The Evolution of Israeli Military Strategy:

Asymmetry, Vulnerability, Pre-emption and Deterrence

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We are a generation that settles the land and without the steel helmet and the cannon's maw, we will not be able to plant a tree and build a home. Let us not be deterred from seeing the loathing that is inflaming and filling the lives of the hundreds of thousands of Arabs who live around us. Let us not avert our eyes lest our arms weaken. This is the fate of our generation. This is our life's choice - to be prepared and armed, strong and determined, lest the sword be stricken from our fist and our lives cut down.

--Moshe Dayan's Eulogy for Roi Rutenberg (April 19, 1956)[1]

Overview

When the nascent Israeli leadership met on May 14, 1948, in Tel Aviv to declare independence, the country was already being attacked by neighboring Arab armies. The clearly stated objective was to destroy the miniscule Jewish state, with its very vulnerable borders, before it could be established, using the apparently decisive Arab advantages in terms of territorial extent, armed forces, demography, and political influence. Israel overcame these hurdles in 1948 and in subsequent military confrontations, yet despite the development of formidable military capabilities, the inherent asymmetries and existential threats to the Jewish nation-state remain.

Given this environment, Israel's survival has depended on the development of appropriate strategic and tactical responses. The period from 1948 to 1973 was characterized primarily by large scale confrontations with the armies of Egypt, Syria,

Iraq and Jordan in different combinations. The high costs associated with such large scale warfare, in addition to Israel's ability to recover from surprise attacks such as those at the start of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, marked the end of such multi-front conventional wars. Egypt entered the peace process after being defeated in 1973 and Syria was left unable to launch major attacks on its own.

Subsequently, the main security threats shifted from major, multi-front wars to more non-conventional forms of warfare, ranging from the threat of mass terror attacks to ballistic missiles potentially armed with non-conventional warheads. Moreover, the geographical radius of the conflict also changed. The conflicts' "terror dimension" was based primarily on intense confrontations with Palestinian groups and with organizations such as Hezbollah across the border in Lebanon. In parallel, the long range threat posed by missiles and WMD (weapons of mass destruction) brought new, and more distant, enemies – particularly the Islamic regime in Iran – into the conflict.

Thus, while the details of the conflict have changed over time, Israel's existential threats, asymmetry, and a high level of vulnerability remain. This vulnerability manifests itself in geographical and demographic factors as much as political and ideological ones. In relation to the Arab countries and Iran, Israel's strategy is determined by its proportional "weaknesses" in territorial extent, demography, natural resources (compared to Arab and Iranian oil wealth), ability to obtain weapons and public sensitivity to casualties.

Israel's narrow borders and small territory gives the country little to no strategic depth, meaning that there is no room to absorb a major ground invasion, retreat and regroup for a counterattack. Any major attack from the East (Jordan and Iraq), North (Syria and Lebanon), or South (Egypt) that penetrated Israeli defenses could reach metropolitan Tel Aviv and Israel's Mediterranean coast in a matter of hours, ending

national sovereignty. These factors combine to make Israel one of the most militarily vulnerable countries in the world, leaving the Jewish state with few options other than military strategies that emphasize preemption and deterrence.

Israel's relatively small population and the inherent asymmetry in this dimension of the conflict reinforce its vulnerability. Between 1948 and the end of 2010, 26,654 Israelis were killed in wars and terror attacks.[2] While Israel's population has grown from 600,000 to more than 7.5 million between 1948 and 2011, the "confrontation states" involved in the conflict have combined populations exceeding 100 million. Thus, the Arab states are able to field large armies for extended periods, while Israel relies on a citizen's army and a reserve system in which a large portion of the population – men and women – participate. In extended conflicts or crises, long-term reserve duty places a very costly burden on the economy. This has increased the strategic emphasis on preemptive strikes, as illustrated in the 1956 and 1967 general wars, the 1982 and 2006 Lebanon conflicts and the attacks against nuclear facilities in Iraq (1981) and Syria (2008).

Throughout this period, Israeli leaders sought to enhance the country's deterrence capability. The undeclared nuclear retaliatory force associated with the Dimona nuclear reactor complex is often credited as a central element in bringing Egypt and Syria to limit their advances in the 1973 war, and preventing Saddam Hussein from using chemical and/or biological warheads on the Iraqi missiles launched in 1991.

Israel has also sought to extend deterrence capabilities in the confrontations with terror groups, including the PLO, Hezbollah and Hamas. What has been criticized as a policy of "disproportionate" response to attacks by these organizations is part of an

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ongoing effort by Israel to increase the costs in a manner that dissuades the terror leaders from continuing strikes.

In addition, the maintenance of technological superiority, in the form of a major qualitative advantage in comparison to hostile forces, has been a central element of the Israeli strategy. In the late 1950s, an alliance with France provided advanced weapons and technology to Israel, and from the mid-1960s, the US has been the primary external supplier of weapons systems and technology. Israel has also created indigenous development and production capabilities to ensure the availability of advanced systems. In some areas of military technology, such as precision guidance weapons, unmanned airborne vehicles (UAVs), space-based platforms for intelligence and communications, and other forms of advanced electronics, Israel has become a world leader. This technological innovation and self-reliance has further boosted Israeli security capability in what was, and remains, a high-threat regional environment.

Defeating the Conventional Threat: 1947-1973

In 1947/8, at the end of the British Mandate period and during and following the UN debate on partition, Ben-Gurion and the Jewish leadership were keenly aware of the vulnerability of the new state and the Arab preparations for war as the British forces departed. Abd Al-Rahman Azzam Pasha, Secretary-General of the Arab League, reportedly declared "It will be a war of annihilation. It will be a momentous massacre in history that will be talked about like the massacre of the Mongols or the Crusades."[3] As Yoav Gelber and other historians have shown, the Israeli leadership "perceived the peril of an Arab invasion as threatening its existence. Having no real knowledge of the

Arabs' true military capabilities, the Jews took Arab propaganda literally, preparing for the worst and reacting accordingly."[4]

Many in the West– particularly American and European officials and experts – agreed with the assessment that Israel would not survive a full-scale war. Israel's weakness and vulnerability to attack was the result of its very small territory as well as the absence of strategic depth (the territory necessary to conduct a retreat and prepare a counter-offensive). Furthermore, Israel's population (600,000 in May 1948) was also very small compared to the Arab states, and this image of weakness was only reinforced as many Jews arrived directly from the European camps following the Holocaust.

