Iran-Israel conflict: A broken taboo

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OPINION
EXCLUSIVE

The confrontation between Iran and the occupying entity known as Israel has undergone three historical and epistemological stages. Each stage of the confrontation was based on a different type of epistemic condition, especially in Iran. Let's go over these stages in order to get a better understanding of how we got here.

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Disorientation, tradition, or the West?

For all intents and purposes, the first confrontation between the two sides can be attributed to the collapse of the Ottoman and Qajar empires. During that time, the groundwork for the establishment of Israel was being laid by the victorious countries of World War II in the lands partitioned off from the Ottoman Empire.
Iranians were experiencing a fundamental epistemological shift in their domestic and foreign policy, moving from a form of despotism reliant on religious tradition to a modernizing authoritarianism that sought to close the gap between Iran and Western civilizations. The main characteristic of this period was a fateful disorientation that made any intervention outside the borders impossible. This was while Iran and Israel had no technological advantage over each other.

Shah turns West, Israel gets armed

The second episode can be titled "the years after World War II". Around this time, Israel practically emerged and was officially admitted to the UN in 1948 as a member. Exhausted from years of being occupied during World War II and plagued by problems such as famine, coup d'état, and separatism, Iran made great efforts to adapt itself as much as possible to Western standards to gain their support, especially due to a fear of the Soviet Union. It should be noted that Mohammad Reza Shah, Iran's ruler at the time, was not alone in this endeavor; some influential clerics supported him as a Shiite king, though not all of them did.
Meanwhile, Pan-Arabism outside Iran reached its peak until its humiliating defeat by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War. However, the defeat of the Arabs became a prominent excuse for Iran's Shah to adjust his relations with Israel and strengthen his alliance with the West. However, Islamist movements and some leftists condemned the Shah for his policies regarding Israel, which caused a significant rift between the nation and the state. By this historical episode, both Iran and Israel had developed classic military capabilities, but Israel was able to achieve the technology to build the atomic bomb with the support of America.
In the third and final episode, the Islamic Revolution soon came to shift its ire from the fleeing king to Israel. The slogan of Imam Khomeini, the late founder of the Islamic Revolution, was the removal of Israel, which he introduced as a fundamental foreign policy strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding the Islamic world. Years later, we are gradually witnessing the conflict between the two religious ideological forces coming to a head.
The most important battlegrounds of this conflict were on two separate layers: regional recruits and military technology. As two warring countries that do not share borders, Israel and Iran need to master both layers for the final battle. Israel, which has the full support of the West as well as a handful of countries in the East, adopted a policy of de-escalation and normalization of relations with Iran's neighbors, successfully playing a role in regional crises such as the Karabakh war. Despite Iran's opposition, Israel was able to establish friendly relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan, especially with the latter.
It cannot be denied that siding with Israel provides the best opportunity and advantage for regional countries to achieve the highest technologies due to its integration into Western civilization, although Iran also seeks to do the same despite Western sanctions. Contrary to Israel's regional recruitment policy, Iran has always tried to keep its backed groups, like Hezbollah and Hamas, battle-ready against the enemy, especially in the face of the failure to unite the countries of the region against Israel. Indeed, all of the confrontational elements have, for the most part, created conditions that made direct battles between the two sides avoidable. However, October 7 and its subsequent events changed the entire playbook.

Motorists drive past a billboard depicting various Iranian-made ballistic missiles in service, in Tehran, Iran, on April 15, 2024.
● ATTA KENARE/AFP

Technology, broken taboo

In the entire history of the Iran-Israel hostility, the arrangement of the military forces of the two sides has always been in such a way as to prevent a direct military confrontation between the two sides. But in Iran's Operation True Promise of April 14, 2024, this taboo was broken.
Certainly, Israel's decision to eliminate the military wings of Hamas and Hezbollah ignited the fire of direct conflict. Technological advancements on both sides are enabling direct military conflict in new forms, such as drone or missile strikes, although neither side has engaged in full-scale conflict, yet. It seems that the trust of both sides in their high level of technological capabilities has played an important role in the initiation of direct warfare between them. However, due to the geographical distance, both sides are trying to use their most advanced war machines in battle. We see the significant role of technology, rather than human resources, in encouraging the initiation of direct war. Additionally, both sides strive to utilize the best technologies to reduce their human losses.
It can be concluded that Israel has been able to seriously damage the military arm of the resistance in the region by relying on its bunker-buster bombs — to destroy the tunnels dug by Hamas and Hezbollah — and other smart military technologies. On the other hand, Iran, using its missile and drone technology, is considering launching more direct attack on Israel to change the tide for its backed groups in the fight against Israel.
Although technology has paved the way for direct combat, this does not mean that technology, instead of the leaders of the two fronts, decides whether the war efforts should be continued or not.

Israeli military spokesperson Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari displays to the media one of the Iranian ballistic missiles Israel allegedly intercepted, in Julis army base, southern Israel, on April 16, 2024.
● ARIEL SCHALIT/AP