be another Iranian Revolution: but it is hard to see how such a revolution would come about in the context of a state geared almost entirely to its prevention, and without a revolutionary leadership capable of organizing such an overture. Israel likely faces a waiting game before its nemesis skulks into the night of history and must anyway survive long enough to see it.

Israel has not managed to figure out a way to use its military power in a way that can appropriately or realistically deter the construct that is the Axis of Resistance. This is due to geographic limitations, to be sure, but equally due to political ones: the difficulty, if not the outright inability, to define any "center of gravity" that military action could meaningfully parry. Its *ultima ratio* in the context of deterrence, its nuclear weapons, have not been declared even if its possession of weapons of mass destruction is the region's greatest open secret. There is, however, a problem: so long as Israel's enemies avoid the tremendous destruction that would be required to justify, even slightly, the use of nuclear weapons in Israeli doctrine (or within an international normative framework), nuclear weapons will be for Israel like those of the superpowers in the original Cold War: a hypothetical fact, that cannot deter an enemy strategy that relies primarily on the use of proxies, or political warfare. Absolute defeat—the collapse of a Jewish state—can in theory be achieved even without the violence of the scenario that would justify nuclear use.

The gap between Israeli and Iranian conceptions of warfare could be put down to the materialism of the former and the historicism (for want of a better term) of the latter. "The political object is a goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose". Clausewitz's insistence on war as a

means is intuitive: war is not fought for the sake of fighting war. It is the next sentence that perhaps strikes the modern reader as contrarian: “*The original means of strategy is victory...* [victory] remains subsidiary and is also to be thought of as a means”.⁷⁸ It is all too easy to think that the purpose of war, like any other contest, is to win. In this novel interpretation, winning is cast as a means to an end. In its long struggle with Iran, Israel has maintained the generic goal of survival: victory is understood in broadly materialist terms.

Israel’s fixation upon technology, and upon the tactical and technical aspects of war, is in a sense logical for a country that cannot imagine a scenario in which it would enjoy a quantitative advantage and must therefore necessarily rely on qualitative advantage. It has long been lamented in Israeli quarters, however, that so little thought is given to the intellectual dimension of war or high strategy. Iran, like the Soviet Union, is the product of a coherent political theory (unlike Zionism, which is better characterized as a movement). The similarities end with the teleological theme that infuses their world-views: the Islamic Republic is a revolt against materialism and the political thought at its root condemns the materialist worldview in exchange for one that takes seriously the notion of “spiritual resources” in warfare. The style of its warfare, therefore, is primarily political.

Early in the Korean War, Harry Summers recalls, Secretary of State Dean Rusk tried to explain to General Douglas MacArthur the aim of the war: “what we are trying to do is maintain peace and security without a general war” (it is hard to ignore a strong echo of the Biden administration’s concern about a “wider war” here). MacArthur replied: “That policy seems to me to introduce a new concept into military operations... that when you use force, you can limit that force... The very term of ‘resisting aggression’, it seems to me that *you destroy the potentialities of the aggressor to continually hit you...* When you say, merely, we are going to fight aggression, that is not what the enemy is fighting for. *The enemy is fighting for a very definite purpose—to destroy our forces in Korea.*”⁷⁹ MacArthur’s reply is worth our consideration.

In comparing the clarity of the two sets of war aims, MacArthur reveals the essential problem which Summers sought to put at the root of American failure in Vietnam: the abstraction of war goals defined at the political level can disrupt the coherence of military operations fought below. *Avoiding a general war* and *maintaining a favorable balance of power* are two distinct sets of goals: if the challenge to peace and security is

too great, then “general war” presumably acts as a final recourse; if general war is ruled out altogether, peace and security can be challenged without significant consequence. “Resisting aggression”, to use MacArthur’s phrasing, can involve elements of “deterrence”, namely in circumscribing the form that aggression can take. There must be an option, however, of destroying the ability of an adversary to conduct aggressive operations, lest the function of military power be entirely confined to the limitation of the scale of a given conflict. If this is the ends of military power, why not pursue a path of perpetual accommodation? The answer to this, presumably, is because there are political “red lines”, the crossing of which is intolerable for whatever political reason. If the goal of an adversary is to cross those red lines, defeat consists of *moving the red-lines* or by *dissolving the relationship of actions to consequences*. The clarity of purpose allows for the formulation of strategy in its strictest definition—the relation of all a state’s *means* to a set of political *ends*.

In the context of Israeli and indeed American strategy, a similar observation might be made: the goal of the United States is to avoid a regional escalation, as American officials have strenuously claimed over the last seven months. But MacArthur’s phrasing can be borrowed to elucidate the continuation of this essential pathology in American thinking: “*The enemy is fighting for a very definite purpose—to expel the West from the Middle East!*” The ability of Iran to pursue this goal—its “potentialities” of aggression—have evidently not been destroyed or even impacted any meaningful way.

Part Six: Pressure Points

“Myself, I made a gallows of my own house...”

– Dante Alighieri, *L'Inferno*, Canto XIII⁸⁰

On the question of Iranian strategy, we return to a debate eerily similar to the one held by analysts of the Soviet Union throughout the second half of the last century. The Soviet Union emerged from the vast Eurasian empire built over the previous four centuries. To what extent was Soviet behavior truly “Russian”? Were the sources of Soviet conduct derivative of this historical experience, or an aberration from it, “servants of a transnational ideology seized a country, which happened to be the Russian Empire, and set about organizing that country for the forwarding of a historic mission in support of the spread of socialism”?⁸¹ In the case of Iran, the Islamic Republic inherited the cat-shaped borders of Iran, wrought by centuries of conquest and colonialism, along with its demography and borders. To what extent does ideology actually matter? To what extent can we speak of “Iran” rather than the Islamic Republic? The answer depends on who you ask. Just as Russian émigrés were, as Colin Gray recalls, “prone to argue that the Soviet Union is an extraordinary anomaly in Russian history which, eventually, will give way before the basic character and allegedly enduring qualities of the Holy Russia upon which it has been imposed”, the Iranian diaspora—far greater and more influential than the Russian during the Cold War—makes similar arguments. The real Iran is an “eternal sun”: the *mehr-e-javedan* of *Vatanam* (My Homeland), Iran’s Qajar-era anthem. It will, according to this view, shine through the dross of the benighted and corrupt alliance of clerics and thuggish officers. However, this “eternal sun” might also be a geopolitical fact.

The Islamic Republic carried on the antagonism of the Pahlavi Empire with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, that having been the focus of the U.S.-led “Twin Pillars” policy and Reza Pahlavi’s extraordinary build-up of arms in the Persian Gulf. It maintained an icy disposition towards the Arab Gulf states, to put it mildly; although the rationale became primarily ideological rather than geopolitical. It did not, against the expectations of some observers, gravitate towards the Soviet Union despite several factors constituting temptations to do so. Perhaps the antagonism between Iran and Israel is the greatest proof of the aberrative nature of the Islamic Republic. In a purely geopolitical reading of events, the collapse of Iraq mirrors the collapse and

partition of Germany: in our case, the removal of a military threat entailed the removal of an obstacle to the expansion of Iranian influence and created a new zone of contest. One can equally look at the Islamic Republic's aim for regional preponderance and consider that commensurate with its size and historic status. Here, one might note the maximal extent of the Persian Empire at various points in history: its dominion over Mesopotamia, the Levant, parts of the Caucasus, and parts of the Arabian Peninsula. The takeaway, then, is that a purely ideological reading is unreasonable.

Geographical and historical continuities are somewhat inevitable. But it is equally absurd to suggest that in our case, ideology is not a critical, if not preponderant factor in determining the behavior of the Islamic Republic. Its means are not those of a typical Eurasian land-empire: the sinews of its strategic construct are religious and ideological and are built in the main from those who subscribe to the idiosyncratic ideology of the Islamic Republic and its claims about its role in world history. The *urtexts* of the Islamic Republic configure it as a state that views itself as a player (rather, as *the* player) on the world-historical stage; this is inevitable given the outsize role of the clergy in its organization and institutional makeup, individuals schooled in Shi'ite canon and dogma tinged with the Islamism of the Islamic Republic. In the abstract, Iran's principal political weapon is its hijacking of the Palestinian cause, aspects of which assail Israel's right to exist *as a Jewish state*, that being the most essential characteristic of its political form. By being the foremost advocate of a 'One State Solution' to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, and by coopting militant Palestinian factions, Iran has acquired access to both a military proxy and a political tool with which to contest Israel's right to exist. This dimension also gives Iran access to additional ideological capital, particularly the far left in the West, which sympathizes with the Palestinian movement, contests Israel's right to exist in its current political form and is hostile to the foreign policy of the United States. This is also a vector by which to push economic and political sanctions against Jerusalem.⁸² In the wake of the Vietnam War, the KGB actively sought to frame the United States as an "imperialist superpower" that could be defeated by a "Third World national liberation movement, inspired by Marxist-Leninist ideology".⁸³ Arguably, the attack of October 7 sought to achieve a similar effect.

The political weapon further allows Iran to take advantage of an old Cold War relic: Soviet antagonism towards Israel. The Soviet Union broke off relation with Israel in 1967, which followed with the “anti-Zionist obsessions” of the KGB. Yuri Andropov, while Chairman of the KGB, saw a conspiracy between Jews within the Soviet Union and a larger “international Zionist conspiracy against the Soviet Union”.⁸⁴ As late as 1982, a KGB conference ended with the conclusion that “virtually no major negative incidents took place [anywhere] in the socialist countries of Europe *without the involvement of Zionists*”. The Soviet Union as similarly a driving force of UN Resolution 3379, which declared Zionism to be a form of racism: it represented an opportunity to demonstrate first-hand the “enormous support [of the Soviet Union] for the struggle of the Arab peoples”⁸⁵

The Italian historian Giuliano Garavini convincingly writes of the collapse of the relationship between Israel and the Western Left:

*“In the rapidly shifting political and ideological currents of the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, Israel was something of an anomaly. The New Left, from Berlin to Berkeley, was concerned less with exploited workers and more with the victims of colonialism and racism... the symbols, slogans, and gestures most popular among European youth came from the rebels and heroes of independence movements in the developing world, in particular those in Vietnam who took on the vastly superior military and technological power of the United States... The image of Third World innocence was exploited by militants to instigate an uprising and evoke comparisons with inequalities within the industrialized countries themselves”.*⁸⁶

In several regards, Iran has taken on elements of Soviet strategy and picked up where Moscow left off. Like Moscow during the Cold War, Tehran today can use the internal logic of democracy as a way to manipulate international politics—particularly in a year that the United States is holding elections. The Islamic Republic’s rabid anti-Americanism, anti-Zionism, and “anti-imperialism” all fall onto the same ideological continuum of the Soviet Union, allowing for support to be mapped onto the goals of Iranian foreign policy. In the words of one Iranian academic, the American protesters currently inflamed over the war in Gaza “are the same people who will take to the streets if America attacks Iran”.⁸⁷ Vietnam is again instructive. By October 1974, the North Vietnamese concluded that “internal contradictions within the U.S. administration among the U.S. political parties had intensified: The Watergate scandal had seriously affected the entire United States...

the United States faced economic recession, mounting inflation, serious unemployment and an oil crisis... US allies were not on good terms with the United States... US aid to the Saigon puppet administration was decreasing".⁸⁸ A sense of the political forces that constrain and propel American foreign policy allowed for this sort of manipulation to be fruitfully pursued. The Islamic Republic clearly has such a sense and has learned how to use it to great effect.

Iran's broader operation of proxy warfare, which spans the entire Middle East, has numerous attritional functions: it stretches Israel's attention and spreads thin resources that might otherwise be focused on Iran. It also coincides with an ideological construct.