In contrast, the Arab states had much more territory, individually and collectively, as well as large populations (particularly Egypt) and standing armies, huge oil resources and funds to purchase weapons. It was therefore relatively easy to dismiss Israel's chances of survival. Although the actual imbalance was less asymmetric than predicted, in part because the Arab forces were poorly trained and equipped, the resulting conflict was very costly.

The war against Israel began immediately following the UN partition vote on November 29 1947, as terrorists launched large scale attacks in which more than 1,200 Jews were killed (one fifth of the total killed in the War of Independence).[5]

On May 15 1948, as British forces departed, the interstate dimension of the conflict began when the armies of Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Jordan (the Arab Legion) launched ground and air attacks (Military forces from Lebanon and Saudi Arabia were also engaged). The Arab leaders were confident of fast success, and focused primarily on their internal competition for "the spoils". They did not consider the Israel Defense

Forces (IDF) – which had only recently been created out of the warring Jewish militias (Haganah, IZL, and others) – to possess a serious fighting capability.

Furthermore, Israel was isolated and without allies. While the United States voted in favor of partition and the creation of a Jewish state, and President Truman overruled State Department advice and recognized Israel, Secretary of State General George Marshall and Secretary of Defense Forrestal told Israeli leaders that the U.S. would not provide any military assistance. Not only did the U.S. government uphold and enforce the UN weapons embargo on both sides of the conflict, it also protested when states, such as Panama and Switzerland, allowed arms shipments for Israel to pass through their borders.[6] In 1949, Britain and France joined Washington in the Tripartite Declaration, which formalized and expanded this embargo.

In contrast, the Arabs constituted a coalition and had powerful allies outside the region. Though embargoing arms to Israel, the British equipped, trained and led (through John Bagot Glubb) Jordan's Arab Legion, which conquered, occupied and annexed the West Bank of Jordan and East Jerusalem. The other Arab nations found alternative sources of weapons and were able to evade the Tripartite declaration.[7]

Israel was able to obtain some *ad hoc* assistance, primarily from Czechoslovakia (Operation Balak), which sold much needed war-surplus weapons including aircraft and rifles that were transported immediately to Israel with Soviet support. For the USSR, the survival of an independent Israel was seen as a means of weakening Western power and control in the Middle East. Israel received weapons and technology from France in the 1950s via a similar ad hoc alliance. These relatively minimal weapons stocks allowed the nascent IDF to defend many positions and to even take the offensive in some areas. Egyptian and Iraqi forces were stopped and pushed back from the southern outskirts of Jerusalem, and the IDF also took territory in the

Sinai. However, there were defeats, notably the loss of the Old City of Jerusalem, the strategic Gush Etzion salient south of Jerusalem and high ground along the border with Syria.

The cost of military success, though, was very high. More than 6,300 Israelis – one percent of the total population -- were killed, and many more were injured. Almost every family lost a relative, and one-third of the dead were civilians, including children and the elderly.

But overall, the soldiers drafted into the IDF - some immediately upon their arrival as refugees from the Holocaust - fought tenaciously, with a high level of motivation and emerged victorious using the available weapons. The widely shared core goals of independence, freedom, sovereign equality and national survival provided the basis for their motivation. Holocaust survivors arriving in Israel especially understood the need for a strong self-defense capability.

Already in 1948, Israel's limited arsenal was offset by a high level of innovation and leadership. In the place of artillery, which was not available, Israel invented a home-made weapon known as the "davidka," and when Palestinian forces ambushed convoys and closed the road from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, an alternative track known as "the Burma road" was carved out. Israel's young officers – Yitzhak Rabin, Yigal Allon and Uzi Narkis among others – devised creative tactics to defeat the Arab attacks. They moved troops and weapons quickly from battle to battle, exploited local weaknesses in Arab deployments and often used surprise to gain tactical advantages. The Arabs, by contrast, were poorly prepared, due in large part to the perception that the new Jewish state lacked the resources and capabilities to defend its territory.

When the Arab states agreed to a ceasefire, they did so as a means of gaining time to acquire new weapons, train forces, and develop effective leadership. Although

the Armistice agreements and UN resolutions included clauses in which all the parties pledged to enter into negotiations designed to result in a permanent peace, most Arabs leaders refused to negotiate directly with Israel or to recognize the legitimacy of the Jewish State on any terms. They imposed total boycotts on Israel, blocked shipping through the Red Sea and maintained a state of war on all fronts.[8]

Post-1948 Security Strategy: Deterrence and Pre-emption

Ben-Gurion and other Israeli leaders understood that despite the successful defense in 1948, Israel's basic asymmetries and vulnerabilities remained. The threat of "another round" was real, and the Arab objective of destroying Israel remained. Strategically, Israel was largely isolated, had no allies and faced great difficulty in obtaining much needed weapons. Although Ben-Gurion was largely successful in his efforts to develop cooperative relationships, including security and military arrangements, with Western-leaning states on the periphery of the Arab world (Iran, Ethiopia and Turkey), this did not offset the Arabs advantage in territory, population, arms and resources.[9] The Israeli response, therefore, emphasized deterrence and preemption.

After the 1949 ceasefire agreements, Arab attacks took the form of terrorism and *fedayun* (irregular forces) raids from Egyptian-controlled Gaza, the Jordanian-occupied West Bank and Syria. In these attacks, a number of Israelis were killed and, in the attempt to deter further attacks by inflicting costs on the other side, Ben-Gurion ordered the IDF to launch reprisals. For this purpose, special units, such as Unit 101 led by Ariel Sharon, were created. But this also led to internal controversy, particularly

after the Kibya incident in 1953,[*] with some critics arguing that reprisals increased, rather than deterred, Arab motivation to use terror.[10]

In seeking to deter attacks from large conventional forces, Ben-Gurion emphasized a strategy based on massive responses to attacks.[11] This was the origin of the Dimona nuclear program, which was designed to offset Israel's quantitative disadvantage in conventional forces and to convey the message that if Israel was faced with the possibility of destruction, the Arab countries would suffer the same fate.

