Episode Book

EPISODE #6277

Why Militaries Fly Long Sorties Just to Turn Around

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SYNOPSIS

Military demonstrations like long-range sorties often blur the lines between showing capability, deterring an adversary, and domestic political theater. This discussion explores the logic of aerial shows of force, using reports of an Israeli flight toward Iran to evaluate whether complex flight packages with tankers actually signal resolve. It examines airpower signaling research, the trade-offs of easily reversible threats versus ground commitments, and why proving resolve from the air remains notoriously difficult.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Flying that far to turn around is an expensive way to leave someone on read.



Corn

Daniel brings us back to the Iran and Israel thread with the reported Israeli flight toward Iran, followed by a turn before the border. Israel reportedly described it to Washington as a show of force. Daniel finds the alternative explanation more convincing, that Israel hoped Iran would fire first and create grounds for retaliation. His doubt is about the demonstration itself. If everybody already knows you have fighter jets, what does flying them toward somebody actually add?



Herman

The useful distinction is between showing that you possess aircraft, showing that you can assemble a particular operation, and showing that you are willing to use it. Those are different claims. A photograph proves the first. A long flight with tankers can help prove the second. The third is much harder.



Corn

Especially when the most observable decision is going home.



Herman

Going home can communicate restraint. It can also communicate reluctance. The aircraft do the same thing in both interpretations, which is why the recipient matters as much as the flight.



Corn

Then the military objective needs a verb more specific than impress.



Herman

The reported operation took place on October nineteenth. Dozens of Israeli fighters and refueling aircraft flew toward Iran through Syrian and Iraqi airspace, over eight hundred miles, before turning back short of Iranian territory. That is the factual outline in the reporting. We do not have a public mission order establishing the intention.



Corn

Tankers matter there. This was a package that resembled something capable of continuing, rather than a lone fighter taking a scenic wrong turn.



Herman

Yes. The Times of Israel relayed Channel Twelve reporting that Israel notified Washington beforehand and described it as a military exercise and a show of force intended to deter Iran. The same reporting carried the competing suspicion, attributed to American officials, that some Israeli officials hoped Iran would engage the aircraft.



Corn

An impression about intention, not a disclosed order to provoke a shot.



Herman

Correct. We should preserve that distinction. The domestic timing also matters. The flight came roughly a week before the October twenty-seventh election. That makes an electoral audience plausible, but it does not establish that electoral considerations ordered the mission.



Corn

I dislike how easily election timing becomes a universal solvent. A real threat can exist during a campaign. Equally, calling something national security does not remove the campaign from the room.



Herman

What would make you think the provocation explanation was stronger, Corn?



Corn

Evidence that the route or conduct made sense mainly if somebody fired. Otherwise, training, deterrence and creating an opportunity are all compatible with approaching and leaving. Daniel's suspicion is logical. I just cannot get from logical to proven by looking at the turn.



Herman

Nor can I. We also do not have an Iranian account confirming precisely what they detected or how they interpreted it. Visibility to Iranian air defenses was described as an expectation. That is different from having their radar picture.



Corn

Already a crowded operation. Aircraft, tankers, and several unverified inner monologues.



Herman

It gives us enough to evaluate the possible purposes, though. We can ask what each explanation would require without pretending we possess the cockpit recording.



Herman

A show of force is a formal military category. American Army doctrine describes flexible deterrence options intended to demonstrate resolve. It explicitly names reassuring allies, deterring potential aggressors, and gaining influence. Crucially, the threat should be credible and specific.



Corn

Specific would be, stop preparing this attack, because we can reach the assets supporting it. Not merely, notice our impressive aviation department.



Herman

Right. Well... the public need not hear the specific demand. It might travel privately. But someone on the receiving side should understand what conduct is being discouraged and what consequence is credible. Without that connection, visibility can produce anxiety without useful direction.



Corn

That is my objection to dismissing Daniel's doubt with a doctrine manual. A military has named the activity. Excellent. Militaries have also named committees.



Herman

You predicted my manual before I opened it.



Corn

You pronounce section numbers with affection.



Herman

They stay where I put them, unlike your bookmarks.



Herman

The doctrine establishes that this is an intended instrument, not that every use works. The strongest justification is informational. An adversary can know your inventory and still doubt your readiness, coordination, reach, or political authorization. A demonstration can change one of those estimates.