As Gray wrote of the Soviet Union, "The Soviet Union can recognize no 'national' interests as inherently legitimate other than its own... in the Soviet worldview, 'national' interests are really the interests of the ruling class, and by definition, *Soviet* national interests are really the interests of all progressive mankind".⁸⁹ There is an obvious parallel with the Islamic Republic, which has, like the Soviet Union, long had a tortured relationship with nationalism. Since its founding, the Islamic Republic has seen it as ideologically distasteful but on occasion expedient bone to throw to the masses in times of crisis. There is equally the identification of the interests of the Islamic Republic with those of the *entire Shi'a world*, if not those of Islamic civilization writ large. There is an assumption that Western decadence and internal contradiction will lead to the eventual exit of the West from the Middle East; Israel will disappear shortly afterwards. Key to this is the solidarity of the Islamic world and indeed, the present war is seen as serving precisely that cohering function.

The territorial contiguity of Iranian "empire", if it can be named as such, is being fused together through various logistical expedients. However, the presence of Iranian weapons poses a problem in those countries as does the presence of significant bodies of people that take exception to Iranian dominance—including within those governments and regimes. There is no small constituency in Iraq and Lebanon that is antagonistic to Iranian influence; the same can be said in Yemen, while the fragile Syrian state is still home to an opposition hungry for revenge. There can be little hope for a "spring of nations" akin to the uprisings that took place in Poland and the Baltic states in the late 1980s: even if such an event were to take place, it is unlikely that the "allies" would be able to pursue an advantage if only for

a lack of will. The likely result would be that Iran would secure its advantage by doubling down on its problems. However, the basic problem of “overextension” forces a choice between the competing priorities of the different systems.

The dependence of the Iranian system, like the Soviet, on the figure of a supreme leader presents another liability; the same goes for the effective autarky (“resistance economy”) of the Islamic Republic, that offers a degree of invulnerability to economic pressure (in addition to the Islamic Republic’s remarkable lack of vulnerability to sea blockade—another feature it shares with the Soviet Union). The elite is well-designed and strong, and there are no signs that the regime sees a need to accommodate the social or economic demands of its public. There is no credible opposition movement with a base inside of Iran that could pose a threat to the ruling regime. Absent significant external support, such a group will struggle to arise, and that is a task beyond Israel’s independent means and beyond the political will of the Gulf states and United States. The broad strategy of the Islamic Republic has been pursued credibly and coherently, with none of the great jolts that have characterized American policy over the last twenty years.

If we speculate on the collapse of the Islamic Republic, we must do the same with Israel. There are fewer examples of a liberal democracy collapsing than there are more experimental modes. The fastest way to perdition for Israel as a Jewish state is a surge of international pressure, the end result of which is that Israel effectively becomes a pariah state. It is here that the analogy of South Africa, of which critics of Israel are so fond, assumes a fascinating relevance. Economic isolation would most likely lead to the intensification of social tensions and large-scale emigration. The resulting political paralysis or crisis could create a window in which Iran and its allies could pursue their demands more aggressively, namely by turning the “one-state solution” into an internationally-accepted political norm that is backed up with the full force of international law and diplomatic pressure. The other option is a full-scale collapse in security along its borders which leads to a protracted war. Absent significant American support—due to domestic political constraints or the emergence of a competing contingency elsewhere in the world—Israel could well struggle to face up to the challenge of a multi-front war prosecuted to its maximal extent. The other option is the rise of a government so extreme—far more extreme than the one

presently in power—that a full-blown political crisis emerges, and effective civil war ensues.

Today, more than ever, the most desirable set of circumstances imaginable for the Islamic Republic has nigh come about. Competing international pressures are dividing the attention of the “Great Satan”, with the war in Ukraine absorbing a significant material and political commitment from American politicians and an even greater strategic focus for its European partners. The looming threat of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan is and has absorbed much of the attention of the American defense establishment and of military planning. The Middle East is viewed as an unwelcome distraction from more pressing challenges to American global preponderance (one recalls the aphorism that “you never fight the war you plan for”!) The domestic appetite for Middle Eastern engagements has been scarred, perhaps irreversibly, by the manifest failure of American intervention in Iraq and a bruising egress from Afghanistan. Israel has had the misfortune of becoming, among so many other issues, a political object in the United States—an object of fancy for the right, an object of scorn for the left—a fact that damages the predictability of American support and likely the extent of public support for supporting Israel in its self-defense, let alone any commitment to defend it outright.

Within the region, the stars have also aligned. Iran’s two historic geopolitical rivals, Turkey and Russia, pose little threat to the Islamic Republic: Turkey is governed by a political party that shares ideological DNA with Iran’s Sunni Islamist partners as well as the threat of Kurdish irridentism; Russia, despite bouts of suspicion, is an ideological fellow-traveler in the quest for a multipolar (read: post-American) world and has proven a reliable diplomatic partner. In fact, the Ukraine War has transformed Iran from a tactical to a strategic ally, with Tehran acting as an indispensable and comprehensive partner to Moscow. Iran’s other possible geopolitical threat, a determined coalition of Arab states, has seemingly acquiesced for the time being. The smaller Gulf states have recoiled. There can be little reward for a small state, with its population and resources extremely concentrated in small areas, to take on a far larger, more populous country—especially when there is no guarantee that a larger state would come to its defense, and where the option of accommodation does not amount to acquiescence and is sufficiently tolerable as to allow it independence and flourishing. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has also opted for

accommodation as to pursue the more urgent task of economic and social reform. Having failed to confront Iran militarily, Saudi Arabia has seemingly chosen to ignore the threat while it bides its time, hedging against a possible through a variety of diplomatic initiatives—not confined merely to the United States.

Lastly, there is the advantage itself: Israel's most profound weakness—domestic political turmoil—came to a head throughout the last year and the schism between different factions within Israeli society continue to be relevant, as demonstrated by the ongoing debate about the goal of the war effort, the necessity of holding elections, the conscription of the ultra-Orthodox, *inter alia*. Crucially, the exposure of this weakness creates a political window in which Iran's end-goal—the collapse of the state—can be fruitfully pursued. The broader geopolitical context allows Iran to do this with a limited cost, particularly if it pursues these goals through a combination of political tools including proxies and limits the use of military force as a means by which to put pressure on Israel. Perhaps the most artful technique used by Iran is its use of the threat of military force as a way to control Israeli policy through the urgings of its friends. This should be studied as a textbook example of the “escalation dominance” spoken of by Edward Luttwak. The cumulative effect of these trends is that Iran can pursue a course of confrontation with Israel while paying little consequence; creating a backdrop of potential “escalation” has the further effect of pushing former rivals closer to Iran as to avoid attack and to have some moderating influence on its decision. The end result is mounting international pressure on Israel to pursue a course of action that will exacerbate the “internal contradictions” within its society while at the same time empowering the most radical elements of the Palestinian national movement, that being Iran's chosen and most rational means with which to ultimately destroy the State of Israel. Israel, unlike the Gulf states, has no such option of compliance: the accommodation of Iran's essential demands perforce mean national suicide, and there is nothing that could compel Iran to modify those demands. This creates a situation whereby it is pushed further into a corner as the combined military and political pressures grow.

Part Seven: Linkage and the Axis

“Whether you like it or not, history is on our side. We will bury you”

—Nikita Khrushchev, November 18, 1956.

“Linkage”, Henry Kissinger wrote, “is synonymous with an overall strategic and geopolitical view. To ignore the interconnection of events [is] to undermine the coherence of all policy”.⁹⁰ Linkage was a signature technique that Kissinger and Nixon used in their approach to diplomacy, particularly vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, whereby progress in one area of policy would be made contingent upon another or a comprehensive “carrot and stick approach”. The stick entail the bringing about of consequences “beyond the issue of issue or region immediately concerned”.⁹¹ In the Middle East, Iran is certainly the most adept practitioner of a “linkage” policy. What is more, though, Tehran has turned “linkage” into more than a mere technique: it has, in the form of the Axis of Resistance, manufactured a fully-fledged strategic construct.

Much has been written about the Middle East’s Axis of Resistance, the grouping of Iran-backed militias that spans Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. The Axis of Resistance—a broad grouping of anti-Western militias spanning the Levant, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula—emerged in the early 1980s, taking the place of the pro-Soviet Arab nationalist states as the most coherent anti-Israeli force in the Middle East. Egypt’s 1978 decision to normalize ties with Israel, based on the pursuit of Egyptian rather than “Arab” interests, broke the original anti-Western grouping, leaving Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and Hafez al-Assad’s Syria as Israel’s only real military opponents. Baathist Iraq and Syria attempted a rapprochement in the 1970s, but this broke down when Saddam came to power in 1979, spoiling an anti-Israel Arab coalition. In the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran became resolutely opposed to Israel, but its immediate priority was war with Saddam’s Iraq. Nevertheless, when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, Iran dispatched 1,500 soldiers to train Shia Lebanese militants which formed the core of Hezbollah. Hezbollah’s founding document swears loyalty to Iran’s Supreme Leader. Iran also supported and trained numerous Shia Iraqi militias which fought Saddam, housing many in Iran. Considering Iraqi hostility, Syria pivoted towards Iran after 1979. The two have been strategic allies since.

Throughout the 1980s, Iran also formed ties with various Palestinian militias, providing weapons and training. After the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) recognized Israel in December 1988, Tehran broke ties with the PLO, instead deepening its ties with Islamist militias such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), which both advocate for the destruction of Israel. After the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iran took advantage of the ensuing chaos, returning older Shi'a militias to Iraq, creating and supporting new ones, and helping friendly Shi'a politicians gradually coopt the Iraqi state. During the 2006 Lebanon War, Iran actively helped Hezbollah with dozens of Iranian officers moving to Beirut to manage the fighting, then to manage the reconstruction of southern Lebanon. In 2007, when Hamas overthrew the PLO's ruling Fatah party in Gaza, Iranian support jumped dramatically, as did Hamas's engagement with Hezbollah on tunnel construction and rocket manufacture. After the Arab Spring in 2011, Iran had yet another opportunity for Iran to expand its "axis." Iran and Hezbollah immediately lent support to Bashar al-Assad's Syria, backed Houthis rebels in Yemen, and tried to stage a coup in Shia-majority Bahrain. The rise of ISIS in 2014 gave Iran an opportunity to create a corridor to Israel's borders spanning Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and to expand and integrate its various militias. In the same year, the Houthis took the Yemeni capital of Sana'a. This marks the first stage of the modern Axis's development.

The second phase is perhaps even more interesting. After the defeat of ISIS in 2017, the former head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF) Qassem Solemani aimed to turn Iran's now experienced and well-coordinated proxies in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon against Israel. Iran undertook a major effort to integrate the Syrian and Lebanese battlespaces, and to build logistical hubs connecting Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. Bashar al-Assad, Iran's most important state ally, has also since been rehabilitated, as Syria returned to the Arab League last May. The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) has gradually wound down its anti-rebel operations besides several pockets. After a brief rift over the Syrian Civil War, Hamas and Iran reconciled in December 2018, with Hamas moving its military headquarters to Beirut. It now has an extensive presence in southern Lebanon, as does PIJ. The normalization of Iran-Saudi ties in March at once dramatically reduced the risk of

Iran being attacked and allowed the Houthis to consolidate their rule in Yemen. Since then, the 'Axis' has been able to turn all of its attention to Israel.