In 1955, the threat of another round of fighting, led by Egypt, increased. After the Egyptian military overthrew the monarchy and took control of the country, Nasser moved quickly to modernize Egypt's armed forces, signing an agreement for Soviet weapons, including modern aircraft and tanks, to be supplied via Czechoslovakia. When Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, antagonizing the British and French, a secret agreement was reached whereby Israel would join the two European powers in a war against Egypt. The English and French sought to capture the canal and weaken Nasser. Israel wanted to stop the terror attacks from Gaza and degrade the broader threat from Egypt before its military had an opportunity to assimilate the new Soviet weapons.

This alliance with France, which lasted until the months before the 1967 War, allowed Israel to acquire French weapons and technology, including advanced combat jets, and provided the political foundations for the construction of the Dimona nuclear reactor.

In the 1956 Suez War, Israeli ground forces made quick progress in Sinai and defeated the Egyptian army. The United States and the Soviet Union intervened,

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[*] In October 1953, following a number of terror attacks launched from the Jordanian-controlled West Bank, including the murder of a mother and her two children, an IDF commando force led by Ariel Sharon entered the village of Kibya, under Jordanian control, in a raid designed to increase deterrence. Due to faulty intelligence, many civilians were killed, and this military operation was widely condemned, both within Israel and outside.

however, and forced London, Paris and Jerusalem to accept a cease-fire. Nasser and other Arab leaders saw this as an important demonstration of how a military defeat could be turned into a political victory through pressure from the superpowers. Under the threat of a variety of sanctions from the Eisenhower Administration, Israel agreed to withdraw from the Sinai in exchange for an American pledge to prevent Egypt from again blocking shipping through the Red Sea to the port of Eilat.

The 1967 "Six-Day War": From Preemption to Deterrence

After the Suez War, tension and low-intensity conflict, including terror attacks, continued and built steadily into the early 1960s with sporadic violence with Syria over the diversion of water supplies. Although Israel's policy of active response to military provocations sought to increase deterrence by demonstrating the costs of such clashes, the perception of Israeli vulnerability due to its fundamental asymmetries did not change.

The extent of the clashes increased and Israel's threat environment became more acute. To divert attention from Egypt's domestic, political and economic problems, Nasser focused on external targets, including Israel. In parallel, the formation of a united military command between Egypt, Jordan and Syria increased Israel's concerns. Fiery speeches referring to "throwing the Jews into the sea," false Soviet warnings of Israeli plans for an attack, Israel's decision to call up its reserves, and other factors accelerated the mutual fear of a surprise attack.

In May 1967, Nasser demanded the departure of the UN peacekeeping troops from the Sinai, and the UN Secretary General complied immediately. Israel was again left politically and militarily isolated when French President De Gaulle abruptly ended

cooperation and arms supplies and US President Johnson warned Israel that if it chose to fight it would do so alone. Subsequently, the US also halted all arms deliveries to the region.

Israel mobilized its reserve forces, meaning that a large percentage of the population was now diverted to military tasks, and the economy was paralyzed. Many analysts expected a war that would be far more costly than in 1948, and Israeli officials prepared for the possibility of as many as 30,000 casualties.[12]

A national unity coalition government was formed, and public pressure forced Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, who had no military expertise, to appoint former Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan as Defense Minister. Dayan and IDF Chief of Staff Rabin reminded the cabinet of Israel's vulnerability to an Arab invasion, its lack of strategic depth and the impossibility of maintaining reserve mobilization for an extended period. Consequently, the government agreed to launch a preventive attack.

Using the technological advantage provided by French-made jet aircraft and Israeli-produced tactical missiles, the IDF successfully destroyed the air forces of Syria, Egypt and Iraq, while ground forces advanced against the Egyptian troops in the Sinai. Based on false Egyptian reports of early success in overrunning Israeli territory, Jordan's King Hussein decided to join the war and his army attacked Israeli neighborhoods in Jerusalem and elsewhere. Israel had originally told Hussein it would not strike Jordan if he stayed out of the fighting, but after coming under attack, Israel fought back against Jordanian forces in Jerusalem and the West Bank.

The war ended after six days, and Israel took control over the West Bank (previously occupied by Jordan), the Sinai (from Egypt) and the Golan Heights (from Syria). Preemption was seen as a highly successful strategy, allowing Israel to defeat its enemies quickly with fewer than expected casualties. Furthermore, it improved its

defensive position for the future by capturing large swaths of territory that, for the first time, gave Israel some strategic depth.

Cease-Fire Lines After the Six-Day War

Israel before June 1967
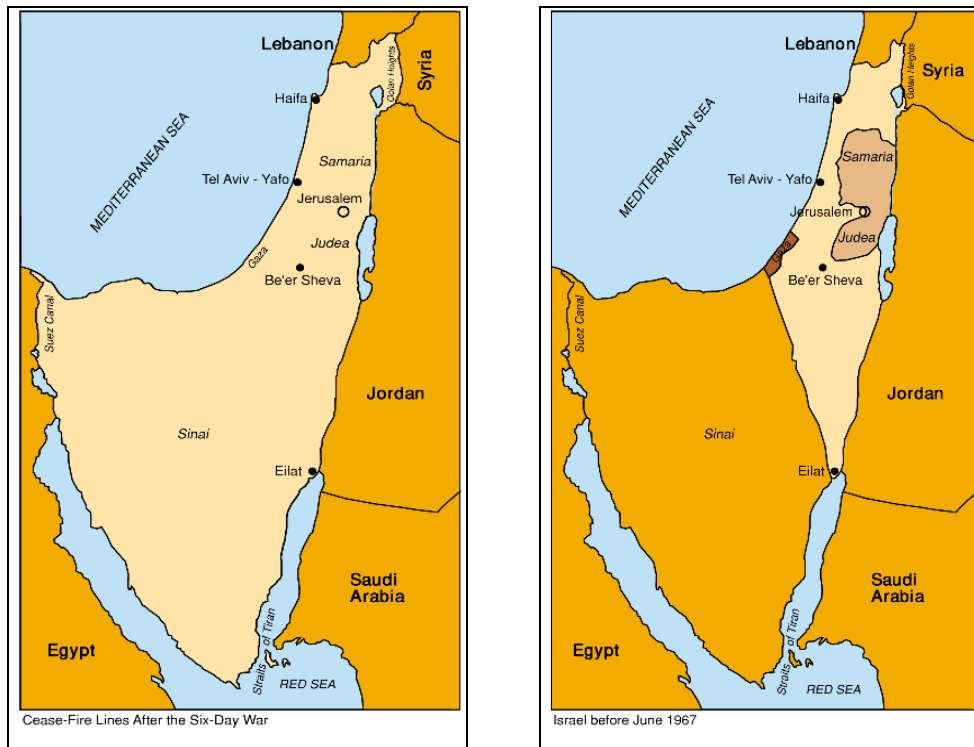
Israel went quickly from being seen as a highly endangered nation to the foremost regional power, and the U.S., which was bogged down in Vietnam, began to view the Jewish state as a strategic asset. The French aircraft and other advanced weaponry in the Israeli arsenal had been used with great success, but now, in place of Paris, Israel looked to Washington as its main source of weapons and technology to Israel. American tanks, advanced aircraft, electronics, and tactical missiles (air-to-ground, air-to-air, and other systems) - often enhanced by Israeli inventions and technological add-ons - became the foundation for the Israeli military capability.

