

Invisible Boundaries and External Aggression: Internal Fragmentation and Israel's Strategic Posture toward Iran

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ISSN 2831-2899 (online)

ISSN 2831-2872 (print)

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Israel's increasingly assertive posture toward Iran is commonly explained through the lens of external security threats. Iran's nuclear ambitions, regional proxy network, and longstanding hostility toward Israel appear to justify a security doctrine centered on preemption and, when necessary, direct military action. Within this framework, Israeli military operations are viewed primarily as rational responses to an existential danger.

While compelling, this explanation is incomplete. It treats Israeli behavior as a product of external stimuli alone and overlooks the extent to which domestic conditions shape strategic perceptions and choices. Israel is not only a state confronting external adversaries but also a society characterized by enduring internal divisions over identity, citizenship, religion, and the future character of the state itself. These divisions create uncertainty about national cohesion and long-term political direction.

This article argues that Israel's posture toward Iran is best understood as the product of external threat perception filtered through conditions of internal fragmentation. Identity divisions, demographic change, and political instability reinforce a security culture that favors preemption, escalation, and decisive action. Israeli behavior toward Iran is therefore not merely a reaction to external danger but also an expression of domestic tensions that shape how threats are interpreted and addressed.

Internal Fragmentation as a Structural Condition

Israel's political instability is often attributed to coalition politics or electoral design. These factors, however, are symptoms of deeper structural divisions rooted in competing understandings of identity and belonging. The Israeli state defines itself as both Jewish and democratic. While these principles are not inherently incompatible, they generate persistent debates regarding inclusion, citizenship, and political authority. The tension is particularly evident in disputes concerning the relationship between religion and state, the status of non-Jewish citizens, and the question of who qualifies as Jewish.¹

These divisions extend beyond the Jewish-non-Jewish divide. Significant disagreements exist within the Jewish population itself. Secular, national-religious, and ultra-Orthodox communities hold fundamentally different views regarding the purpose of the state, the role of religion in public life, and the obligations of citizenship. Debates surrounding military service illustrate these competing visions. For many

Israelis, military service represents a shared civic responsibility and a cornerstone of collective identity. For many ultra-Orthodox communities, however, military service is perceived as a threat to religious continuity and communal autonomy.²

Demographic trends are likely to intensify these tensions. Israel's secular Jewish population no longer constitutes the unchallenged demographic center of society. Both ultra-Orthodox and Arab populations continue to grow at higher rates, gradually altering the composition of the electorate and increasing the political influence of groups with distinct visions of the state's future.³ As these demographic changes translate into political representation, coalition politics increasingly reflect competition among identity blocs rather than disagreement about specific policy preferences. The result is a political system characterized by recurring instability and difficulty generating long-term strategic consensus. The significance of these divisions extends beyond domestic politics. They influence how Israeli society understands threats, vulnerability, and national survival.

Fragmentation and Security Culture

Israel's strategic culture has long been shaped by a powerful narrative of vulnerability and survival. The state's founding declaration invoked Jewish persecution, the Holocaust, the need for national sovereignty, and the armed assault confronting the Jewish community at the moment of independence. These themes contributed to a political vocabulary centered on national defense, self-reliance, and the protection of Jewish statehood.⁴ Internal fragmentation strengthens this orientation. When a society experiences uncertainty regarding its identity and future direction, external threats assume greater significance. Ambiguity becomes increasingly difficult to tolerate, and political leaders face strong incentives to prepare for worst-case scenarios rather than accept strategic risk. Under these conditions, preemption becomes more than a military doctrine—it becomes a political and psychological response to uncertainty.

The Begin Doctrine reflects this logic. In June 1981, the Israeli government justified its strike against Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor by arguing that a hostile state could not be permitted to acquire a capability that might threaten Israel's survival. Later scholars have described this position as a broader principle of preventive action against hostile nuclear programs.⁵ The doctrine rests on the assumption that waiting for threats to mature may impose unacceptable costs. This preference for decisive action is often interpreted

solely through the lens of external danger. Yet it is also reinforced by domestic conditions that heighten sensitivity to uncertainty and reduce tolerance for perceived vulnerability.

Iran as an Existential and Symbolic Threat

No external actor occupies a more prominent position in Israel's threat perception than Iran. First, Iran's nuclear program is widely viewed within Israel as an unacceptable strategic risk. Even the possibility of a hostile regional power acquiring nuclear weapons is frequently framed as a threat that cannot be managed through traditional deterrence alone.⁶ Within a security culture shaped by preemption, such perceptions naturally encourage consideration of preventive action.

Second, Iran occupies a unique ideological position. Unlike many regional adversaries, the Iranian regime has consistently challenged the legitimacy of the Israeli state itself. This rhetoric reinforces the perception that the conflict is not merely geopolitical but existential in character.⁷

Third, Iran's support for regional proxy organizations extends its influence directly into Israel's security environment. Through actors such as Hezbollah and other aligned groups, Tehran projects power in ways that combine conventional, unconventional, and ideological dimensions.⁸

Taken together, these factors elevate Iran beyond the status of a traditional adversary. It becomes both a strategic threat and a symbolic embodiment of the existential dangers that have historically shaped Israeli security thinking.

Internal Drivers of External Aggression

Although Iran presents genuine security challenges, Israel's willingness to pursue high-risk and aggressive strategies cannot be fully understood without considering domestic influences. One important factor is the uncertainty generated by demographic and identity-based change. As internal divisions deepen and existing political arrangements come under strain, long-term threats may appear increasingly urgent. In such circumstances, the perceived costs of delay rise while the political appeal of decisive action grows.⁹

A second factor is the unifying effect of external threats. Shared security challenges can temporarily bridge otherwise persistent social and political divisions. While external conflict does not eliminate domestic fragmentation, it can provide a common narrative around which diverse constituencies rally. This dynamic should not be exaggerated. Israeli leaders do not initiate military action solely to generate domestic cohesion. Nevertheless, ex-

ternal confrontation often creates political conditions in which assertive security policies become easier to sustain.