The goal of the Axis is to destroy the State of Israel, politically or militarily. Palestinian members of the Axis take a Sunni Islamist position, arguing that Israel occupies Islamic land (*waqf*) which must therefore be recovered by force. Iran's argument, based on a Shi'a Islamist position, is more focused with the notion of Israel as a "Western military garrison", a "colony", and an "American proxy" in the words of Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini. The Islamic Republic is based on the idea that liberal Western culture is antithetical to Islam, that capitalism is exploitative and unjust, and that the U.S. underpins un-Islamic regimes and ruins Islamic unity. This in part explains the attempt by Iranian proxies to "punish" the United States for Israel's activities in Gaza. Beyond ideology, though, the military might of the United States and Israel have been the main obstacle to effective Iranian hegemony in the Middle East.

Perhaps this is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Israel is the driving force behind massive international sanctions on Iran and works closely with the Iranian opposition with the long-term goal of changing Iran's regime. The United States is the engine behind sanctions on Iran and is the main military deterrent to Iran's expansion. Over the last decade, Israel has hundreds of conducted airstrikes in Syria and Iraq, killing several dozen Iranian officers and soldiers and regularly conducting sabotage and assassination operations inside of Iran. The United States has also conducted dozens of airstrikes on Iranian targets over the last decade and was notoriously behind the assassination of Iranian General Qassem Solemani in January 2020. Since 1996, Israel has considered the possibility of bombing the Iranian nuclear program. It has come close to doing so on numerous occasions, with numerous "close calls" over the last decade.

In the short term, the Axis needs to preserve Hamas, allowing it to claim victory, maintaining Hamas as leverage in Gaza and boosting Hamas's plan to expand into the West Bank. This explains the Axis's concerted effort to push for a permanent ceasefire: Israel has the military upper hand, but combat pauses and a flood of anti-Israel propaganda can restrict Israeli action. In the medium term, the Axis of Resistance needs to tie down Israel militarily, keeping it mobilized to stress Israeli society, spreading it thin so it cannot attack the Axis beyond its own borders and

critically for Iran, so it cannot attack the Iranian homeland. This explains the Axis's consistent effort to collapse the Palestinian Authority, the expansion of its operations in Lebanon, and early signs that the Axis seeks to destabilize Jordan. Over a longer horizon, the Axis seeks to isolate and delegitimize Israel internationally, to distance it from the United States, to worsen its security situation, and to exacerbate its domestic political tensions. The end goal is a cycle of condemnation, emigration and economic downturn that makes Israel's continued existence as a Jewish-majority, Western-oriented liberal democracy untenable. This broad goal also serves the individual goals of the Axis of Resistance's constituent members.

Beyond survival, the real prize for Hamas is to destabilize and ultimately take over the West Bank. Since 2007, Hamas and Israel have maintained a level of equilibrium: wars inflict political damage to Israel and inflict material damage on Gaza. The price of "mowing the lawn"—a significant escalation once every five years, with smaller escalations in the interim—was tolerable to Israel, relative to the high price of occupying Gaza. Moreover, Israel's Iron Dome anti-air system, deployed in 2011, reduced the cost of Hamas rocket attacks on Israel. Hamas' 2014 plan to invade Israel with tunnels led to Israel's Operation Protective Edge. The operation thwarted the plan but Israel stopped short of a regime-change operation in Gaza. There were sporadic engagements since in 2018 and 2021, but Israel and Hamas largely preserved a balance, particularly as Israel relaxed the Gaza blockade to allow Hamas to tax aid shipments and provided work visas to Hamas-approved Gazans. The terms of the deal were violated on October 7: Hamas overstepped its threshold, meaning that Israeli retaliation will cross the 'red line' in seeking to destroy Hamas altogether—something Hamas never assumed Israel would do.

Hamas, meanwhile, has started comparing its gains to the Battle of Karameh, where the IDF launched a raid on the Jordanian border town of Karameh in March 1968. The IDF aimed to destroy a major Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) camp after a series of raids on Israeli towns, and to capture PLO leader Yasser Arafat. Israel successfully destroyed the camp, but the PLO won a political victory: the UN Security Council passed Resolution 248, which condemned Israel for disproportionate use of force, and the IDF took heavy losses, destroying the myth of its invincibility. Arafat and his Fatah bloc gained huge standing in the Arab world, claiming the mantle of Palestinian leadership and gaining thousands of volunteers

within days—enough to try and launch a coup in Jordan two years later. Most importantly, the question of Palestinian statehood was propelled onto the world stage, becoming distinct from the broader pan-Arab cause. Today, Hamas seeks to replace Fatah in the West Bank and has seemingly received a boost in doing so.

The West Bank's size, large population, and long border with Jordan make it the center of gravity for Palestinian politics, especially since at least two to three million Palestinians live in Jordan. The West Bank also offers significant leverage over Israel, with nearly 250,000 Israelis based in the West Bank, its adjacency to Jerusalem, and its centrality to the horizon of a two-state solution, which Israel must at least theoretically endorse. We now know that on October 7, Hamas wanted a simultaneous uprising in the West Bank to that end, although it failed for logistical reasons. Hamas cannot take control of the Palestinian Authority (PA), owing to internal Palestinian politics as well as Israeli security guarantees. It must therefore destroy the PA and gain *de facto* control in major Palestinian cities. For the last two years, the PA's legitimacy has declined across multiple governorates (*muhafazat*.) Its ruling Fatah party is vastly unpopular while PA President Mahmoud Abbas is widely seen as corrupt and inept. Israel has preserved the PA by conducting dozens of raids and arresting hundreds of Hamas activists. However, October 7 and its aftermath have given Hamas a major boost in Palestinian politics.

Hamas has conducted public executions in Jenin, Qalqilya, and Tulkarm, so weak is the presence of the PA in those cities. Other *muhafazat*—Tubas, Salfit, Hebron, Jericho, and Al-Bireh—have seen a significant uptick in Hamas activity. Hamas has used hostages from October 7 to free Palestinian prisoners from the West Bank and East Jerusalem in order to turn the release parades into Hamas parades. Hamas is now trying to trade the remaining hostages to release senior members of its West Bank operation. Disorder in the West Bank eases the pressure on Hamas in Gaza and would suck Israel into a politically-costly reoccupation of major Palestinian population centers, while discrediting Fatah and the PA—or providing it with a way to enter the PA in the context of a peace agreement, or to be rehabilitated in the Palestine Liberation Organization—the representative of the Palestinian people. In the longer-term, disorder in the West Bank gives Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups a chance to destabilize Jordan. Turmoil in Jordan, with which Israel shares its longest border, would mean Israel's total encirclement by the "Axis."

Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran's Iraqi proxies could exploit any Israeli border breach, allowing weapons and people to flood into the West Bank. Jordan is also home to several million Palestinians, both refugees and Jordanians of Palestinian descent, making it an important political arena in the broader battle for control of the Palestinian cause.

Iran is by far the greatest beneficiary of the current fighting, pursuing its long-term strategic goals at virtually no political or military cost. Israel is now completely preoccupied with its immediate surroundings—Gaza, Lebanon, and the West Bank. The United States has demonstrated that it has limited appetite for escalation, which the 2024 election will decrease further. This gives Iran a perfect window to test a nuclear weapon: Iran could use “Israeli crimes” to justify crossing the nuclear threshold formally. Most estimates suggest that Iran would need around four to six months to test a nuclear bomb, making a test viable by the end of 2024, depending upon technical progress. Politically, Iran has resurrected the Palestinian cause, a key political wedge issue in the Arab and Islamic world.

In the Arab world, Israel, not Iran, is seen as the “bad actor,” making normalization with Israel politically improbable. Western escalation concerns, meanwhile, allow Tehran to deny involvement in the current conflict while Europe, the Gulf, and even the United States rely upon it to prevent “escalation.” Saudi Arabia has no appetite for conflict. Reports suggest that Riyadh has offered Tehran massive investment in exchange for quiet. The Palestinian question's resurrection has also enabled Iranian public diplomacy throughout the Islamic world and with the global left. The PA, which Iran has long sought to marginalize, is at a historic nadir while the popularity of its Islamist allies is at an historic high. The conceit that Israel is a “Western colony” has seemingly been proven, and the ‘Global South’ as well as its supporters in the West have all played into the Iranian narrative. Militarily, because Israel's hands are tied and the U.S. has no desire to escalate, the Iranian homeland is likely secure, and Iran has a further opportunity to perfect and refine its anti-Israel campaign.

At the same time, Iran can work with its partners in Iraq to wedge the United States out of the region. The long-term goal of the Iraqi militias is to expel the United States from Iraq and Syria. Many Iraqi Shia militias are directly controlled by embedded Iranian officers. Iran-backed Iraqi militias claim that the United States' limited presence in Iraq and Syria remains an illegal occupation. The Gaza War gives Iran's Iraqi militias an opportunity to pressure the United States, raising the material and political cost of an enduring American presence in Iraq and Syria. It also puts pressure on the Iraqi government, which treads a fine line with the United States, to press for the medium-term expulsion of the United States from the country. The War has also served as a point of convergence between disparate Iraqi Shia factions, with anti-Iran Shia politicians falling behind the cause of attacking Israel and supporting attacks on the United States. The departure of the United States will allow Iran to complete its "Shia Crescent", linking Iran to Lebanon through Syria and Iraq, while also bolstering forward-deployed Iranian air defenses against an Israeli attack, and extending Iran's strategic buffer against Jerusalem and Washington.

The other premise of the Axis is that Israel is a "temporary imposition", again a derivative of the Islamic Republic's teleological view of affairs. The Israeli state is domestically unstable and incapable of surviving absent Western military and economic support. Axis-linked commentators take keen note of Israel's secular-religious, left-right, and socioeconomic divides, which have manifested themselves prominently over the last year. The natural conclusion of this doctrine is to pursue a "war of bloodletting" (*harb istinzaʿf*), an attrition war with a strong political dimension. This method, heavily influenced by the heavily-political Marxist view of war, is typically used by guerrilla groups to exhaust adversary will, as the North Vietnamese did with the U.S. and South Vietnam. This method leverages the short attention span of Western liberal democracies and Israeli and Western sensitivity to casualties. The Axis' members, authoritarian regimes or Islamist groups with large populations, can absorb the stresses of attrition, which allows them to pursue singular goals for long spans of time. Pressure short of war—terrorist attacks, sporadic rocket fire, information operations—contribute to this goal, but the Axis needs a war to impose real attrition costs on Israel and the West.

We might fruitfully compare the Axis of Resistance with Soviet support with leftist guerilla movements. Iran's modus operandi with the Axis of Resistance somewhat resembles that of the Soviet Union with its support for guerilla movements. To quote a contemporary document from the CIA, the goal was "to divert and distract the United States through many simultaneous challenges: some pinpricks, some major; to exploit lingering repugnance in the US to Third World engagements and to build on resulting controversy to complicate other foreign policy and national security initiatives, including defense programs; and to deny the US access to facilities abroad such as the USSR itself seeks".⁹² The same might be said of the function of the Axis vis-à-vis both Israel and the United States. It diverts and distracts, overwhelming with the sheer number of challenges; it takes advantage of "existing controversies", including long-standing grievances over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (in addition to Shi'a religious cleavages, that are arguably far deeper than merely ideological ones). It acts to frustrate the wider program of initiatives, particularly the creation of a regional security construct through the harmonization of U.S. relationships across the region.

What is of interest to us is the way that the last six months have demonstrated the functionality of the Axis of Resistance as a strategic construct. Since October, the full array of Iran-backed proxies has been leveraged to put pressure on Israel, to the United States, and to international trade. The function of this has been to link the application of pressure to the continuation of the war in Gaza. Complementing the ability of the Axis to apply leverage across a geographically dispersed range of points of different value is its ability to control the format and pace of escalation—defined by Edward Luttwak as "escalation dominance", the ability to threaten an enemy in a manner incommensurate to his ability to respond.⁹³ The specter of a larger regional war has haunted the region since October 7, although the initiative has seemingly passed from the hands of Israel to the hands of its foes. This allows the Axis to exploit the American fear of war—and Israel's susceptibility to those fears—giving it the ability to exercise political control over an aspect of its adversary's policy. The function of the has been to funnel the conflict by offering a single political "off ramp": the outcome they most desire.