This victory, coming after the national depression and fear of attack, led to confidence among many Israelis that the War of Independence had finally ended and that the Arabs would have no choice but to accept Israel. However, in their humiliation, the Arabs vowed to rebuild for continued warfare against Israel. Meeting in Khartoum,

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Arab leaders adopted the "three no's"– no recognition, no negotiations, and no peace with Israel.

Aided by massive Soviet arms shipments and training, Egypt recovered quickly and launched a War of Attrition in 1969. Russian pilots supporting Egyptian forces engaged Israelis flying American-made aircraft, and the conflict became a proxy war between the two superpowers. Given its small population, Nasser understood that Israel could not sustain a war of attrition, and Egypt continued to attack Israeli positions. The growing number of Israeli casualties forced Israel to accept a U.S.-brokered cease-fire in 1970 on terms that were less than favorable to Israel, and set the stage for the next war.

1973 – EXHAUSTION, THE END OF CONVENTIONAL WARFARE, AND PEACE WITH EGYPT

In October 1973, the Egyptian and Syrian armies launched a highly successful surprise attack, penetrating Israeli defense lines and inflicting heavy losses. This attack was timed for Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), the most sacred day of the year for the Jewish people, when most Israelis were fasting and in synagogues for prayers. Israeli intelligence had indications of an impending Arab offensive a few hours before the invasion began, but, under pressure from the United States, Israel decided not to launch a preemptive airstrike as it did in 1967.[13]

The Sinai desert, captured by Israel in 1967, provided an important buffer along the southern front with Egypt. While the Egyptian military achieved a major breakthrough at the outset, Israel had enough strategic depth to recover. In the north,

however, the Golan Heights provided a much smaller buffer zone; Syrian tank forces broke through Israeli defenses, and created concern that a continued offensive would reach the Israeli heartland within a few days and succeed in conquering the country. Based on this grave scenario and as Israel's situation grew more desperate, the Israeli leadership reportedly signaled a readiness to use nuclear weapons, if necessary, to prevent national destruction. However, once Israel deployed its reserve forces, the Arab advances, particularly in the north, were halted. Egyptian and Syrian losses on the battlefield prompted the Soviet Union to resupply weaponry to its allies. Meanwhile, Israeli forces were significantly degraded, and the loss of many aircraft and tanks led Golda Meir to request replacements from the United States.

With its stocks replenished, Israel launched a counter-offensive. In the south, Ariel Sharon's troops crossed the Suez Canal and began to move toward Cairo. On the Syrian front, the IDF recaptured the Golan Heights and expanded the area under its control. At this stage, the U.S., working through the UN, negotiated a cease-fire agreement.

The war ended in a stalemate without a clear victor. The Arabs had succeeded in striking a major blow, but Israel had fought back and was poised to threaten the capitals of Egypt and Syria. The thousands of deaths on all sides, the high economic costs, and the stalemate which ended the war changed the nature of the security environment for Israel. In preparing for this war, Egypt and Syria had used all of their available resources, and in the wake of this outcome, Israeli deterrence became much stronger against future attack.

Additionally, Egypt, in particular, regained territory and the honor lost in previous wars, allowing Sadat leverage to negotiate peace without humiliation. The direct talks that followed between Egyptian and Israeli officials opened a channel of

communication that led to a disengagement agreement. In contrast, the Syrian regime still refused to talk to Israelis, forcing U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to shuttle between Damascus and Jerusalem to reach an agreement to disengage forces on the Golan Heights. While Kissinger's follow-up talks with Syria went nowhere, indirect negotiations between Israel and Egypt continued and led to a second disengagement agreement in 1975. Two years later, Sadat accepted Begin's invitation to visit Jerusalem and his historic visit was followed, in 1979, by the signing of a peace treaty.

As a result of these events, Egypt ended its role as the leader of the anti-Israel coalition. Without Egypt, a large-scale conventional attack against Israel became far less likely as the other Arab states were too weak to risk going to war. Indeed, the 1973 war was the last between the ground forces of Israel and any Arab state.

LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICT, ASYMMETRIC WAR AND TERROR

While the 1973 war ended the era of large-scale combat between armies, the roles of terrorism and low-intensity conflict increased. Terror attacks had been a constant part of anti-Israel violence since the 1920s, and continued during and after the 1947/8 War, but had not constituted a major strategic threat.

This began to change in 1964, however, with the founding of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). After the 1967 debacle, the PLO, under Yassir Arafat, gradually increased its attacks against Israel as terror was a low-cost means of drawing international attention to the Palestinian cause. Terrorism had the added benefits of forcing Israel to expend more resources on security and also increased the psychological and economic strain on Israel's general population.

Most attacks originated from within the West Bank and Gaza, which had both come under Israeli control after the 1967 War. This provided easier access to Israeli cities, including Jerusalem, where a number of terror attacks were conducted. By operating from within civilian areas - using schools, mosques, hospitals and private homes for cover - the terrorists had protection through human shields. Other groups, such as the PFLP and later Hamas and Islamic Jihad, contributed to this form of low-intensity warfare against Israel, but Arafat and the PLO remained the main sources of large-scale terrorism from the 1960s through the 1990s.

