

# The looming crisis

BY EMANUELE OTTOLENGHI

The new normal for Iran and its proxies in creating provocations and America's insistence on responding to them by putting up a stronger defensive line, means that deterrence is eroding, not improving. For now, the much-feared escalation in the region is contained. Yet the calm may be brief and illusory. Tracing back the Biden doctrine is crucial to grasp this widening insecurity.

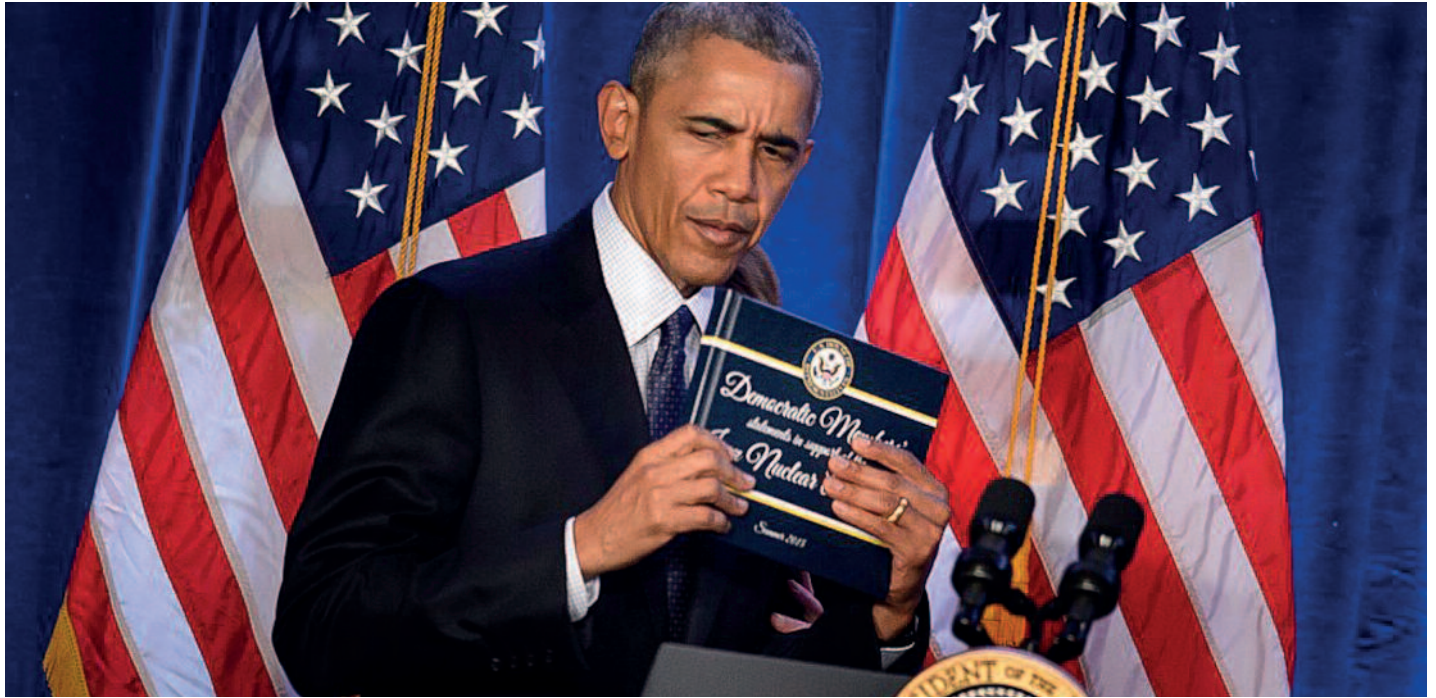
Assault rifles and missiles seized by the French navy lay on the deck of a ship at an undisclosed location February 1, 2023.