Part Eight: Reflexive Control

“To go wrong in one's own way is better than to go right in someone else's”

– Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*⁹⁴

Carl von Clausewitz wrote, “In small countries that rely on large ones, [the center of gravity] is usually the army of their protector.”⁹⁵ Until late February, Iranian proxies regularly attacked U.S. bases in order to put stress on the relationship between the two countries, and to test American defense below the threshold of a full-blown war. An attack of too great a scale, however, would force the United States into a corner, strengthening the relationship. Low-level stress instead serves to place pressure on the United States, essentially revealing a small appetite to defend Israel only in a worst-case scenario. A more modern interpretation of Clausewitz's case, which accounts for the greater importance of domestic politics, would take stock of the option of attacking this “center of gravity” through political means:

“It is possible to increase the likelihood of success without defeating the enemy's forces. I refer to operations that have direct political repercussions, that are designed in the first place to disrupt the opposing alliance, or to paralyze it, that gain us new allies, favorably affect the political scene, etc. If such operations are possible it is obvious that they can greatly improve our prospects and that they can form a much shorter route to the goal than the destruction of the opposing armies”⁹⁶

The seemingly intractable problem of Gaza acts as a constant strain on this “center of gravity”, undermining it at the root: in the phrasing of Hassan Nasrallah, such political pressure generated by the continuation of the war—the reputational damage caused to Israel— “the victory of blood over the sword”.⁹⁷ The very nature of October 7 and its aftermath was not intended to physically destroy the State of Israel: the target is not *mass*, to use the military jargon for troops and weapons systems. It is hard to see how Israel's destruction could be achieved in this way without incurring unthinkable consequences. The target was, evidently, to trigger a wider political event. To borrow from maneuver theory, operational planning begins “with the pursuit phase: the exploitation and the pursuit are the only reason maneuver theory agreed to fight the battle”.⁹⁸ The decision to initiate the battle indicates some sense of “unfair advantage” that can be exploited. The events that have occurred since have seemingly vindicated this logic: there has arisen an opportunity for Iran to “disrupt

the opposing alliance” by capitalizing on domestic political unrest in the United States and to “gain... new allies”.

There is also a reciprocal argument here. It is not merely a question of targeting the United States as a way to attack Israel. To again quote Clausewitz: “If you can vanquish all your enemies by defeating one of them, that defeat must be the main objective of the war. *In this one enemy we strike at the center of gravity of the entire conflict*”.⁹⁹ At a geopolitical level, the function of attacking Israel is to dislodge the United States from the region. It is a mainstay of the Axis of Resistance’s thinking that Israel is the main anchor for any American presence in the United States in the Middle East. The disestablishment of the State of Israel will, in this view, loosen the greatest tie that binds the United States to the region in other ways. By attacking Israel, per this view, *Iran is in reality attacking the United States*. With the destruction of Israel, there will be no more substantive external threats to the Islamic Republic’s existence or the expansion of the Islamic Revolution. Again, this is not due to the threat posed by Israel *per se* but by the unmooring of American commitment.

To extend this thought by Clausewitz: Iran views the fight as between it and the United States; the Axis of Resistance effectively means fighting Israel on its own terms, confronting an effective proxy (or “colony”) with proxies. As Israel fights several smaller enemies, Iranian strategy—moored in the deniability of action—does not lend itself to attacking the center of gravity directly. Certainly given the growth of Iran’s proxies, they represent an almost all-consuming preoccupation for Israel. The rise of a multi-front war raises questions about Israel’s decision to organize its military acquisition around a long-range strike.

It is widely acknowledged that only a single course of action—a ceasefire in Gaza—can bring some quiet to the Middle East. Different versions of this statement have been proffered by senior American, European, and Middle Eastern officials. These pronouncements are, by themselves, the best evidence for the astuteness and effectiveness of the policy of linkage pursued by Tehran and its allies. This off-ramp—the end of the war—is a comprehensive win for the entire axis. A permanent ceasefire would grant Iran the ability to preserve Hamas as one of its key outlets of influence. This would not only remain a serious political force in Palestinian politics but would arguably achieve even greater influence as a victor. Hezbollah would not be left alone as Israel’s single outstanding front and could even achieve an additional

political victory in the form of a border agreement. All parties that contributed to 'linkage' would win a massive propaganda victory in the Middle East. The political crisis in Israel which would likely result from "defeat" in Gaza would further insulate Iran from a direct Israeli attack. Any lingering Israeli operations in Gaza—and Lebanon—would absorb further attention and manpower. The only possible downside for Tehran that might emerge from a comprehensive ceasefire is the possibility of a normalization deal between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Even this, though, is of limited strategic import to Tehran. Its own normalization of relations with Riyadh is continuing apace, and Saudi Arabia has shown little ability or willingness to break off the process of détente that began last March. Riyadh's prevailing focus remains its social and economic development and not the military containment of Iran. A ceasefire would be a net win for Tehran.¹⁰⁰

It also bears mentioning another Cold War relic that has seemingly reappeared: the Soviet tactic of reflexive control, which is a combination of information warfare, disinformation, and provocation. It is striking to match a check-list of the characteristics of reflexive control. Some of the influential Soviet military theorist Sergei Komov lists the following characteristics:

- "Distraction through a real or imaginary threat to one of the enemy's vital areas, forcing him to reconsider the common sense of his decisions.
- "Overload, owing to large volumes of contradictory information".
- "Paralysis, creating the perception of unique threats to vital interests".
- "Attrition, forcing the enemy to perform useless actions and thus leading the armed forces to deplete resources".
- "Deception, provoking the enemy to redeploy armed forces to the threatened region during the preparatory stages of military operations".
- "Splitting, convincing the enemy that he should act contrary to the interests of his coalition".
- "Reassurance, causing the enemy to believe that training in pre-planned operations is being carried out rather than preparations for offensive actions - and thus reducing his vigilance".
- "Provocation, forcing the enemy to perform actions beneficial to your side"
- "Proposal, offering information that affects the enemy legally, morally, ideologically or in other areas".

- “Pressure, offering information that discredits the government in the eyes of the population”.¹⁰¹

Many of these characteristics are immediately visible in the events of the ongoing war. “Reassurance” was already in motion throughout 2023, in the various probes and training operations conducted by Hamas and Hezbollah. This played into “deception” on the Israel-Lebanon border and in the West Bank, while Gaza was considered ‘pacified’ as late as August 2023.¹⁰² “Attrition” was widely anticipated by observers from around the Axis of Resistance, who predicted that Gaza would be “Israel’s Vietnam”. This was far less effective than initially thought, owing to a low Israeli casualty count, although Israel has expended munitions and precious political capital that might have been used elsewhere, to say nothing of the economic effect of the war. Pressure is now the defining characteristic of the war:

“Victory is the main object in war. If this is long delayed, weapons are blunted and morale depressed. When troops attack cities, their strength will be exhausted... Thus while we have heard of blundering swiftness in war, we have not yet seen a clever operation that was prolonged”.¹⁰³

The historian Michael Handel observed:

“...commanders must exploit an advantage by keeping the enemy under unrelenting pressure, thereby denying him respite or time to regain his equilibrium. The underlying logic is universal: it makes no sense for the side that has gained an advantage to give an opponent the chance to renew his resistance later on... the defeated or weakened side has every interest in disengaging—whether through withdrawal, seeking a ceasefire, or prolonging negotiations—to build up his strength for the future”.¹⁰⁴

This observation applies to Gaza, a war now in its seventh month and counting. Domestic support for the war is decreasing, as are the number of political constraints on the field of possible action. At the time of writing, Israel continues to pursue an increasingly contradictory set of military goals, ‘regime change’ in Gaza on the one hand and on the other, the liberation of more than a hundred remaining hostages held captive by various Palestinian militant groups. The Axis is, in effect, ‘talking over’ the war, relying heavily on international pressure and international opinion in addition to using a sophisticated program of linkage: “splitting” and “overload’

occur through the use of international media to devastate international opinion of Israel and to pressure U.S. President Joe Biden in an election year; targeting U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria to link U.S. and Israeli interests; activating the ‘dormant’ Houthi rebels in Yemen to target international shipping in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, imposing a global economic cost to raise the international pressure on Israel, consciously mimicking the construct of the Arab Oil Blockade in 1973-4. “Proposal” and “pressure” are also at work, as the issue of hostages has—as many observers in the Axis predicted early in the war—once again caused a split in Israeli society, and protests have again reignited calling for a ceasefire to regain the hostages at all costs.¹⁰⁵

The construct of the Axis has served to and to outfit Iran with an invaluable capacity for deniability. That deniability is especially potent when there is a deficit of political willpower to conduct more forceful operations, much less to risk the war. It allows Iran to pursue the goals of its foreign policy, vis-à-vis Israel and the United States, without the need for direct engagement or loss to the Iranian homeland. However, it leads to Israel to pursue a policy that is, in the literal sense, superficial, in that it concentrates on an “outer layer” of Iran’s forward defense—as opposed to hitting what former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett referred to as “the head of the Octopus”. Israel cannot take on Iran, or the Axis, alone. Its branches in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian territories, and Iran itself amount to too great a challenge in terms of scale and scope. Its main problem resides in the fact that the political appetite for other important actors to join the foray—notably the United States and the Gulf states—has markedly decreased in recent years. Israel is therefore left with no choice but to take on the branches of the Axis it is most able to confront, in the Palestinian, Syrian, and Lebanese arenas. However, should Iran seek to further close in Israel’s operational freedom—with another event similar to its April 14 attack—Israel will, like the proverbial cornered dog, be forced to find a way to break out.

In Krav Maga, Israel’s national martial art, breaking out of a headlock requires striking one’s opponent in the head with a free hand, disorienting them before going on the offensive. Historically, Israel has broken episodes of attrition through comparatively decisive action. In August 1955, Operation Elkayam, the most successful of Israel’s retribution operations against the Fedayeen insurgency, killed

72 Egyptians with one Israeli loss, humiliating Egypt into a U.N. ceasefire by September. In June 1967, while pre-emptive in character, the *blitzkrieg* of the Six Day War was also a response to Egypt's closure of the Straits of Tiran. In 1978, Operation Litani sought to extract the PLO from Southern Lebanon after a string of terror attacks and frequent insurgent raids in Israel's North. The First Lebanon War in 1982 followed a resurgence in PLO terror attacks—allegedly over 200—since a ceasefire in 1982. In the recent past, the latest Gaza War in 2021 followed weeks of rocket attacks against Israel's South. The 'headlock parallel' remains apt today: the question is *how* Israel will break out of it. All options for decisive action carry with them a significant risk of a full-scale regional war. A war in Lebanon to impose costs on Hezbollah would result in a bloody and likely protracted struggle that would no doubt invite an even more forceful attempt at linkage. A direct strike on Iran's nuclear facilities would invite a retaliatory strike some orders of magnitude greater than April 14. The return of an aggressive Israeli policy in Syria could also invite Iranian retaliation, per the new norm. Despite the risks of these courses of action, though, Israel's current strategic predicament is not a sustainable holding pattern: sooner or later, it will likely use one of these options, or another, to break its it, reigniting the possibility of this "cold war" going hot.