These attacks, which killed an increasing number of Israelis, included airplane hijackings, bus bombings, kidnappings, hostage-takings (e.g., the attack on the Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics in 1972), attacks on schools (e.g., 22 children were killed in *Ma'alot*, on the Lebanon border in 1974) and other forms of terror.

This was a different type of warfare, requiring different training and weapons. Large tank formations and mobile ground forces were no longer required, and the mass army based on universal conscription could also be reduced.[14]

In this aspect of the conflict, as in the conventional dimension, Israel emphasized deterrence and pre-emptive attacks as well as the use of innovative tactics and advanced technology to offset territorial and other vulnerabilities. However, in this type of asymmetric warfare, in which terror groups operate from densely populated areas and use the general population as human shields, military responses – both preventive and designed for deterrence -- often lead to significant civilian casualties.[15] This forced the IDF to develop new tactics and weapons for use in a battlefield in which civilians were used deliberately as shields. Over time, Israel became the focus of intense criticism from human rights groups and the media for using "disproportionate force" and allegedly killing innocent civilians.

Initially, Israeli security forces were generally successful in responding to PLO terror tactics through interrogation, checkpoints and punishments directed against terrorists and their families. In many cases, perpetrators were found, tried and punished, while intelligence information prevented attacks. In addition, Israel also began to apply passive defensive measures at roads, airports, markets, schools, sports arenas, embassies, and other potential targets.

In 1970, a large-scale house-to-house operation in Gaza to locate weapons and explosives, led by IDF Southern Regional Commander Ariel Sharon, resulted in a sharp decline in attacks for a few years.

Following these Israeli actions, Arafat and the PLO moved the base for attacks to Jordan and, in September 1970, they sought to overthrow the Jordanian government and the Hashemite monarchy. After this failed, Arafat and the PLO were forced out of Jordan and moved to Lebanon, where they resumed terror operations against Israel and contributed to the outbreak of civil war in Lebanon and the subsequent Syrian intervention and occupation.

In Europe and other areas where the Palestinians had easy access to Israeli targets, security was increased (particularly around El Al aircraft, which ended hijackings). Additionally, Mossad "hit squads" sought out and killed Palestinians in Europe who had participated in attacks, such as the at the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre. Such attacks created greater publicity for the PLO and the Palestinian cause, and led European leaders to fear confrontation with the terror groups. Informal agreements were reportedly reached in which the PLO pledged to limit its attacks to Israeli targets while European security forces "looked the other way."

At the same time, Israel carried out-large scale operations against PLO training camps and related targets. In March 1978, after Palestinian terrorists from Lebanon

hijacked a bus and killed 35 people, including 13 children, Israel responded with

Operation Litani. The objective was to push Palestinian bases and armed attacks away

from the Israel-Lebanon border. Israel also formed an alliance with the Christian

Maronite forces in southern Lebanon, in an attempt to reduce the ability of the

Palestinians to use that territory for attacks against Israel. The Maronite militia,

operating under the framework of the South Lebanese Army, was trained, armed and

financed by Israel as a counter-weight to the PLO.[16]

In 1982, after a PLO terror squad shot and critically wounded the Israeli

Ambassador to Britain, Israel launched a full-scale attack which included entry into

Beirut and battles with the Syrian army that occupied Lebanon. Arafat and the PLO

leadership - who were based in, and launched attacks terror from, Beirut - were forced

to flee to Tunis, but Israel wound up losing many more soldiers than had been expected

and received a great deal of international condemnation for the deaths of civilians.

When Christian militia members murdered a large number of Palestinians, including

women and children, at the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in Beirut, many blamed

Israel.

In general, counter-terror operations were portrayed in the media and

international forums as "disproportionate," limiting Israel's ability to take decisive

action against the source of this threat.

Building on this advantage, Palestinian terrorism continued sporadically

throughout the 1980s and 1990s, accompanying the "Oslo Peace Process" that was

signed in 1993. Under the Oslo framework, Israel agreed to the creation of a Palestinian

Authority that included parts of Gaza and the West Bank to be put under the control of

Arafat. Internal competition to Arafat from the Muslim Brotherhood-based Hamas

movement also grew simultaneously. In 1995 and 1996, large-scale suicide bombings in Israeli cities undermined Israeli support for this political process.

In 2001, the scale of violence escalated dramatically after Arafat rejected an Israeli offer of a Palestinian state in approximately 97 percent of the West Bank and all of Gaza during the Camp David summit. During this "second intifada," which lasted until the middle of 2005, suicide bombings and other terrorist attacks killed more than 1,000 Israelis, while wounding more than 8,000.

The frequency and scale of these Palestinian attacks changed the Israeli security calculus with respect to terrorism. While in the past this form of low-intensity warfare was indeed painful, it was not considered a strategic threat until 2002 when 55 suicide bombings – an average of more than one per week – were carried out. These attacks hit throughout the country – in Tel Aviv, Netanya, Jerusalem, Haifa, Eilat - and took place in buses, restaurants, shopping malls, cinemas, wedding halls, and on busy streets. In response, security forces were deployed in thousands of locations, adding further to the budgetary cost of national defense and the emotional stress of living in Israel.

Led by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Israel overcame the threats posed by this terror campaign through major counter-attacks such as Operation Defensive Shield (2002) which targeted Palestinian terror centers across the West Bank. Israel retook control over some areas that were transferred to the Palestinians in the Oslo framework and isolated Arafat, preventing him from directing and funding the attacks. Israel also began to engage in targeted killings of major terror leaders as a means of preventing attacks and reestablishing deterrence by imposing a cost on the planners of these strikes.[17] By the end of 2003, the number of attacks and Israeli casualties had been reduced by half, and they continued to drop in subsequent years.[18] In this process, Israel again relied on its advantage in advanced technology, including precision weapons

launched from UAVs (unmanned airborne vehicles). U.S. forces later began using similar weapons and tactics to target al-Qaeda and other terrorists in Yemen, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Israel also began construction of a formidable separation barrier around much of the West Bank (a similar barrier was built around Gaza in the mid-1990s), making terrorist infiltration more difficult. This barrier proved highly successful in reducing the number of attacks and, in turn, the number of Israeli casualties.[19]

With little prospects for resumed peace negotiations, the Israeli government sought an alternative approach rather than being subject to international pressure. In addition, they were increasingly concerned about demography - that is, the possibility that Palestinian Arabs would outnumber Israeli Jews in the area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River - if all the disputed territories were retained. For these reasons, in 2005 Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, with the support of the majority of the Knesset, ordered the evacuation of all civilians and military personnel from the Gaza Strip. There was some hope that this would encourage the Palestinians to begin to build the infrastructure of a state while ceasing their violent campaign against Israel. The Palestinians, however, did not respond in this way, and rocket attacks from Gaza only increased.