For four decades, the Islamic Republic of Iran has fought its adversaries through proxies, conducting a shadow war against the United States, Israel, and others. No more. Iran sees its enemies weakened, checked by its power and that of its proxies. Since October 7, it has unleashed its proxies in a conflict designed to sow chaos in the region and challenge Tehran's enemies. Of the many factors guiding Tehran's calculus, one merits our attention: America, the Ayatollahs believe, no longer has the resolve to protect its allies and defend its interests, because it has no appetite for escalation. And while chaos mounts, fomented by Iran's proxies, Tehran is moments away from becoming a nuclear weapon state.

It is difficult to see how the Islamic Republic of Iran, with its revolutionary zeal protected by a nuclear arsenal, could play a constructive role in pacifying the regional tensions it is currently fomenting. Its proxies will be able to shelter under the destructive power and diplomatic prestige of Iran's nuclear umbrella. Israel's ability to respond to Iranian aggression will be severely diminished. Western response options will be constrained. Moderate Arab states will hedge their bets. The regional prospects of normalization under the







**Obama's nuclear deal with Iran has with hindsight proven not to be very advantageous to the West.**

Abraham accords will wither, replaced by instability, conflict, and growing Iranian influence. We may be only months away from such a prospect. And the past six months have given the world a taste of what Iran may be capable of doing once it crosses the last technological threshold before going nuclear.

It is easy to see why, Tehran thinks the West is in retreat. The Obama administration negotiated a nuclear deal with Iran in 2015 that essentially left its industrial-size nuclear infrastructure intact; allowing Iran to keep the know-how and the infrastructure it needs should it choose to break out and become a nuclear weapon state. But there was more to Obama's presidency than his capitulation to Iran's nuclear ambitions. Despite publicly stating, in 2013, that Bashar al Assad, the ruthless dictator of Syria who ethnically cleansed his own country and tortured and gassed his own people with Iran's and Russia's assistance, had to go, President Obama ultimately opted not to dislodge Assad from Damascus. The joint Iranian-Russian effort to save their proxy worked and, although a small US military presence remained in Syria, a critical piece of Iran's regional axis of resistance was now safe.

Instead of containing Iran by blunting its nuclear ambitions and weakening its ring of proxies, President Obama set out a new doctrine to contain Israel and America's moderate Gulf allies, in the hope that by giving Iran its place in the sun Tehran would moderate its behavior. That's what the nuclear deal, in Obama's view, sought to incentivize. It optimistically set sunset clauses to the arms embargo – including missiles –

that have now expired, allowing Iran to pursue modernization and procure advanced weapons without the need to go through the hoops of sanctions evasion, costly procurement networks, and limited access to what it would take to turn its military into a regional superpower. Iran did not moderate. At the same time, Obama sought to contain America's regional allies, thinking that their opposition to the deal, Israel's in particular, was misplaced and could cost America more military engagement in a region it was seeking to disengage from.

Under Obama, the United States poured billions into supporting Israel's multilayered missile defense system. It seemed a strong pro-Israel position, and it was, to a point. But in fact, it was principally predicated on a weak commitment to Israel's right to defend itself – defense, yes, but no counterattack. Essentially, the Obama doctrine gave up the notion of deterrence – the ability to dissuade bad behavior with the threat of or the infliction of significant punishment – in favor of an enhanced ability to fend off attacks. Obama offered Israel a seemingly impenetrable defense system against rockets and missiles, to blunt Israel's need to launch massive retaliations against Gaza, or to invade South Lebanon, or to engage in pre-emptive strikes against Iran. But rather than discouraging Israel's enemies, this sophisticated Maginot Line of technological wizardry only encouraged them to seek a work around. On October 7, 2023, they finally found one.

October 7 should have swept away the notion that Israel, a nation under siege by enemies who wish to de-



stroy it, could defend itself simply by constantly reinforcing its ramparts. Israel should have been given free rein to reestablish deterrence by smashing Hamas, going after Hezbollah, and perhaps even hitting their patron directly in Tehran. To be sure, Israel had been engaged in a shadow war against Iran already, which involved significant kinetic action in the skies over Syria, plus the occasional foray into Iran. Yet, there were significant red lines that neither Tehran nor Jerusalem seemed to cross, before October 7.

