

# DECISIVE POINT

The USAWC Press Podcast Companion Series

## Podcast Transcript

C. Anthony Pfaff

### “Avoiding the Escalatory Trap: Managing Escalation During the Israel-Hamas War”

In this episode, Dr. C. Anthony Pfaff, interim director of the Strategic Studies Institute at the US Army War College, discusses his work on managing escalation during the Israel-Hamas War. The conversation covers the complexities of Israel’s deterrence strategies, the proposed ceasefire, and the implications of Hamas’ potential power dynamics akin to Hezbollah. Pfaff highlights the delicate balance required in deterring Iranian support for Hamas and the importance of diplomatic efforts in establishing sustainable ceasefire conditions and examines how Israel’s strategies can inform global conflict resolution, offering insights into the intricate dynamics of military and diplomatic engagement in international relations.

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#### Episode Transcript

##### Stephanie Crider (Host)

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I’m in the studio with Dr. C. Anthony Pfaff, author of “[Avoiding the Escalatory Trap, Managing Escalation During the Israel-Hamas War](#),” which was published in the [Autumn 2024 issue of Parameters](#).

Pfaff is the interim director of the Strategic Studies Institute at the US Army War College. He’s also a senior nonresident fellow at the Atlantic Council and a distinguished senior researcher at the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy.

Welcome to Decisive Point.

##### Dr. C. Anthony Pfaff

Thanks, Stephanie. Very happy to be here.

##### Host

How does Israel deter Hamas from future attacks should there be a ceasefire?

##### Pfaff

That’s a really good question, and the answer to that is a hard one cause that’s ultimately what’s hanging up the ceasefire in the first place. Currently, the way the agreement is supposed to go is a six-week term where there’d be a partial exchange of hostages. Palestinian prisoners would be released. Israel would withdraw partially from the populated areas of Gaza. Meanwhile, they’re going to try to reach an agreement, which would include establishing other conditions for a more stable equilibrium than the status quo before the war started.

And, that’s kind of what’s hanging up [the process] because in that space is where Israel has to have some kind of confidence that Hamas wouldn’t use that pause to re-arm, regroup and, in conjunction with Iran and Hezbollah,

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later on, not just launch an October 7th kind of attack but be able to launch a coordinated attack with other proxies like Lebanese Hezbollah, which is Israel's worst-case scenario. So, if they settle, how do they maintain that level of deterrence? And, that's hard to know. Part of what will have to happen would [not] be so much about deterrence, but impacting Hezbollah's capabilities.

So, they're not going to so much have to deter Hamas as much as dismantle its ability to conduct offensive operations. And, included in these terms are likely going to be removing Hamas from power. Hamas may agree to the latter—being removed from power—because they can then operate like Lebanese Hezbollah, unburdened from governance, freer to operate. That may not be exactly in Israel's interest. When it comes to dismantling their offensive capabilities, that might be possible, particularly if there's involvement by the international community in terms of providing observers and so on, and governance and aid and assistance to the Palestinians. But without that, it's hard to see how a ceasefire is going to be anything more than just a pause, and that's the problem. The question is going to be then is how do they deter Iran?

### Host

What role do you see diplomatic efforts playing in managing the delicate balance between military deterrence and escalation in this conflict?

### Pfaff

Very good question. They do that by lowering the threshold to agreement, or in terms of escalation, raising the cost of escalation. To the extent that Israel depends on US and Western assistance and political support, should that erode because of escalatory moves, it's going to become harder to do that.

Meanwhile, threatening that assistance if there's a failure to reach an agreement can also do that. But there's got to be good reasons for it. Simply threatening to withhold assistance without also solving the security problem that Israel has is obviously not going to be much of an incentive. It goes back to finding ways to set conditions to get to that agreement that gives Israel the confidence that Hamas will not be able to launch another October 7th attack—or worse, a coordinated attack with other proxies—but also [for] the Palestinians, the trust that they're not going to be continued targets of Israeli operations. That's another way diplomatic efforts can help is by helping clarify the things that both sides say—being clear about what they're willing to enforce and what they're not willing to enforce. And, they can do that in a way that lowers that threshold to agreement by [making] both sides confident that the ceasefire can be more or less permanent.