The situation was exacerbated in 2007 when Hamas took control of Gaza from a weakened PLO, and the smuggling of weapons and explosives from Egypt increased greatly. Over the course of the next few years, thousands of rockets and mortars were launched from Gaza into southern Israel. Consequently, Israel returned to a policy of preemption, punishment and deterrence, launching military strikes at terror bases and rocket launching sites in Gaza and resuming the targeted killing of terror leaders.

In analyzing this history, Israel, although generally successful, cannot be said to have achieved a total victory over Palestinian terror campaigns, and the efforts, including occasional suicide bombings, continue, although at a much reduced rate.[20] This limited result can be explained by the political environment and the role of "soft power," which created hostility toward Israel, and support for the Palestinian cause. As a result, Israeli counter-terror operations were portrayed in the media as "disproportionate," particularly when Palestinian civilians were killed or hurt accidentally, and condemned by political groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch that use human rights rhetoric. The United Nations Human Rights Council, dominated by the 56 members of the Islamic bloc and their allies, also passed a highly disproportionate number of resolutions on allegations against Israel. [21]

Moreover, the political skills of Palestinian leaders like Arafat, and their ability, particularly in Europe, to portray themselves as the weak victims had a significant security impact. Criticism of Israel expanded, including from American opinion leaders and in the growing internal debate, and these factors inhibited Israeli leaders from taking strong action against terrorism in this asymmetric conflict. [22] For example, Israel withdrew all of its forces from Southern Lebanon in 2000, but instead of adding to stability, Hezbollah used this opportunity to expand its arsenal of ballistic missiles, provided by Iran and Syria. While Israeli leaders monitored this buildup, the IDF was constrained politically from launching preventive attacks.

In 2006, following a major Hezbollah attack in which two Israeli soldiers were kidnapped, the IDF response was too late to prevent retaliatory missile attacks from causing numerous Israeli casualties. The Second Lebanon War lasted five weeks, during which Israel was again subject to intense international pressure following allegations of disproportionate force. When the fighting ended, the terms of the cease-

fire allowed for a quick rebuilding and expansion of the missile threat in southern Lebanon. The agreement, embodied in UN Security Council Resolution 1701 (August 12 2006) , depended on enforcement by the Lebanese government and the United Nations multilateral force known as UNIFIL, and both proved to be largely ineffective.[23]

A similar process took place in Gaza following the withdrawal of Israeli forces in 2005 and a violent coup by the Hamas terror group to take control from the Palestinian Authority in 2007. As in the case of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas greatly increased the number and range of rocket and mortar attacks against Sderot and other towns in southern Israel. In 2008, there were more than 3,000 such rocket strikes, launched from densely populated civilian centers, including mosques, hospitals and even schools.[24]

Although Israeli civilian casualties increased, officials were reluctant to engage in a major military operation due to the expected international condemnations. In seeking to severely damage the ability of Hamas to launch rockets, the IDF would have to enter civilian areas and, as in previous operations, there would be numerous claims of human rights and international law violations. As a result, the government added protective structures and early warning sirens in Sderot and nearby communities. This proved costly and ineffective, however, in part due to the increased range and payloads of the rockets from Gaza.

On December 28, 2008, the IDF launched Operation Cast Lead, which was more militarily successful than the Lebanon war two years earlier, but was politically even more problematic. The Israeli military adopted new tactics and weapons to minimize civilian casualties, including making phone calls and dropping leaflets warning civilians to move away from Hamas targets.[26] Palestinian sources, however,

claimed that of the 1,400 deaths, 960 were civilians; Israel, on the other hand, stated that at least two thirds of the casualties were involved in combat.[27] As in the past, NGOs claiming a human rights mandate published condemnations based on the Palestinian allegations and accused Israel of war crimes. Journalists and European government officials repeated the allegations, and the UN Human Rights Council appointed Judge Richard Goldstone to head a commission to investigate Israeli (but not Palestinian) actions. Goldstone's report, published in September 2009, repeated the human rights allegations which had been rejected by Israel. After an intense controversy over the report's accuracy, Goldstone published a partial retraction, acknowledging the incorrect information on which many of the allegations were based.[28] Despite this retraction, the legal and political restraints on Israeli responses to terror and asymmetric warfare remain and will continue to impact on military operations.

Another major issue that could have a significant impact on Israeli counter-terror strategies is embodied in Hamas' success exchanging one kidnapped Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, for more than 1,000 Palestinians held in Israeli jails due to their involvement in terror attacks. Shalit was abducted in a June 2006 cross-border attack from Gaza in which two other soldiers were also killed. He was held captive in Gaza for over five years until the agreement for his release was reached in October 2011. The carefully planned operation by Hamas coupled with the IDF's inability to extract Shalit was a major blow to the Israeli military. Moreover, the uneven exchange agreement has led to concerns of renewed terror campaigns against Israel and similar kidnapping scenarios with the objective of releasing more jailed terrorists. Thus, the threat posed by mass terror continues to be a major Israeli security concern.

Israel's unique conflict environment of multiple asymmetries led to the development of a nuclear deterrent option based on deliberate ambiguity. This unannounced capability has been in place since the 1960s, and has received very broad support from across the Israeli political spectrum.[29] The implicit threat of unacceptable costs is seen as a highly successful strategy that has strengthened Israeli security, and also contributed to peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan.