Hamas' success on October 7 – penetrating Israel's defensive walls, seizing territory, slaughtering with abandon, taking hostages – could not have happened without Iran, its financial backing, its training, and its guidance. That's why, on April 1, Israeli jets struck a building in Damascus right next to the Iranian embassy. The target: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Qods Force commander Mohammad Reza Zahedi, an Iranian general in charge of liaising with Hezbollah in Lebanon, who was also behind the October 7 attacks. Zahedi was not alone: six other senior officials were in the building with him. In one strike, Israel annihilated Iran's entire senior command structure in charge of waging war against the Jewish state from South Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza.

This could have been another occurrence where Israel's exceptional intelligence, coupled with air supremacy and precision, would score a point in the shadow war with Iran, and Iran would seek to avenge its slain commanders through terror operations abroad. That was the case, in 2008 when Israel and

the United States, in a joint operation, eliminated Hezbollah's terror mastermind, Imad Moughniyeh, in Damascus, or in 2020, when Israel eliminated Iran's nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh, in Tehran.

But since October 7, 2023, the rules have changed. Iran no longer feels it needs to engage Israel and the United States by proxy and rely on plausible deniability to avoid escalation. It seeks escalation because it feels its enemies will back down. And much of this newly found assertiveness can be blamed on the Biden Administration and its nearly four-year record of strategic timidity. This timidity is not just confined to the Middle East, where the Biden administration sought to revive the flawed nuclear deal with Iran, letting its sunset clauses expire and refraining from implementing the sanctions that the Trump administration had reinstated; where it gave the cold shoulder to Saudi Arabia, picked open fights with Israel, and precipitously and disastrously retreated from Afghanistan. It is also apparent in Eastern Europe, where military support for Ukraine's resistance against Russian aggression is always tempered by fear of provoking Moscow. Instead of massively arming Ukraine for victory, Washington has shied away from rising to the level of aid needed to allow Kyiv to decisively turn the tables on Moscow, for fear of "escalation." Russia has escalated anyway, thankful to Washington for falling short on its promises of military assistance. The result is a bloody stalemate. The same logic guides Washington in the Red Sea, where the Houthis, another Iranian proxy, have managed to disrupt global commerce, thanks more to West-

**It is believed that terrorist militia were trained in Iran before the October 7 attack.**



Houthi rebel forces in Sana'a.

ern reluctance to launch a full-fledged military response against their harassment of commercial vessels than because of their unbeatable military prowess. The Houthis would probably be ineffectual, were it not for Iranian training, military supplies, and the presence of an Iranian spy ship in the waters of the Indian Ocean, guiding their strikes. But Washington will not sink it, because that would escalate matters.

America's timidity coincided with, and perhaps has contributed to, Israel's sudden vulnerability. While Iran did not order its proxies to join Hamas in a full-fledged war on all fronts against Israel, it ordered them to turn up the heat, including by targeting US forces in the region. And true to form, while Israel responded in kind, escalation on the Israel-Lebanon border has created an impossible situation where 80,000 Israelis have abandoned their homes in the country's north and cannot return due to daily bombings and fear of another October 7, this time from Lebanon. Israel cannot ignore this situation and survive. It cannot allow Iran's proxies to turn entire regions of its small territory into uninhabitable wastelands. It should be allowed to sweep into southern Lebanon and smash Hezbollah. But the Biden administration will not allow it, because it would be an escalation. Instead, Washington responded to this threat by deploying naval forces in the Eastern Mediterranean and signaling that they would help defend Israel. This move has certainly deterred Iran and Hezbollah from opening a second front but the deployment, helpful to Israel as it was initially, is also another instance of deterring through strong defens-

es. While Hezbollah has not launched a full-fledged assault on Israel's north, it has not retreated either back to its pre-October 7 positions; and it has shattered all previous restraints and red lines, with little cost. The new normal Iran and its proxies are creating, amidst America's insistence on responding to their provocations by putting up a stronger defensive line, means that deterrence is eroding, not improving.