To paraphrase AirLand Battle, the U.S. Army's 1980s warfighting doctrine: "Close operations bear the ultimate burden of victory or defeat. The measure of success of deep and rear operations is their eventual impact on close operations".¹⁰⁶ The war between Israel and Iran has reached a point where an Israeli attack "deep" in Iran would have little impact on its close operations, owing to the Axis. The operations of the Axis—in Lebanon, Gaza, and Syria—have reached a level of such intensity that an attack on Iran would do little good, even from the perspective of deterrence. Deterrence is, in this regard, dead. Indeed, it could lead to those "close" operations being complimented by a far greater Iranian contribution to the fighting which could bring Israel to another existential point. The focus of Israel's "deep" operations has now shifted to Lebanon—but this is the ultimate proof of concept for Iran's forward defense.

Part Nine: On Good Faith

“There's no trust, No faith, no honesty in men; all perjured, All forsworn, all naught,
all dissemblers.”

–William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*¹⁰⁷

Colin Gray memorably wrote that “Diplomacy is only an instrument of foreign policy, but frequently it is confused with foreign policy”.¹⁰⁸ Perhaps because of the cult of deterrence, and the long shadows of annihilation cast out at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the relationship between military and diplomatic policy is highly disjointed in the West. An anecdote that the author was told by a retired Reagan administration official does well to illustrate the problem. The official returned to Foggy Bottom from abroad, having concluded a deal of a highly-classified nature. Upon entering the floor of his office, around a dozen junior diplomats began applauding him for his efforts. He asked why they were clapping. One of them almost mechanically exclaimed, “You signed a deal!” He shook his head and replied: “You have no idea what the deal was. It could have been a bad one”. This vignette of naiveté is by no means meant to serve as a blanket characterization, but it again speaks to the conflation of means and ends. The observation of Clausewitz that even *victory* is but a means to the ends set out in strategy surely applies to diplomacy to an even greater extent. If anything, it could be argued that the function of diplomacy is to create an amenable context for the pursuit of national interests. When those interests are conceived of in highly-abstract terms, it becomes difficult for diplomacy to serve its function as a means because the ends are so obscure.

The historian Richard Pipes observed that the State Department in particular “can give the appearance of being a giant law firm, seeking reasonable deals on behalf of its client”.⁸ This stands in stark contrast to the Soviet Foreign Ministry, which operated according to a much more rigorous ideological framework without the fluidity of changing administrations: “Soviet diplomacy, on the other hand... *has been very much an instrument of political struggle resting upon a worldview which did not recognize that other states have legitimate interests warranting respect.*”¹⁰⁹ Soviet diplomacy was a reflection of the Soviet Union’s essentially teleological worldview: instrumental and

⁸ There is a wider question to be asked here which exceeds the scope of this discussion but would make for a fascinating line of inquiry: Why are there so many lawyers at the top of the American foreign policy firmament? And what is the effect of this on the conduct of American foreign policy?

based on a long-range view of an inevitable class struggle, which could be pursued over the long term by the authoritarian and undemocratic nature of Soviet government. Western diplomacy operates with a concept of interests: it is, however, hard to pursue a constant program of action when the hands that operate the machinery of diplomacy change with frequency—as does the master concept of what is being achieved. Contingency presents policymakers with the need to negotiate and decide. The frame of reference tends to be short and the worldview transactional.

This has historically been a problem in the dealings of Western states with authoritarian counterparts.

Colin Gray expounded upon this point in 1990:

“Western governments approach... East-West political issues more generally, in the spirit of reasonable people who expect other (Soviet) reasonable people to be fundamentally interested in the mutual adjustment of interests for the good of international order. However, *Moscow does not share a common frame of conceptual or policy reference with the United States*. The USSR has been an imperial state eminently realistic in its calculation of the respect and influence it is due, *but revolutionary in its commitment both to alter the contemporary distribution of power in its favor and to encourage the reordering of security arrangements for the Eurasian Rimland so as to promote an imbalance of power*”.¹¹⁰

In the case of Iran, there is no clearer example of this tendency than the attempts of Western policymakers to engage in attempts at reconciliation with the Islamic Republic (not that the Islamic Republic at any point conciled itself to the international order or the facts that make up the international order.) It is here that the Soviet analogy is again instructive. As with the Soviet Union, “the critical assumption behind any grand design for... military disengagement... has to be a genuine willingness on the Soviet part to forgo the attractions of hegemonic empire as a price well worth paying for the conclusion of such empire”.¹¹¹ Yet, as with the Soviet Empire, to forego this would *betray the essential ideological logic of the Iranian “empire”*. To would be to fold in on the Islamic Revolution itself and to resort to a particular, Iranian frame of legitimation that turns its back on the assumptions about Islamic history and Islamic solidarity that form the bedrock of the Islamic Republic. Unlike the Soviet Union, there is less scope for ideological flexibility precisely owing to the institutional make-up of the regime. Since the late 1990s, optimism about this

possibility has waned considerably. Instead, Western efforts have gone towards accommodation on specific matters of import, chief among them the regulation of the Iranian nuclear program which, between 1996 and 2003, aimed specifically at weaponization. It is curious to see, in the context of a ‘new’ Cold War, the revitalization of the “arms control” debates of the 1980s and on remarkably similar grounds.

On the question of arms control—an effective analogue to the nuclear diplomacy of the last decade—Gray must be quoted in full for the almost-ecore resemblance of the past to the present:

“The Soviet Union does not want, indeed for reasons of imperial political stability probably cannot afford, an enduring real peace with the West. *But the Soviet Union does want to avoid competition, crisis, or war on disadvantageous terms... as with Japan, Italy, and Germany in the interwar years, and for some of the same reasons, the USSR sincerely desires to achieve agreements labelled as manifestations of arms control... which diminish the pace of Western military effort through action against the political consensus necessary to sustain arms competitive behavior at a high and expensive level; help psychologically to disarm democratic societies; and help alleviate or resolve some Soviet military (and economic, and hence social and political) problems.*”

It is hard to imagine the Islamic Republic in a good-faith peace with the West, certainly with the United States and to an even greater extent with the State of Israel.¹¹² The alternative, as with the Soviet Union, is to try and secure advantages that maneuver the locus of the struggle to the arena of political warfare in which Iran excels and in which the West tends to falter. This serves to defuse the military threat while splitting Western decision-making, rupturing the continuity of policy (a fact helped by the American propensity for political polarization!) It saps the antagonism of Western publics for a sustained confrontation, reducing a single issue to the kernel of the conflict even if the other areas of the conflict are not addressed—witness the manifest failure of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to speak to the issues of Iranian proxy warfare against American allies and even against the United States, to mention one issue among many. Moreover, the resolution of arms control issues defuses the argument for a sustained offensive operation, much moreso the argument for war, as it gives the public the impression that war has been averted. Finally, it comes with the benefit of economic relief which, in an autocratic society, has the

function of a steam valve, releasing political pressures that build up from discontent. The windfall that Iran received with the signing of the JCPOA needs no further explanation.

He continues:

“In and of itself, arms control and the process thereto associated has no normative value in the Soviet political pantheon. In its own official estimation... the Soviet state is engaged inalienably in a struggle to ultimate decision between antagonistic social systems and their political and military superstructures”.

As a consequence:

*“What appears as Soviet arms-control policy is an instrument of Soviet propaganda and defense policy, generally of grand strategy. The Soviet approach to international negotiations is formally in the Leninist tradition, with the competitive or noncompetitive circumstances in which Soviet leaders find themselves determining just how accommodating they choose to be... The pattern of Western self-restraint and Soviet advantage-seeking is unmistakable as it is regularly dismissed as relatively unimportant by apologists for Soviet misbehavior. Where many Western arms and arms-control experts believe that through an arms control process they are addressing pragmatically essentially technical issues in the necessary technical manner, the Soviet Union is engaging in political theater and seeking to inhibit the will of the enemy to compete”.*¹¹³

The parallel is unmistakable.

Part Ten: The Question of Credibility

“Where conscious subjectivity is concerned, there is no distinction between the observation and the thing observed.”

John Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind*¹¹⁴

In our ‘cold war’ setting, a deficit of credibility concretely translates into a decline in deterrence. The loss of credibility comes to imply an inability to respond to challenges, thereby serving as an invitation to more intense probing activity or to outright predation. Especially in an attrition scenario, where time is the critical variable, there is an additional incentive to exploit advantages when they are available and to raise the political or material cost of a direct conventional conflict at any possible juncture. Credibility matters even more in the complete absence of diplomatic relations. Communication often takes the form of low-level kinetic probing, which communicates discipline, readiness, and resolve and demonstrates internal cohesion—or on the contrary, demonstrates a lack of any of those things.

On June 26, 1950, the day after the outbreak of the Korean War, the legendary American diplomat George Kennan submitted his analysis of the brewing conflict to Secretary of State Dean Acheson. Kennan opined that “If these developments proceed in a way favorable to Soviet *purposes and prestige* and unfavorable to our own, there will scarcely be any theater of the East-West conflict which will not be adversely affected thereby.”¹¹⁵ This expression encapsulates an important aspect of the logic of containment, which animated so many of America’s most dramatic decisions in the Cold War: the Berlin Airlift in 1947-8; the U.S. intervention in Lebanon in 1958; the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1961; and of course, the creeping onset of the Vietnam War throughout the 1960s. Kennan was not alone in his belief that bolstering credibility—demonstrating that actions had consequences and exhibiting a capacity for endurance under pressure—was the best way to prevent the Cold War from turning ‘hot’.

For Kennan, his contemporaries, and many of his acolytes, the importance of credibility served to demonstrate not only what the consequences of certain actions might be, but that the United States is in the first instance both able and willing to act. Per the heuristic of “credibility”, there is a benefit to showing that one’s freedom of action is not limited by material and political constraints. Such demonstrations

matter especially when one has declared interests in a given area or if a rival deliberately launches a challenge in order to test the limitations of those resources in a new arena. The “credibility” heuristic also makes a conceptual offering: in that it presupposes that foreign policy is geographically and intellectually holistic, it highlights the importance of intangible factors in the conduct of diplomacy. In the absence of a direct confrontation (a “hot war”), there are only speculative fronts. The concentration of forces entails a gamble insofar as it presupposes that one front will matter more than another. In the period between the present antagonism and the hypothetical future war, the nature of confrontation is essentially psychological. Clausewitz is worth quoting in full here:

*“Military art pertains to living and moral forces, insofar as it cannot achieve anything absolute or concrete: there is always room for chance (“dem Ungefähr”)... as this chance stands on one side, courage and self-confidence (“Mut und Selbstvertrauen”) must compensate”.*¹¹⁶

A similar concept might be applied to a ‘cold’ war. In the absence of an *absolute* state of war or peace, the interim period demands endurance and a certain willingness to act, even if the extent of possible action is restricted in its remit. The “living and moral forces” that Clausewitz describes assume a greater importance because in the absence of a “hot” war, the only possible avenues with which it is possible to influence the adversary's decision are psychological. The decision is the name of the game: war versus peace, adjustment of positions, and the very character that antagonism takes. The terminology of “escalation” that was popularized in the Cold War elides the fact that political and military competitions are in essence tests of will. In a way, the highest form of “courage and self-confidence” is the decision to “go hot” although like all acts of courage, it comes with the risk of terrible backfire.

