



## Failed Deterrence and Misplaced Compellence in Gaza

By

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The October 7, 2023, Hamas surprise attack on Israel proved that Israel's strategy of deterrence was a failure. After [two destructive wars](#) in Gaza, in 2014 and 2021, the hope that Hamas endured enough was proven wrong. In reality, it was [biding time](#) as Israel's security apparatus grew overconfident and pivoted toward [other threats](#): Hezbollah, militancy in the West Bank, and the Iran nuclear program.

So sure was Israel in its southern security that intelligence reports were downplayed; the military even [redeployed](#) troops from Gaza prior to the October 7. The brutality of the attack and horror at the hostage crisis left Israel so shocked that it delayed a ground invasion for [20 days](#).

Despite the delay, calls for [ceasefire](#) and accusations of [genocide](#) existed before Israel's offensive began. All the same, every first-semester international relations student knew what would happen next: with Hamas no longer deterred, Israel's only recourse was [compellence](#).

Compellence theory is simply acting on the threat that keeps your adversary deterred. Israel needed to compel Hamas to surrender the hostages, disarm, and realize that attacking Israel is a bad idea—[restoring deterrence](#). For nearly two years since, Israel has tested compellence theory; at best, with mixed results, not only with Hamas, but across the region.

The Lebanese terror group Hezbollah launched its [own attack](#) on October 8, 2023, which by the end saw the [launch](#) of approximately 10,000–15,000 rockets and 2,500 drone attacks that displaced at least [70,000](#) Israelis and killed 75 soldiers and 45 civilians. Israel's effort to restore deterrence devastated Hezbollah, killing 2,500–3,000 fighters, eliminating the [majority](#) of its leadership, through an exploding beeper attack in advance of a ground invasion. [Seeing](#) their losses, the group agreed to partially [disarm](#) and [stay out](#) of further hostilities, being effectively compelled.

In Yemen, the [Houthis](#) likewise joined the attack on Israel with rocket and drone attacks, as well as targeting ships off its coast, causing significant [supply-chain](#) disruptions. The attacks prompted the United States (US) to designate them a terrorist group and launch an aerial campaign alongside the United Kingdom—on top of Israel's responses.

The Houthis endured [severe damage](#) to its offensive infrastructure and lost hundreds of fighters but still managed to occasionally launch limited attacks. The Houthis are more weakened than compelled.

Iran, the [financier](#) of Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis, for the first time acted against Israel directly. Retaliating against Israeli strikes, Iran [launched](#) ballistic missile and drone salvos against Israel in April and October of 2024. The tit-for-tat came to a head over [12 days](#) in June 2025, as the two exchanged strikes while Israel tried to destroy Iran's nuclear weapons program.

Though the damage Iran's nuclear capability took is [debated](#), what is known is Israel's [air superiority](#) destroyed nearly all of Iran's defense framework and eliminated several [senior military staff](#).

Israel endured significant damage as Iran managed to breach its defenses on a few occasions, and the two have since agreed to a [ceasefire](#), while simultaneously pledging readiness to attack in the future. So perhaps, they are mutually deterred for now.

Syria recently entered a new phase of its [civil war](#) following the downfall of Assad, an Israeli push to expand its buffer region, and the emergence of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) faction. HTS is led by Abu Mohammed al-Julani, an Islamic State affiliate who recently began targeting members of Syria's minority populations, largely the Druze.

Israel [intervened](#) to protect the Druze, striking HTS sites until Julani quickly [agreed to](#) withdraw his troops from the Druze-populated areas. Prior to that intervention, there were rumors of Syria joining the [Abraham Accords](#). While compellence worked to protect the Druze in the short term, it may have derailed a long-term peace deal.

Hamas remains the outlier. Ceasefire talks are again looking to [collapse](#). The message is that despite the [devastation](#), loss of [leadership](#), approximately [17,000](#) lost fighters, and thousands of civilians killed in the crossfire, it can endure more. Israel's attempt at compellence was so intense, that it sparked worldwide protests and allegations of [genocide](#). Yet, rather than agree to Israel's terms, Hamas continues to hold out, giving a statement that they will [continue to fight](#) until a Palestinian state is established.

The US attempted to broker multiple ceasefires, with some success in [November 2023](#) and [January 2025](#), but a deal to end the conflict remains elusive. If the US wants real results, compellence should target Hamas' hosts and financiers, [Turkey and Qatar](#).

While publicly [on good terms](#) with the US, the argument that Turkey and Qatar are state sponsors of terrorism would [not be difficult](#) to make given the support and protection they have offered Hamas. President Trump could threaten to add Turkey and Qatar to the list of state sponsors of terror unless Hamas agrees to Israel's terms of ending the war.

There are indications that this could work. At least publicly, the two countries recently joined with Saudi Arabia and Egypt in a [call](#) on Hamas to disarm and relinquish control of Gaza to the Palestinian Authority. This is a good first step, but the call has no "or else"-type clause that would actually pressure Hamas.

With that support gone, Hamas' political leadership's only choice would be deportation from its hosts which would likely jeopardize their finances and potentially put them within Mossad's reach or accede to Israel's conditions. Ever self-interested, the hope is they would be compelled to the latter. This type of diplomatic pressure directed at Hamas' sponsors could trickle down to Hamas' leadership and potentially be the last best hope for Gazan civilians as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu signals plans for a renewed military offensive in the enclave.

Whether deterrence is restored by Israel is yet to be determined. For the sake of civilians on both sides, let us hope it is restored and soon.

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