Abstract

This study will aim at examining how the changes in Israel’s security environment affected the strategic usefulness of its nuclear deterrent. The Israeli nuclear deterrent was developed during the 1950s and the 1960s when Israel’s strategic setting was, mainly, dominated by state-centered security threats. Consequently, Israel, at the time, was mainly concerned with the possible symmetrical military confrontations with its Arab neighbors; something that would have created strategic value for the Israeli nuclear deterrent.

Yet, a closer examination of the evolution of the Israeli security environment since 1982 will reveal that Non-State Actors (NSAs) and asymmetrical forms of warfare, slowly but surely, have dominated the Israeli security setting. The year 1982 is chosen because it is the date of the last major military confrontation between Israel and another state (Syria in that case) in a symmetrical form of warfare. Since then, Israel’s major security threats originated from NSAs either operating from neighboring states (as in the case of Hezbollah in Lebanon) and/or Palestinian groups operating in Israel or from the occupied Arab territories in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The most obvious example of this new type of threats is the highly successful campaign launched by Hezbollah, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, against the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon, which eventually led to an Israeli withdrawal in 2000. In this campaign Hezbollah depended on asymmetrical forms of warfare that left the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) entangled in a long and destructive war of attrition.

In addition to Hezbollah, both the first and the second Intifadas proved to be a great security threat to Israel, as the Palestinians, generally and more so in the second
Intifada, devised and restored to asymmetrical means of warfare that proved hard to break using conventional military means.

This rise of threats stemming mainly of NSAs and asymmetrical means of warfare was coupled with the simultaneous and relative decline of state-centered security threats; which are threats mainly originating from states mounting regular and symmetrical wars. In fact, this relative decline of state-centered security threats initiated by a complex set of, often interrelated, political and strategic factors.

This study will aim, first, at providing a comprehensive overview of how and which context did Israel develop its nuclear deterrent and how was it related to the Israeli self-perception and strategy of deterrence. Second, the study will tackle the changes that took place in Israel’s strategic setting over the past three decades; discussing, in the process, the various political and strategic factors that led to the decline of the state-centered security threats and the simultaneous rise of NSAs as Israel’s main security threat. Finally, the effect of this change in Israel’s threat map on the usefulness of Israeli nuclear deterrent will be examined.