The semantic distinction between “cold” and “hot” war allows us to conceive of a separation of political and military warfare; the legal distinction between acts of “political” and “economic” warfare on the one hand and acts of “real” warfare further restricts our conception what war actually is. In all cases, however, the end goal is the “defeat” of the adversary. As B.A. Friedman writes, “defeat is a decision”.¹¹⁷ The goal is always the same: *to debilitate and degrade the viability of an enemy's material, psychological, and social ability continue saying “no” to a set of concessions they initially consider to be politically undesirable.* The heuristic of credibility is, at its core, based on the prior that one's actions and processes of decision-making are

subject to constant probing and scrutiny: the goal is always to understand the antagonist's proximity to the elusive "yes" which by itself is tantamount to victory. The failure to meet a challenge in one arena may, therefore, give rise to further challenges in others. In the most dangerous case, war becomes likely: either through a protagonist's misreading of the balance of forces, a failure to understand an adversary's "red lines", or an abrupt attempt to reverse a disadvantageous situation.¹¹⁸

It is worth noting the effort that Russia, China, Iran, and other authoritarian states have in recent years made significant efforts to dissolve the narrower concept of "warfare" in exchange for more holistic concepts of long-term struggle.¹¹⁹ The intellectual genealogy of this is likely Marxist-Leninist, designed to get an adversary to *eventually* make politically undesirable concessions. The capacity for a tenacious, long-term struggle is nourished by the propensity of authoritarian states to view politics in a holistic rather than in a siloed way¹²⁰, as well as the absence of democratic competition, which brings with it the possibility that a policy could be unmoored by political upset. In this regard, time is on the side of the authoritarians. The closer the "elusive yes" seems, the harder they can push, especially at vulnerable moments: the obvious influence of the U.S. presidential election and Israeli coalition politics on the ongoing war in Gaza is *prima facie* evidence of this.

Credibility, then, matters a great deal: for the failure to meet a challenge in one arena may, therefore, give rise to further challenges in others. In the most dangerous case, war becomes likely: either through a protagonist's misreading of the balance of forces, a failure to understand an adversary's "red lines", or an abrupt attempt to reverse a disadvantageous situation.¹²¹ This insight is especially pertinent in our case. The need to win back that the intangible of credibility—or too great a deficit of it—manifests itself in the real world. In the months leading up to October 7, Israel faced a number of smaller probes that served, in effect, to gauge Israel's political appetite to engage in a conflict of a greater intensity and scope than the low-intensity operations in which it had engaged for the last decade. Over time, these smaller signs cumulatively led some observers to anticipate that a larger conflict was in the making. A non-exhaustive list would include the following:

- Between January and March, the UN reported that Hezbollah dramatically expanded its deployments in the area of Mount Dov (Sheba'a Farms), crossing the Blue Line—

the 2000 demarcation line between Israel and the Golan Heights—in an unprecedented fashion.

- In February, Israeli media noted an uptick in Iranian arms exports to the West Bank via southern Syria.
- Since February, thousands of Hezbollah and PMF-linked militiamen travelled through north-east Syria to southern Lebanon and southern Lebanon in a redeployment unprecedented since the end of the Syrian Civil War.
- In March, a car bomb was attempted in the city of Megiddo in northern Israel by a suspect who infiltrated Israel from Lebanon. The attack was claimed by the ‘Wolves of the Galilee’, largely considered to be a Hezbollah front. Israel issued a gag order on the event¹²² but Hassan Nasrallah in his annual Quds Day speech.¹²³
- In early April, (poorly-trained) Iranian operatives attempted to attack Jewish and Israeli infrastructure in India, Greece, and Turkey.¹²⁴
- On April 6, on the second day of Passover, Hamas and Hezbollah fired a joint barrage of 34 rockets from Lebanese territory, the largest such barrage since 2006. The head of the IRGC’s Quds Force, Esmail Ghaani, as well as senior members of Hamas and PIJ were in Beirut at the time of the event.
- On April 8, Hezbollah also set up two armed encampments several feet inside of Israeli territory in a symbolic seizure of Israeli land.
- On April 17, the Shin Bet releases information about a joint Hezbollah-IRGC smuggling cell into the West Bank.
- Later that month at a conference in Beirut, senior Hamas official Saleh al-Arouri hinted that a “sacred campaign” against Israel was “imminent”¹²⁵.

Those probes were no doubt triggered by an assessment of Israel’s internal political dysfunction—and possibly by a desire to create a diversion ahead of October 7. In the aftermath of the Gaza War, Israel will have an uphill battle restoring the credibility it had. This is compounded by the fact that, until November, the United States will be unable to credibly threaten a strike on Iran due to the proximity of the 2024 election. Until then, Israel will be forced to act without the cover of its ultima ratio. Short of its nuclear arsenal, the use of which would likely anyway imperil the future of a Jewish state, Jerusalem does not at present have a credible deterrent against Iran. It is this reality that produced the attacks of April 14 and could lead to further risks in the near future: an emboldened Iran could try its luck with another

attack or an attempted sprint to a nuclear bomb; an insecure Israel could try to confront Iran or Hezbollah without the full backing of Washington.

A final word on nuclear weapons. General Maxwell Taylor referred to “the Great Fallacy that henceforth the use or the threatened use of atomic weapons... would be sufficient to assure the security of the United States”. Israel, too, may have fallen into this trap, and at a far greater cost. For the first four decades of its existence, Israel prepared for wars against other state actors. Nuclear weapons were rational, and their use was even conceivable, not for the purposes of massive destruction or even deterrence but in the battlefield against massive Egyptian or Syrian armored columns. Since 1982, however, the vanguard of Israel’s threat has been sub-state actors that are immune to destruction save for through political means and which fit poorly into the Cold War-era paradigm of deterrence, escalation, and parity. The array of actors that makes up the Axis of Resistance cannot be vaporized into plumes of nuclear ash: if anything, the goal that these actors share with the Islamic Republic—the international isolation and eventual collapse of the State of Israel—would likely be expedited by such a move. In Israel’s case, nuclear weapons pose no deterrent against the very real threat of political warfare. Arguably, they lend themselves to the conceptualization of warfare in overly technical terms, subsuming the theoretical and abstract aspects of war—the crucial “intangibles”—in nuclear game theory. Israel has not imposed a cost on Iran for the development of the construct of the Axis of Resistance and the use of it. One wonders whether the Islamic Republic could have conceived of, or operationalized, so agile a concept as the Axis of Resistance if it had to factor nuclear weapons into its doctrine. For Israel, nuclear weapons have *failed* to deter Iran and certainly to deter its proxies.

Colin Gray wrote, “It is the solemn duty of the statesman to set the political framework for a conflict so that his generals have a reasonable chance of succeeding. But it is also the statesman’s duty to reduce the basis for the demand for military power: *to minimize the political incentives discerned by other countries to seek to trigger crises or seek military solutions to pressing problems*”.¹²⁶ There is, in this, an injunction to some display of strength. In Gray’s formulation, military power is a last resort that can be forestalled through disincentivizing potential predators. This presumably entails some external display of domestic political fortitude, of resolve, and of willingness to meet hostile actions with consequences. Failure to do so will, in this formulation,

invite adversaries to “seek to trigger crises” and to “seek military solutions” which in turn places the burden on politics on armed force. In this view, war is not “politics conducted by other means” but rather, the failure or opportunism of a statesman. Gray’s implicit message here is *peace through strength*, the term strength encompassing the full spectrum of a state’s resources, material and spiritual.

Conclusion

What, then, do we call this conflict? Is it a cold war? There are enough structural parallels between the conflict between Israel and Iran and the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union that there is an argument for using the term. At the same time, it is wholly insufficient in that it does not describe reality: a conflict in which the goal is total annihilation. The program is in motion, and the goal is being pursued. “Cold war” describes what could be, not what is. “War” is increasingly a more fitting description for the event playing out in front of us. It is sleepwalking in the literal sense: where there is motion without consciousness, and a concurrently great danger of harm. It should not, however, induce any supine complacency. The outcome of this cold war could easily and conceivably end up very different to the ‘original’. It is also worth remembering that, as many scholars now note, the ‘cold war’ between the United States and the Soviet Union was sublated by the fall of the Berlin Wall more than it ended. The reversion of U.S.-Russia relations to their parlous state can by no means be called inevitable. Nevertheless, the collapse of the Soviet Union was a civilizational tragedy for Russia and consciously a reaction to it. Moreover, the structure of the new Russian state was deeply influenced by the Soviet state form that preceded it, with many of the same people and institutions. Regime change in Iran could conceivably lead to a form of Iranian Bonapartism, whereby the “deep state” of the Islamic Republic—the nomenklatura of the IRGC—seizes the reins of the state and turns Iran into a non-theocratic military dictatorship which is equally antagonistic to the West. It is equally difficult to see how Israel would realistically give up its state form, as a Jewish state, without the shedding of a great deal of blood—and how the Islamic Republic would not be blamed for that outcome, in one way or another.

The ‘cold war’ between Israel and Iran does not fit neatly into any category, and any analogy will be inadequate in critical ways. The distance between the two countries is enormous: there is no clear geographical point at which the two countries could face off, as they do not share any borders. They are almost comically mismatched in size: Israel can pose no independent threat to Israel, even on the political level, and would likely reconcile itself to the existence of an “Islamic Republic” would Tehran do the same with a Jewish state. The lands between the two countries only became contested zones decades after the onset of the antagonism, and the main instrument

of the Cold War—Iran’s ‘Axis of Resistance’—did not exist until around a decade ago. Both countries are also unconventional state-forms: the only Jewish state and the only Islamic Republic in the world. Both are products of political theory, and the horses to which the carts of entire civilizations are hitched. Both states seek to destroy one another through the constant application of political pressure—perhaps the critical distinction with the Cold War, coexistence was at least a hypothetical possibility—the threat of military force and its application are meant to serve as expedients to that ultimate goal. However, there are many factors that could lead our ‘cold war’ to go hot. For that reason, it is imperative that this cold war be understood on its own terms: comparisons with the Cold War should serve primarily to elicit the differences between the two historical events rather than their similarities.

If we accept the use of the term ‘cold war’ to describe the relationship of Israel and Iran, we cannot assume that it will be, like *the* Cold War, a storm in the night, with bouts of unsettling thunder and lightning that in the end pass into daybreak, or some sort of bad dream from which history will eventually wake unscathed. Such sighs of relief are a luxury afforded to the future; the present, aware of anxiety. A ‘cold war’ is nothing than a shorthand for a war that has not quite yet exploded; a loose term to describe a structural opposition. Especially in light of recent events, any confident forecasts of ‘coldness’ are delusional at best and reckless at worst. A better analogy for Israel and Iran is perhaps a volcano. We tend to call volcanos “dormant”, even though they on occasion trickle streams of lava or belch out plumes of ash. That they have not yet erupted does not guarantee the impossibility of disaster. As George Santayana wrote: “People never believe in volcanoes until the lava actually overtakes them”. In our ‘cold war’, there is a clear and present danger of an eruption that would be massive and fatal, with implications for the entire world.