Which takes us to April 1. Soon after Israel's strike, Tehran announced it would retaliate. It set the stage with a diplomatic offensive to justify an unprecedented direct attack against Israel, by claiming that the building struck in Damascus was a consulate (it was not), that it was a direct attack on Iran's territory (it isn't), and it violated international law (it didn't). Iran's invocation of the inviolability of diplomatic seats such as embassies and consulate is expedient and a tad disingenuous – ever since November 1979, when it seized the US embassy in Tehran holding American diplomats hostages for more than a year, Iran and its proxies have elevated the bombing of embassies and assassination of diplomats to an art form. They treated embassies and diplomats of their adversaries and enemies as fair game. Over four decades, Iran and Hezbollah have blown up US and Israeli embassies multiple times, ransacked Saudi and British diplomatic posts, and assassinated or sought to assassinate US and Israeli diplomats. Their outrage was selective, but it served the purpose of setting the stage for a direct attack on Israeli soil.

In the early morning hours of April 14, Iran launched a barrage of suicide drones, cruise, and bal-



listic missiles against Israeli territory. The attack carried over sixty tons of explosive and sought to test and penetrate Israel's multilayered missile defense system. The attack failed to inflict significant damage, with only seven projectiles eventually penetrating Israel's defenses and causing minor damage to military infrastructure at an air base and one casualty – a seven-year-old Bedouin girl. But Iran managed to shut down the airspace of Israel and neighboring countries in the region, inflicting significant financial costs. It also displayed the ability to coordinate a multi-pronged attack that tested Israel's multilayered system and included the participation of Iranian proxies in the region. Most importantly, it got away with a disproportionate response. Hours after the attack, President Biden telegraphed his worldview to Israel's prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu: "take it as a win," he reportedly told him, as a way of saying: defense is your only option.

To make sure the new strategy of deterrence by defense would resonate, the US and the UK joined Israel in the defense of its territory, helping strike down numerous targets. So did moderate Arab countries, including Jordan, whose air force engaged Iranian projectiles that entered Jordanian airspace. This assistance enhanced Israel's ability to minimize the damage through its sophisticated anti-missile umbrella. It also cemented the budding anti-Iranian, Arab-Israeli coalition in the region. But, more importantly, the joint operation fulfilled a key strategic US need: by minimizing the impact of the Iranian strike, Israel was not in a position where it would have to launch an attack on Iran.

The damage done to Israel's deterrence since October 7 meant that Israel, nevertheless, had to respond. On April 19, its air force conducted a precision strike against an Iranian base near Isfahan, causing serious damage to its anti-missile defenses and radar system. Israel's attack relied on limited but precise force, hitting a facility deep inside Iranian territory aimed at protecting Iran's nuclear infrastructure. It did so by eluding Iranian detection and dodging its air defenses. The message was received, and despite threats of further escalation should Israel respond to Iran's attack, Tehran backed down.

For now, then, the much-feared escalation in the region is contained. Yet the calm may be brief and illusory. What we have seen in the last seven months points in the opposite direction. Iran is emboldened. Its proxies are more aggressive and better armed. Every red line that existed in the region before October 7, 2023, has vanished. Everywhere, Iran and its allies are pushing those red lines through gradual escalation.

The Biden doctrine, thus, seems to be not to deter enemies by inflicting punishment. It is performative: we can deflect your jabs, so we do not need to knock you out. The problem, of course, is that this strategy does not work in the boxing ring. Never mind the Middle East.

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Locals walk past an anti-Israeli banner depicting missiles, in Tehran.