### Host

Can you elaborate on the specific threats Israel must develop to dissuade external support for Hamas without triggering further regional instability?

### Pfaff

Yeah, and this is the tough question because if you look at the last escalatory cycle, what did Israel do? Well, it attacked Iranians, attacked IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] officers and assets and facilities operating under the guise of a consulate. They were in Syria actively supporting Lebanese Hezbollah and likely Hamas as well, or at least they have every good reason to believe that's the case. The problem is when you start going after Iran directly, that is the definition of escalation.

So, there needs to be a way to differentiate the kinds of things that can impose the kind of costs that Iran will pay attention to without imposing the kind of costs Iran has to respond to. What I argue in the article, perhaps somewhat controversially, is that in international law, there's a really high threshold to hold a state accountable. And, it's really

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murky whether or not external parties’ personnel supporting an ongoing conflict are assimilated to a class of legitimate targets. So, on one side, that needs to be clarified. To the extent it is, assimilating them to the class of legitimate targets, then, should be a cost one can impose on that external party [and] is one way to impose the kind of cost that can increase your deterrent capability.

The idea here is, does this count as escalation, targeting that proxy infrastructure? Well, maybe. But, if you look at the last cycle, only sort of. Israel targets those IRGC leaders. Iran launches this huge barrage. Now, that has very little effect. The Israeli air defense has shot most of it down.

There’s a lot of speculation. A lot of people believe Iran did that deliberately. They did announce about a week before what they were going to do. They announced the kind of thing they were going to do, which gave Israel time to prepare. So, in a sense, it was escalatory. But if you noticed, in terms of impact, it was actually even less than the original Israeli attack. And then, what followed? Israel, after the attack, they said, we’ll consider the matter settled. Israel didn’t settle the matter. They fired some missiles inside Iran—but just a couple. So, each move, each response, wasn’t escalatory.

It spiraled downward, not upward. So, those are the kinds of things to look for when you are looking at the kind of things you can use to dissuade further escalation—and not every response is necessarily escalatory. So, you can shape it that way.

### Host

Let’s talk a little bit more about escalation management. How might Israel’s approach to escalation management be adapted for other global conflicts involving state-supported non-state actors?

### Pfaff

To be honest, I’m not sure that Israel’s engaging in escalation management at the moment.

### Host

Fair.

### Pfaff

Look at it this way. After that barrage, which again, Iran may have intended it to be not very effective but because it wasn’t, they’ve basically lost their deterrence. Now let’s talk about their deterrence against Israel. If that’s all [they’ve] got is the ability to shower them with missiles and drones, and Israeli’s air defense capabilities remain the same, that’s neither a credible nor capable deterrent threat. But, what emerges in these kinds of conflicts are actually norms that reflect equilibria between the two conflicting parties that provide a direction in which you can point de-escalatory activities. So, for instance, before this outbreak, Hezbollah and Israel kind of had an informal agreement, we’re going to call it a norm, that as long as Israeli attacks against Hezbollah did not kill civilians, Hezbollah would refrain from shelling northern towns in Israel. And, if they did, Hezbollah would shell towns in northern Israel in response.

The question now is, can we find a similar equilibrium between Israel and Iran, where each side still has the ability to respond to the other, but there’s a clear line they’d cross that then enables the other to escalate? If you can get that back, if you can get that established more clearly between Israel and Iran, you would have a way to support getting back to that normative basis—like you saw the attack on Majdal al-Shams.

Hezbollah basically claimed they didn’t do it. In fairness, it probably was a mistake on their part, but Israel kills Fuad Shukur, the Hezbollah commander. That’s escalatory. So, is that round’s complete, and they go back to that norm? Or is it going to continue to escalate? This, again, goes back to your question about where external parties can help.

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Getting them back to that norm still allows both to defend themselves and to respond to perceived breaches of the norm, but also gives them a clear line around which they can secure their interests but not escalate.

### Host

Listeners, you can download the article at [press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters](https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters). Look for volume 54, issue 3.

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Dr. Pfaff, thank you for making time to speak with me today.

### Pfaff

[It was] a pleasure, as always.

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