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- ¹ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (Harper, 2013), 555.
- ² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922, 1*.
<https://people.umass.edu/klement/tlp/tlp.html>
- ³ Wittgenstein intended to convey the first idea, broadly speaking, although this is not the venue for an extended discussion of the philosophy of language!
- ⁴ The American scholar Stephen Melton notes, importantly: “Much of *On War* is a philosophical attempt to resolve the dialectical contradiction *between the unlimited violence of battle and the very limited political objectives of monarchical war*”. Here is the basis of Hew Strachan’s contention that the essence of *On War* is the tension of *strategy and tactics*, not that of *strategy and policy*.
- ⁵ Harry Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Presidio Press, 1982), 69.
- ⁶ William F. Buckley, “George Kennan’s Bomb”, *National Review*, April 4, 1984, 432
- ⁷ Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 17.
- ⁸ Op. cit.
- ⁹ Or arguably 1988, given the preponderant role of the United States in the Gulf War.
- ¹⁰ Bertrand Russell, Introduction, in Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 1922,
<https://people.umass.edu/klement/tlp/tlp.html>
- ¹¹ Robert Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver: Maneuver-Warfare Theory and AirLand Battle* (Presidio Press, 1991), 76.
- ¹² Lawrence Freedman, “Escalation, Red Lines, Risk and the Russo-Ukraine War,” *Comment is Freed* (Substack), April 24, 2024, <https://samf.substack.com/p/escalation-red-lines-risk-and-the>.
- ¹³ Jay Mens, “Two Types of Applied History,” *Journal of Applied History*, vol. 5, no. 2 (December 2023): 89–110.
- ¹⁴ Is this “the Great Satan” *avant la lettre*?
- ¹⁵ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World: Newly Revealed Secrets from the Mitrokhin Archive* (Basic Books, 2005). E-Book.
- ¹⁶ Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Angola, and Afghanistan speak for themselves.
- ¹⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, “Meeting the Soviet Challenge in the Third World,” April 8, 1983, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00153R000100080020-1.pdf>.
- ¹⁸ Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Psycho-nationalism: Global Thought, Iranian Imaginations* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 57. Yadullah Shahibzadeh, *Islamism and Post-Islamism in Iran: An Intellectual History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 46.
- ¹⁹ Khamenei.ir, “Zionists Deceived Jean-Paul Sartre into Writing Against Palestine,” April 15, 2018, <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/5560/Zionists-deceived-Jean-Paul-Sartre-into-writing-against-Palestine>.
- ²⁰ Shahibzadeh, *Islamism and Post Islamism in Iran*, *ibid*.
- ²¹ Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace, and Victory: Strategy and Statecraft for the Next Century* (Simon & Schuster, 1990), 205.
- ²² Ali Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled: How the Revolutionary Guards is Turning Theocracy into Military Dictatorship* (AEI Press, 2013), 204.
- ²³ Saeid Golkar, “Iran after Khamenei: Prospects for Political Change,” *Middle East Policy*, vol. 26, no. 1, Spring 2019, Middle East Policy Council, 60.
- ²⁴ “Senior Iranian figures, such as former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, have referred to Syria as ‘a golden ring of resistance against Israel,’ and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei-confidante Mehdi Taeb said that Syria is Iran’s “35th province...if we lose Syria we won’t be able to hold Tehran.”” Karim Sadjadpour, “Iran’s Unwavering Support to Assad’s Syria,” *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, April 24, 2024, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/irans-unwavering-support-to-assads-syria/>. See also Maj. Gen. (res.) Uzi Dayan, former head of IDF Central Command and National Security Advisor in 2014: “The Jordan Valley is the only truly defensible eastern border for Israel.” Uzi Dayan, “The Jordan Valley is Israel’s Only Defensible Eastern Border,” *BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 244*, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, April 14, 2014, <https://besacenter.org/jordan-valley-israels-defensible-eastern-border-2/>.
- ²⁵ Calcalist Special, “Hezbollah’s Price” (Hebrew), February 8, 2024.
<https://newmedia.calcalist.co.il/magazine-08-02-24/m01.html>
- ²⁶ Aleksandr Svechin, *Strategy* (East View Information Services: 1991), 297.
- ²⁷ See Sohrab Sobhani, *The Pragmatic Entente: Israeli–Iranian Relations, 1948–1988*, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2008)
- ²⁸ Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (Macmillan, 1973), 332.

²⁹ See Khamenei's 1991 speech: "Iran has decided that divine command should be the source of laws and the criterion for legislation. This is because Iran believes that dignity, independence, welfare and material and spiritual perfection of a nation lies in implementing divine command. The result is that – encouraged by the intervention of Zionist plotters – the leaders of the camp of arrogance consider Islamic Iran as their archenemy and they oppose it as much as they can". xxx

³⁰ As the historian Walter Lacqueur wrote, "Zionism... is the product of Europe, not of the ghetto". Walter Lacqueur, *A History of Zionism* (Schocken Books, 2003), 941 (E-Book). In the context of the Jewish question in particular, see Holly Case, *The Age of Questions: Or, A First Attempt at an Aggregate History of the Eastern, Social, Woman's, American, Jewish, Polish, Bullion, Tuberculosis, and Many Other Questions Over the Nineteenth Century, and Beyond* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

³¹ It is worth noting that the basic concept used by Khomeini was prefigured by the cleric Ahmad Naraqī in the early 19th Century in *Awaiyid al-Ayyam*; the framework is in part on the jurisprudence underlying the guardianship of a child or a mentally-disabled person, which the scholar Mohsen Kadivar discusses in *Nazariyeh-ha-ye Dowlat dar Fiqh-e Shia'* (Nashr-e Ney, 1998), 17-18. Another precursor is Muhqaiq al-Karaki's *Mata'in al-Mufrimiyya fi Radd al-Sufiyya*, which sets out a system of clerical supremacy. Psychonationalism Afshin 38-9 XX. On Khomeini in particular, see Yasuyuki Matsunaga, "Revisiting Ayatollah Khomeini's Doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih (Velayat-e Faqih)," *Orient*, vol. 44, 2009, pp. 101-121. On the conceptual framework of Velayat-e-Faqih, see Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, "Wilayat al-Faqih, Exigency and Presuppositions," in *A cursory Glance at the Theory of Wilayat al-Faqih*, (Ed., Sayyid 'Abbas Husayni), 2003, <https://www.al-islam.org/cursory-glance-theory-wilayat-al-faqih-muhammad-taqi-misbah-yazdi/chapter-1-wilayat-al-faqih>. See also Leila Brännström, "Law's Comprehensiveness and Sovereign Leadership: On the Juridico-political Thinking of Ayatollah Khomeini and Carl Schmitt," *Political Theology*, vol. 23, no. 1-2, 2022, pp. 75-89.

³² Francesco Maiolo, *Medieval Sovereignty: Marsilius of Padua and Bartolus of Saxoferrato* (Eburon Academic Publishers, 2007), 72-76 Franz-Reiner Erkens, "Vicarius Christi - sacratissimus legislator - sacra majestas. Religiöse Herrschaftslegitimierung im Mittelalter Erkens", In Martin Hille, Marc von Knorring, Hans-Christof Kraus, and Andreas Fohrer (Eds.), *Sachwalter Gottes: Der Herrscher als Christus Domini, Vicarius Christi und Sacra Majestas: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Duncker & Humblot, 2017), 255-300. "Innocenzo III collega spesso la dignità regale e sacerdotale di Gesù col titolo papale di *vicarius Christi*, senza, tuttavia, spingerla fino alle ultime conseguenze, cioè all'attribuzione di un'illuminata potestà nel temporale: la distinzione dei due poteri è mantenuta... Innocenzo III giustifica la sua autorità nel temporale *con la spirituale*... in forza del suo ufficio di vicario di Cristo, supremo signore del mondo." *La Civiltà Cattolica*, Anno 103, 1952, Volume 3, 537-41. The Islamic Republic does not distinguish in this way, however: there are no Iranian prince-bishoprics (mullah-satrapies?) or kings, and the distinction between temporal and spiritual power has always been porous in the history of Iranian political thought. There are also obvious differences between Christianity and Islam given their history (Christianity existed without a political-territorial form prior to its existence; this was not the case for Islam and certainly not the case for Shi'ism, which, as Hamid Dabashi points out, has its origins in an essentially political dispute). The similarity, though, is in the formulation of political legitimacy with the manifestation of a hidden and inaccessible spiritual power in temporal terms. Thanks to Harry Halem for this important point of nuance.

³³ "It is the mojtahideen and the *primus inter pares*, the Supreme Jurisprudent, who have a supreme knowledge of the political and religious law that can establish guardianship of the Islamic society. Other forms of government are considered usurping... The Vali e Faqih claims divine sovereignty *on behalf of the state* but is also bound to public accountability: without the acceptance of the people, even if it is righteous, it is not legitimate. This is, of course, intrinsically contradictory". Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Psycho-nationalism*, 108-9 .

³⁴ In the sense of countries based on political theories of their bookish founders: obvious examples include the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, the French Revolution, and the American Revolution.

³⁵ Hence the paucity of specifically "Iranian" content in the Iranian constitution and outsized emphasis on Islamic, and specifically Shi'a, political solidarity—Iran, per the Islamic Republic's ideology, is the dwelling-place of a world-historical movement.

³⁶ See also a compendium of speeches by Khamenei on exactly this issue, the (ominous) following in particular: "The Zionist regime is a regime that has been based on open violence since its illegitimate birth... There is no cure except the destruction of this regime... We propose a referendum of the Palestinian nation... [to] *determine the fate of the non-Palestinian immigrants* who have moved to this country in the past years". Khamenei.ir, "Wiping Out Israel: On Implementation", August 24, 2018, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=44012>.

³⁷ Speech in Tehran on October 5, 1994 In Ali Khamenei, *The Most Important Problem of the Islamic World: Selected Statements by Ayatollah Khamenei About Palestine*, Moasseseh Pajooheeshi Farhangi Enqlab Eslami, 2013. 39.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Laqueur, *A History of Zionism*, 304-5.

⁴⁰ “Today we are faced with a great hostile camp which consists of the powers of the world. This camp has formed in international centers of power – the financial and economic superpowers – which are mainly controlled by the Zionists and great capitalists. This camp uses everything that is available to it in order to confront the Islamic Republic. And unfortunately, there are some people inside the country who are affected by them”. Khamenei, *The Most Important Problem of the Islamic World*, 22.

⁴¹ This trope of course predates the Islamic Republic: see the rage of Jalal Al-e-Ahmad, one of pre-revolutionary Iran’s leading intellectual lights, after the Six Day War in 1967: “Because Nazism, this flowering achievement of European bourgeois civilisation slaughtered six million poor Jews in concentration camps, today 2–3 million Palestinian Arabs of Palestine, Gaza and the West Bank are to be killed to protect the capital of Wall Street and Rothschild Bank, and just because European intellectuals were complacent with Hitler, now Arabs have to pay back so that the people of Algeria, Syria, Egypt and Iraq don’t have the illusion of fighting back against colonialism and try to close the Suez Canal to civilised nations”. Cited in Hamid Dabashi, *The Last Muslim Intellectual: The Life and Legacy of Jalal Al-e Ahmad* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 231-2.

⁴² The day when Imam Khomeini (r.a.) wrote in his letter to Gorbachev that Marxism would be consigned to museums, certain people sneered. His prophesy was fulfilled in two or three years. Everything changed in less than one year after the demise of Imam Khomeini (r.a.). Why would such things be impossible? America’s power will decline as well. America will fall apart as well... Speech in Tehran on July 30, 1991 In Khamenei, *The Most Important Problem of the Islamic World*, 102.

⁴³ “Palestine will be liberated. Do not have any doubts in this regard. Palestine will definitely be liberated, and the people of Palestine will return to Palestine and establish a Palestinian government there. That Middle East will be an Islamic Middle East, just as the issue of Palestine is an Islamic issue”. Note the emphasis on the return of Palestinian refugees and the establishment a Palestinian government, in the context of an *Islamic Middle East*. Speech on February 27, 2010 In Khamenei, *The Most Important Problem of the Islamic World*, 63.,

⁴⁴ Seth G. Jones, *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2021), 15.

⁴⁵ “The usurping regime – which used to appear invincible and extremely powerful, relying on its army and weapons and on the political and military support of America – has been defeated twice by the resistance forces who are relying more on God and the people than military weapons. In spite of all that training and military preparation... the Zionist regime is heading towards decline and collapse and the signs of its incompetence are becoming clear against the strong wave of Islamic Awakening”, Speech on March 5, 2009, Khamenei, *The Most Important Problem of the Islamic World*, 54. It bears taking seriously this definition of victory and defeat. Iran and its allies have opted for a way of fighting in which defeat is the failure to vanquish and victory is the avoidance of defeat.

⁴⁶ For instance, CNN, “Netanyahu discusses regime change in Iran”, September 29, 2018.

<https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2018/09/29/labott-netanyahu-iran-regime-intv-sot-vpx.cnn>

⁴⁷ This is well documented in Yonah Jeremy Bob and Ilan Evyatar, *Target Tehran: How Israel Is Using Sabotage, Cyberwarfare, Assassination – and Secret Diplomacy – to Stop a Nuclear Iran and Create a New Middle East*, Simon and Schuster, 2023.