Israel's nuclear development efforts began shortly after the 1948 War. Ben-Gurion understood that Israel's success in defeating the Arab armies and negotiating armistice agreements provided only a temporary respite. To prevent future attacks based of more powerful forces which could threaten national survival, a credible deterrent force was needed. Ben-Gurion, therefore, began the program to acquire a nuclear option as a "deterrent of last resort" and to create a "balance of fear."

Construction of the Dimona facility was inconsistent with the nuclear non-proliferation policies pursued by Presidents Eisenhower (1953-1960) and Kennedy (1961-1963). They repeatedly demanded that Israel end this effort, emphasizing the threat of a nuclear arms race between Egypt and Israel. Kennedy's policy was reflected in U.S. support for a world-wide agreement, which in 1967 resulted in the negotiation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

In a series of threatening letters and meetings in the early 1960s, Kennedy demanded that Ben-Gurion open the Dimona site (which was described as a research center) to U.S. inspectors. At first, the Israeli leader sought to avoid a confrontation and agreed to very limited access, but later, in 1963, Ben-Gurion refused to accept full inspection and verification. He resigned without responding to Kennedy's last letter on

this issue. Levi Eshkol, who replaced Ben-Gurion, also avoided the issue, while construction at Dimona continued.

For a short period under President Johnson (1963-1968), the friction with the U.S. decreased, in part due to changing American security policies as the Vietnam War escalated. In this period, the construction of the Dimona reactor was reportedly completed and went on-line, initiating the production of plutonium necessary for warheads. According to Mordechai Vanunu - an Israeli who worked in the nuclear program and later revealed some of its secrets - as well as other unofficial sources, a plutonium separation facility was also constructed at Dimona.

In 1968, when the NPT was opened for signature, Israel was one of the few countries that chose to remain outside of this framework. The NPT's language permitted the U.S. as well as four other international recognized nuclear weapons states at the time to keep their weapons. Israel was not a member of this exclusive "nuclear club," and therefore joining the NPT would have required the country to relinquish its undeclared deterrent option. (One consequence of not signing, Israel is not eligible to receive international assistance for civil nuclear development programs.) In parallel, Israeli "nuclear exceptionalism" drew renewed criticism from the United States, which tried to convince Israel to sign the NPT in exchange for conventional weapons, such as advanced aircraft and tanks. [31] Israeli leaders rejected this pressure, arguing that a nuclear option was essential for ensuring national security in that it deterred full-scale attacks mounted by regional armies.

In 1969, a confrontation between President Nixon and Prime Minister Golda Meir finally resulted in a compromise. Israel agreed not to declare or test a nuclear weapon, and the U.S., realizing that the Israeli strategic situation was unique, ended its public pressure on Israel to sign the NPT and open Dimona for inspection. This "don't

ask, don't tell" formula, based on acceptance of Israeli nuclear exceptionalism, significantly reduced the friction between the US and Israel, though officials have occasionally suggested that Israel sign the NPT and end its nuclear deterrent option, eliciting the standard refusal from Jerusalem.[32]

The effectiveness of the NPT has also been questioned after signatories such as Iraq, Iran, and Libya were found to have secret nuclear weapons programs. Since Israel did not sign the NPT, it could not be accused of violating any commitments. The stated Israeli objective is that once all of the countries in the region stop attempting to "push the Jews into the sea," a nuclear-weapons-free-zone can then be negotiated and Israel will be able to close Dimona and end reliance on a nuclear insurance policy.[†]

In the meantime, Israel maintains its policy of nuclear ambiguity and, in contrast to the other seven known nuclear powers, has never tested a nuclear device or declared itself to be a nuclear power. Israel also has never threatened its neighbors with destruction, other than the threat of a "last-resort deterrent option" to be used only in response to similar threats directed at Israel. (For example, in January 1995, during a Knesset debate on the Iranian nuclear threat, Deputy Defense Minister Gur warned that all Islamic nations would suffer the consequences of the fierce response if there is any use of non-conventional weapons against Israel. After an Iranian missile test in July 1998, Prime Minister Netanyahu noted that "I think it should be remembered that Israel is the strongest country in the region. It has answers, and I think that every country in the region knows Israel's power.")

This policy is also popular with the Israeli public, with polls consistently showing over 80% of the surveyed public supporting the policy of nuclear ambiguity.

The popularity of the policy is related to the perception that it has been very

successful. While the threat of nuclear retaliation did not prevent Egypt and Syria from launching the 1973 war, this was a limited attack, and after their initial breakthrough across the Suez Canal, Egypt was careful to avoid threatening Israeli national survival.[33] Nevertheless, in the first few days of the war Israeli losses were so grave that its leaders feared the destruction "of the Third Temple," and reportedly revealed preparations to launch missiles as a means of reminding Egypt and Syria (as well as the U.S. and USSR) of this capability.

In 1991, Saddam Hussein did not use chemical or biological warheads to attack Israel, but restricted the Scud missiles to conventional warheads that did not threaten national survival.[34] As in the case of the 1973 war, the nuclear option did not deter all forms of attack but it is credited by some analysts with having prevented existential threats, in this case the use of non-conventional warheads. (In most cases, evidence of successful deterrence is inherently impossible to obtain – wars or attacks that do not occur leave few if any traces. Conclusions that assert success in particular cases are based on inference and the elimination of alternative explanations.)

The nuclear deterrent capability is also credited with helping bring Egypt to the peace table by demonstrating that the goal of defeating and destroying Israel is impossible without risking mutual destruction.

While Israel's invisible deterrent is actually viewed as having promoted stability in the Middle East since 1973, the Iraqi, Syrian, Libyan and Iranian efforts to acquire nuclear weapons are still seen as particularly dangerous. The fear is that these regimes would use the threat of nuclear attacks to protect terrorist groups like Hezbollah, and to threaten Israeli national survival. In 1981, in response to Saddam Hussein's illicit weapon's program and the failure of diplomatic efforts to stop it, Prime Minister Menachem Begin dispatched the Israeli Air Force to attack and destroy the Iraqi

nuclear reactor. This operation, which was initially condemned by the U.S. and Europe, preserved the Israeli nuclear monopoly for many additional years and inaugurated the "Begin Doctrine," a policy which declared that no country in the region that maintains a state of war against Israel can be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons. A similar Israeli operation in 2008 destroyed a secret nuclear production reactor under construction in Syria with North Korean technology and assistance.