A third factor is institutional instability. Frequent elections, fragile governing coalitions, and disputes regarding constitutional authority complicate the development of consistent long-term strategies. Diplomatic initiatives and containment policies require sustained political consensus. Military action, by contrast, can often be implemented more rapidly and with fewer institutional obstacles.

These domestic factors do not create Israeli hostility toward Iran. Rather, they reinforce an existing strategic culture that already favors preemption and decisive action. Internal fragmentation therefore acts as a force multiplier, increasing the attractiveness of aggressive responses to external threats.

Risks and Limitations

An aggressive posture toward Iran is not without costs. Military action may delay aspects of Iran's nuclear program or disrupt proxy networks, but it also carries significant risks of escalation. Preventive strikes can strengthen hard-line factions within Iran, intensify regional instability, and encourage retaliatory action. Equally important, external aggression does not resolve the domestic conditions that help generate support for it. Identity fragmentation, demographic tensions, and political instability remain largely unaffected by military success abroad.

Indeed, repeated reliance on external force may ultimately reinforce internal divisions. Different segments of Israeli society interpret security challenges through distinct ideological frameworks. Military action that unifies some communities may alienate others, particularly groups whose relationship to the state differs from the dominant security-oriented narrative.

Consequently, security policy can become another arena through which competing visions of Israeli identity are expressed rather than a mechanism for achieving national cohesion. External aggression may temporarily obscure internal divisions, but it rarely eliminates them. This dynamic reflects a broader paradox. Measures adopted to reduce insecurity can, over time, contribute to the very conditions of insecurity they are intended to mitigate.

Conclusion

Israel's posture toward Iran is often interpreted as a straightforward response to external threats. While those threats are real and significant, such an interpretation overlooks the role of domestic conditions in shaping strategic behavior. Israel's identity fragmentation, demographic

transformation, and political instability create an environment in which uncertainty is pervasive and the perceived costs of inaction are exceptionally high. Within this context, a security doctrine emphasizing preemption and decisive action becomes not only strategically plausible but politically reinforced.

Understanding Israeli behavior toward Iran therefore requires examining the interaction between internal and external dynamics. External aggression is not solely a function of objective threat. It is also shaped by how a state understands itself under conditions of internal division. In this sense, Israel's posture toward Iran reflects more than the challenge posed by Tehran. It also reflects the continuing struggle to maintain cohesion within a society marked by competing identities, demographic change, and unresolved questions regarding the character of the state itself.

ENDNOTES

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GLOBAL STUDIES PROGRAM

The Global Studies Program is a new Marine Corps War College (MCWAR) program designed to deepen the knowledge of select Marine Corps University (MCU) students about strategic challenges the United States faces or is expected to face and to better equip them for success in their future missions. The program originated in Academic Year 2020–21 (AY21) as the Krulak Scholars Program, under the direction of the Krulak Center for Innovation and Future Warfare, with a focus on great power competition. With structural changes at the Krulak Center, MCU paused the Krulak Scholars Program after AY24. It was relaunched and rebranded as the Global Studies Program (GSP) under the leadership of MCWAR in AY27 and begins in September 2026.

Executive Summary

During AY27, a select cohort of participants from across MCU’s resident professional military education schools and eligible College of Distance Education and Training (CDET) programs will participate in the GSP, a selective, cross-MCU scholarly initiative designed to deepen understanding of a major global strategic challenge facing the United States through mainly unclassified interdisciplinary study, engagement with subject-matter experts, sustained seminar discussion, and the production of policy-relevant scholarship.

The AY27 GSP theme, “The Iran War: A Strategic Reassessment,” will examine the conflict as a strategic inflection point in Middle Eastern security, U.S. policy, allied and partner operations, maritime security, competing claims in and around the Strait of Hormuz, and nuclear nonproliferation. The program will move beyond event chronology to assess how the conflict emerged, how it altered deterrence calculations, how military operations reshaped regional dynamics, and what policy choices may define a postwar, continuing-war, or renewed-escalation environment.

The AY27 GSP will be organized around five broad areas of inquiry:

1. Origins of the Iran War. Historical and strategic background; the evolution of U.S.-Iran, Israel-Iran, and Gulf-Iran tensions; the Islamic Republic’s regional strategy; proxy networks; deterrence failures; and the road to open conflict.

2. The Nuclear File and Counterproliferation. The Joint Comprehensive Plan on Action; the consequences of the U.S. withdrawal in 2018; Iran’s subsequent nuclear advances; Israeli counterproliferation campaigns; Operation Rising Lion; and the evolving nuclear landscape.

3. Operation Epic Fury, Operation Lion’s Roar, and Escalation Dynamics. The campaign’s objectives, conduct, and aftermath; U.S. and Israeli target sets; Iranian adaptation; escalation dynamics; and the question of whether military action restored deterrence, widened the conflict, or established a new baseline for recurring confrontation.

4. Hormuz, Maritime Security, and Freedom of Navigation. Iranian claims, threats, and capabilities in and around the Strait of Hormuz; competing legal and strategic interpretations; freedom of navigation; and implications for energy markets, maritime security, and U.S. and partner force posture.

5. Strategic Futures after the Iran War. A forward-looking reassessment, informed by conditions in spring 2027, examining possible pathways including negotiated de-escalation, prolonged coercive conflict, Iranian reconstitution, regime adaptation, regional realignment, renewed escalation, and broader transformation of the Middle East.