⁴⁸ Jay Mens, “Iran’s Implausible Deniability”, *Tablet*, November 26, 2023.

⁴⁹ “Dachtet ihr, der Löwe schlief, weil er nicht brüllte?” Friedrich von Schiller, *Schillers sämtliche Werke: in zwölf Bände (Zweite Band)*, M. Hesse, 1890, 157

⁵⁰ If Israel and Iran were indeed locked in a “Phoney War” and not a “Cold War”, might October 7 in the future be some political equivalent of the invasion of Norway? If so, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would bear the unfortunate historical burden as Neville Chamberlain. It is an open question.

⁵¹ Gray, *ibid.*, 40-41.

⁵² “Some people used to shout slogans in support of ‘realism’ under the illusion that the Zionist regime was invincible, and they surrendered and reached out to the occupation forces for concessions.... after the wave of awakening in the Islamic Ummah and after the blossoming of the sapling of Islamic resistance, that fake façade of power has crumbled, and the signs of incompetence and frustration have appeared in the structure of the usurping regime”. Khamenei, *The Most Important Problem of the Islamic World*, 48.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Jay Mens. "The 'Age of Normalizations'—An Overdue Post-Mortem." *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 2024, 1–12.

⁵⁶ Leonhard, *ibid.*, 76.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 62.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁹ Gray, *ibid.* 122.

⁶⁰ Strachan, *ibid.* 177.

⁶¹ The classic is Ronen Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran: The 30-Year Clandestine Struggle Against the World's Most Dangerous Terrorist Power* (Free Press: 2008)

⁶² "Iran's GDP Growth Slows Despite Government Spending and Oil Support," *Iran International*, February 27, 2024, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202402278547>.

⁶³ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Iran: Country Analysis," September 2022, https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/iran/.

⁶⁴ Saeed Ghasseminejad, "Iran's Inflationary Quagmire: Economic Challenges and Potential Instability," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, May 16, 2023,

<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/05/16/irans-inflationary-quagmire-economic-challenges-and-potential-instability/>.

⁶⁵ Nahal Toosi, "Iran's China Bet: Oil, Economic Leverage, and the Threat of Israel's Attacks," *Foreign Policy*, April 19, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/04/19/iran-china-israel-attack-oil-trade-economic-leverage/>.

⁶⁶ Ali Alfonch, "Iran: Republic of God in an Increasingly Secular Society," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, February 26, 2024, <https://agsiw.org/iran-republic-of-god-in-an-increasingly-secular-society/>.

⁶⁷ Valentine M. Moghadam, "Iranian Women, Work, and the Gender Regime," *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Spring 2018, <https://www.thecaireview.com/essays/iranian-women-work-and-the-gender-regime/>.

⁶⁸ Reza Gholami, *Secularism and Identity: Non-Islamiosity in the Iranian Diaspora* (Routledge, 2015).

⁶⁹ Ali Alfonch, *Iran Unveiled*, 166-174.

⁷⁰ Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 1-16.

⁷¹ CNN, "Iranian Lawmakers Urge Judiciary to 'Deal Decisively' with Protesters." November 6, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/06/middleeast/iran-lawmakers-judiciary-letter-protests-intl-hnk/index.html>.

⁷² Tasnim News Agency, "Ayatollah Khamenei: Role of Arrogant Powers' Policies in Recent Bitter Events in Iran Is Obvious." October 5, 2022. <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2022/10/05/2784035/ayatollah-khamenei-role-of-arrogant-powers-policies-in-recent-bitter-events-in-iran-is-obvious>.

⁷³ Khabaronline, "Ten Reasons for the Failure of the Thirteenth Administration's Negotiations: From an Ideological View of America to a Lack of Familiarity with Successful Negotiation Tactics and Methods" [Dah Dalil Shekast Mozakerat Dolat Sizardhom: Az Negah Ideolozhik be Amrika ta Adam Ashnaei ba Taktik-ha va Ravesh-ha-ye Mozakerah Movafagh]. August 11, 2023. <https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1789917/ده-دلیل-شکست-مذاکرات-دولت-سیزدهم-از-نگاه-ایدئولوژیک-سببه>.

See also Khamenei's speech, "Negotiations with the U.S." [Mozakerat ba Amrika]. Khamenei.ir. <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/newspart-index?tid=1045>.

⁷⁴ NPR, "Iran Acknowledges It Has Detained Tens of Thousands in Recent Protests." February 5, 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/05/1154584532/iran-acknowledges-it-has-detained-tens-of-thousands-in-recent-protests>. Maziar Motamedi. "Iran Unveils Plan for Tighter Internet Rules to Promote Local Platforms." *Al Jazeera*. February 24, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/24/iran-unveils-plan-for-tighter-internet-rules-to-promote-local-platforms>.

⁷⁵ This is the premise of Alfonch's *Iran Unveiled*.

⁷⁶ "[La mort du corps politique] Telle est la pente naturelle et inévitable des gouvernements les mieux constitués Si Sparte et Rome ont péri, quel Etat peut espérer de durer toujours?" Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social, Chapitre XI*, In Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Collection complète des œuvres de Jean-Jacques Rousseau, citoyen de Genève, 1780-1789*. <https://www.rousseauonline.ch/Text/volume-1-ouvrages-de-politique.php>

⁷⁷ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 11.

⁷⁸ Summers, *ibid.*, 108.

⁷⁹ Summers, *ibid.*, 66

⁸⁰ "Io fei gibetto a me de le mie case". Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, translated by Robin Kirkpatrick, Penguin Classics, 2013. Canto 13, Verse 151.

⁸¹ Gray, *ibid.*, 201.

⁸² This is a very broad topic, although a basic primer is Emmanuel Karagiannis and Clark McCauley, "The emerging Red-Green Alliance: Where political Islam meets the radical left." *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 25, (2013), 167-182.

⁸³ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Giuliano Garavini, *After Empires: European Integration, Decolonization, and the Challenge from the Global South 1957-1986* (Oxford Studies in Modern European History), Oxford University Press, 2012, 70.

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⁸⁸ Cited in Summers, *ibid.*, 114.

⁸⁹ Gray, *ibid.*, 205.

⁹⁰ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 129

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Central Intelligence Agency, "Meeting the Soviet Challenge in the Third World," April 8, 1983, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00153R000100080020-1.pdf>.

⁹³ Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century A.D. to the Third* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 41-42.

⁹⁴ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 2024 (1866), LitToGo, Part 3, Chapter 1.

<https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/182/crime-and-punishment/3406/part-3-chapter-1/>

⁹⁵ Joseph L. Strange and Richard Iron, "Center of Gravity: What Clausewitz Really Meant," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, no. 35 (2004): National Defense University, 25.

⁹⁶ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton University Press, 1984), 92–93.

⁹⁷ Al-Ahed News, "Messages of Logic and Certainty in Sayyed Nasrallah's Speech." [Resael al-Manteq wa al-Yaqeen fi Khitab al-Sayyed Nasrallah]. May 20, 2024.

<https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=69527&cid=124>.

⁹⁸ Robert Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver: Maneuver-Warfare Theory and AirLand Battle* (Presidio Press, 1991), 112

⁹⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, 596.

¹⁰⁰ The historian Michael Handel identifies two historical vignettes from modern American historical experience that are seemingly relevant to Israel's current predicament: "In the spring of 1951, the U.S. offensive in Korea... came to a halt on the ground by June 1951 as soon as the Chinese and North Koreans indicated their readiness to negotiate... In hindsight, it is evident that the Chinese, North Koreans, and North Vietnamese dangled the bait of negotiations in front of the Americans primarily to avoid defeat and prepare for the next round. *While the communists in each instance coordinated their diplomatic and military actions in support of each other, this was not true for the United States. In each case, a desire to terminate the war as quickly as possible and reduce casualties ironically prolonged the war and increased costs.*" In another context: "each time the United States began its negotiations with Hanoi in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it politely halted its strategic bombing... if an opponent makes the condition that operations must come to a halt before negotiations begin, his real motives are suspect. *Unless an agreement can be reached quickly or operations successfully renewed, negotiations and operations should always continue simultaneously until a satisfactory agreement has been concluded.*" Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought* (Frank Cass, 1996), E-Book.

¹⁰¹ G. L. Smolyan, "Refleksivnoe upravlenie — tekhnologiya prinyatiya manipulyativnykh reshenii" [Reflexive Control — Technology for Making Manipulative Decisions], *Trudy Instituta sistemnogo analiza Rossiyskoy akademii nauk* (ISA RAN) [Proceedings of the Institute for Systems Analysis Russian Academy of Sciences (ISA RAS)] 63, no. 2 (2013), 57-8.

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¹⁰³ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Cited in Handel, *Masters of War*.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Smadar Shir, "'Shichrur Bechol Mechir' Mul 'Ha'aska Hi Nitzachon LeHamas' | HaMishpacha Shel Omri Miran Chatsuya" ["'Release at Any Price' vs. 'The Deal is a Victory for Hamas' | Omri Miran's Family is Divided"], *Ynet*. May 22, 2024.

¹⁰⁶ Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver*, 159.

¹⁰⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, Act III, Scene II.

https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/play_view.php?WorkID=romeojuliet&Scope=entire&pleasewait=1&msg=pl

¹⁰⁸ Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace, and Victory: Strategy and Statecraft for the Next Century* (Simon & Schuster, 1990), 88-89

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 202

¹¹² A negotiated settlement has long been ruled out by Khamenei: “the Zionist regime is founded on coercion, violence and cruelty and it is moving forward on the basis of these characteristics. It could not, and will not, make any progress without cruelty and coercion, and yet you say Palestinians should make peace with this regime?! What peace? No one would fight them if they were not greedy – that is to say, if they returned Palestine to its real owners and went away or if they asked the Palestinian government to let some of them or all of them stay in Palestine.... Therefore, they want to make peace and use it as a stepping-stone for further oppression. If a kind of peace is established, it is just a break to prepare for another kind of aggression and transgression later on.” In Ali Khamenei, *The Most Important Problem of the Islamic World: Selected Statements by Ayatollah Khamenei About Palestine*, Moasseseh Pajooeshi Farhangi Enqlab Eslami, 2013, 20.

¹¹³ Gray, *ibid.*, 231.

¹¹⁴ John R. Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind*. Bradford Books, 1992, 97.

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¹²² Yoav Itiel, “HaPitzutz BeTzomet Megiddo: HaKvisim BeEzor Adayin Chasumim” [“The Explosion at Megiddo Junction: Roads in the Area Are Still Blocked”], *Ynet*. <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/h1rmstzt2>.

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¹²⁴ Yaniv Kubovich, “Revealed: The Iran-based Handler Behind the Pakistani Agents Who Targeted a Greek Chabad,” *HaAretz*, April 4, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-04-04/ty-article/premium/revealed-the-iran-based-handler-behind-the-pakistani-agents-who-targeted-a-greek-chabad/00000187-4cf4-dde0-afb7-7ef764040000>. *Al-Jazeera*, “Turkey foils alleged Iran plot to kill Israelis in Istanbul,” June 23, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/23/turkey-foiled-iranian-plot-to-kill-israelis-in-istanbul-fm>.

¹²⁵ Hurrya News, “Al-Qa’id al-‘Aruri: Sha’buna Lan Yankasir wa Ma’rakatuna Qa’ima Ma Damet al-Quds Muhtalla” [“Leader al-‘Aruri: Our People Will Not Be Broken and Our Battle Continues as Long as Jerusalem is Occupied”], February 13, 2023. <https://hurrya.news/?p=32024>.

¹²⁶ Gray, *ibid.* 30.