DETERRING THE IRANIAN THREAT

For many years, the Islamic regime that took power in Iran in 1979 has sought to acquire nuclear weapons in violation of its NPT commitments. These efforts accelerated in the 1990s, but it was not until 2006, when the International Atomic Energy Agency revealed Iran had not reported its nuclear research activities as required under the NPT and had been lying for 18 years while seeking components and information for use in nuclear programs, that Iran was found to be in non-compliance with the NPT and the UN Security Council imposed sanctions demanding Iran to allow inspections of its nuclear facilities and cease enriching uranium. The widespread international condemnation reflected the realization that a radical Iranian regime armed with nuclear weapons would pose a major threat to both Israeli and international stability.

However, this international action may have come too late to be effective. Iran is viewed as growing ever closer to achieving the capability of building a nuclear weapon while, simultaneously, developing missiles that can be armed with nuclear warheads and have the range to reach Israel, Turkey, U.S. bases in the Middle East and even Europe.

Iran has made no secret of its antipathy toward Israel, assumed the leadership role for radical anti-Israel forces in the region and explicitly called for the destruction of the "Zionist entity." In 2000, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei declared "that the cancerous tumor called Israel must be uprooted …."[35] In 2001, then President Rafsanjani referred to the establishment of Israel as the "worst event in history," and declared, "In due time the Islamic world will have a military nuclear device, and then the strategy of the West would reach a dead end, since one bomb is enough to destroy all Israel."[36] Israeli defense officials take such threats seriously and understand that if Iran succeeds in building nuclear weapons it will have the capability and desire to use them. In addition, given the intense religious and nationalist foundations of the leadership in Teheran, many policy makers are not optimistic about creating and maintaining a stable deterrence relationship with Iran. The radical Islamist core of the Iranian leadership is seen by some analysts as resulting in a greater willingness to take major risks in order to promote revolutionary and messianic objectives. This mindset is incompatible with a deterrence relationship based on maintaining the status quo.

Iran also supports Hamas and Hezbollah and, through them, could easily become involved in a nuclear crisis with Israel. For example, if Hezbollah were to launch another series of missile attacks against Israel, as it did in 2006, Israel could respond by striking the terror group's headquarters in Beirut. In that situation, a nuclear armed Iranian regime would be expected to defend its ally by threatening major retaliation against Israel. A confrontation between Tehran and Jerusalem could then become a Middle Eastern version of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis in which the U.S. and Soviet Union were involved in nuclear brinksmanship.

The absence of any form of communication with Tehran only adds to the factors which lead to instability in this tense relationship, and the limitations of mutual and

stable deterrence.[37] The 1962 U.S.-Soviet confrontation was resolved peacefully due to communications and negotiations facilitated by diplomats based in Moscow and Washington, journalists who carried messages back and forth and direct text links to exchange letters. None of these mechanisms exist in the case of Israel and Iran – there are no embassies, journalists, or hotlines to exchange messages to avoid escalation.

As in the past, and given the lack of realistic alternatives, Israeli policy makers are considering preventive attack and deterrence options in response to the challenge of the Iranian efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. Both approaches, however, are inherently problematic.

Unless international sanctions or other methods (including the spreading of computer viruses) succeed in preventing Iran from crossing the "red line" in development of nuclear weapons, Israel may be left with no other choice than to invoke the Begin Doctrine and launch a preventive military operation against Iran's nuclear weapons facilities. Some analysts have argued that Iran's policy of dispersing and protecting these facilities from attack (in contrast to the Iraqi and Syrian cases) would limit the impact of a preventive military operation, though others note that a series of highly accurate air and missile strikes could result in a lengthy delay in the Iranian effort.[38] Setting back the Iranian program by 10 or 15 years would probably be enough time for a new regime to emerge in Iran or give the international community more time to develop effective defenses.

There are dangers of Iranian retaliation, however, including major terror attacks, retaliation against Jews worldwide, and retaliation against the U.S., including against its forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, there is the potential for a sharp increase in oil prices and the resulting damage to the world economy that would cause, and a unilateral Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear facilities would generate international

opposition, and perhaps a rebuke from Washington. Still, not acting may be seen as more dangerous for Israeli long-term survival.

Alternatively, Israel may decide to strengthen its deterrence capability, if this is viewed as a better strategy.[39] In the deterrence option, past Israeli reliance on an unannounced and untested nuclear retaliatory threat may be seen to be inadequate and lacking the credibility necessary to influence Iranian decision makers. In this case, it is possible that Israel will end the "don't ask, don't tell" policy adopted in 1969, openly declare the possession of a nuclear deterrent, and demonstrate this capability by conducting a test of a nuclear warhead. This could be accompanied by more open development and testing of secure second-strike capabilities, such as a submarine-based nuclear retaliatory force, or missiles that are buried deep underground, protected by massive concrete bunkers. As in other areas, Israel can be expected to use its advanced technological capabilities to strengthen nuclear deterrent options, if this becomes necessary.

ASYMMETRY, SECURITY AND DETERRENCE: A FORWARD LOOK

In addition to the challenges posed by Iran, the unprecedented political changes taking place in the region also have the potential to impact the Israeli security environment. Following the end of the Mubarak era, Egypt may be ruled by a more hostile and activist leadership, which could lead to renewed threats of conventional conflict with the Arab world's most important power. A new regime in Syria, as well as the eventual return of Iraq as a significant regional actor will also have implications for Israel. Pessimistic scenarios posit aggressive military leaders who might use conflict

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with Israel as a means of rallying political support, while optimistic scenarios envision a focus on economic development and regional stability.

Although it is far too early to predict the nature of the new political and strategic order that will eventually emerge from the changes in the Arab world, the inherent asymmetry and lack of strategic depth that define Israel's security will not change. Thus, the combination of prevention, preemption, and deterrence are likely to remain the principal Israel strategies, despite the limitations of each approach. Technology will continue to play a crucial role in partially offsetting Israel's territorial and other limitations. As in the past, these factors will have to be adjusted to the regional conditions and threat environments that are formed. The degree to which Israeli leaders and decision makers are successful in making these adjustments will determine the ability of the Jewish state to continue to survive in a largely hostile environment.

<div align="right">***NOTES***</div>

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