Corn

The tanker is doing more explanatory work than the fighter. The fighter says you own a fighter. The supporting operation says you can organize a distant mission without the whole thing becoming a meeting.



Herman

Tankers, coordination, timing, crews, maintenance. The capability lives in the combination. A formation arriving together says more than the sum of aircraft photographed separately. It may also show that a government has authorized forces to get closer to combat than normal.



Corn

Although Iran has rather more experience of Israeli capabilities than an audience at an air show. The claim that they need proof Israel can reach them seems weak.



Herman

That objection narrows the plausible message. It could concern readiness now, or willingness under present political conditions, rather than discovering that Israel has long-range aviation. Existing knowledge also decays. An adversary may believe an opponent is exhausted, constrained, divided, or temporarily unwilling.



Corn

I would still separate ability from willingness. I can stand beside the washing machine. That does not commit me to operating it.



Herman

Your commitment problem is well documented within the laundry basket.



Corn

No deployment has altered the balance.



Herman

This is where the airpower criticism bites. Abigail Post's Flying to Fail examined two hundred and ten cases of compellence and found that air signals were associated with less successful coercive threats than the alternatives. Her argument is that they can reveal limited resolve.



Corn

Expensive enough for the taxpayer, insufficiently expensive for the enemy.



Herman

Relative cost matters. Aircraft can deploy and return quickly. Ground forces may create harder commitments, expose more people, and remain in place. Naval deployments can persist. A reversible air demonstration may suggest that a state cares, but only enough to choose the option easiest to unwind.



Corn

Before that result gets promoted into a universal law, compellence means making somebody do something. Deterrence means stopping them doing something. Getting a government to surrender a position is different from discouraging an attack.



Herman

That qualification is indispensable. The finding challenges automatic confidence in air demonstrations. It does not establish that this Israeli flight reduced deterrence. Different objective, different setting, and these are observed crises rather than randomly assigned signals.



Corn

Also, taking and holding territory is a peculiar standard if your threat is to destroy a military facility. Nobody needs to occupy the centrifuge.



Herman

Airpower can make a very credible threat of destruction. The absence of ground forces becomes more important when the political objective requires holding territory or imposing a durable settlement. We should not borrow that criticism wholesale for every mission.



Herman

Would you consider this flight more persuasive if the aircraft stayed deployed somewhere forward?



Corn

More persuasive about commitment, perhaps. Not automatically better. You would also expose them, involve a host country, and make leaving politically harder. If the aim is restraint, reversibility is something you deliberately buy.



Herman

That is the tension. A feature that weakens coercive commitment can improve crisis control. Planners may prefer a message that can be withdrawn without a battle.



Corn

They are paying for an exit as well as an entrance.



Herman

Different audiences can read that exit differently. Washington sees advance notification and a decision not to cross the border. Tehran may see approaching strike capacity. Israeli voters may see readiness, restraint, or election theater, depending on what they already believe.



Corn

Those audiences are not neat boxes, either. Iran reads what Washington says. Washington reads how Israeli voters react. A private reassurance can become a public threat once the account leaks.



Herman

Communication can change as it travels. The operational question becomes whether the intended recipient updates the intended belief, rather than whether everyone at home agrees the demonstration looked convincing.



Corn

The message might never land, while every briefing says it did.



Hilbert

Hilbert's Mid-Show Haiku. Show of force. Fuel spent over empty desert. The message arrives before the aircraft do. Someone in a room decides it was worth it. The jets turn back.



Corn

The debrief has excellent attendance.



Herman

Observable consequences matter more than the label. Did the opponent disperse forces, stop a preparation, seek clarification, or change its posture? Even then, interpretation is difficult. Dispersal could mean fear of attack, preparation for attack, or a routine precaution.



Corn

Silence is particularly convenient. Iran does nothing, deterrence worked. Iran protests, the message landed. Iran prepares, they took us seriously. A theory that welcomes every outcome needs a firmer test.



Herman

Planners should specify the behavior they hope to affect beforehand. Otherwise the flight produces a story that can always be declared successful.



Corn

My cost objection is less about the fuel bill than what else those crews could have been doing. You can spend money and get useful training. You can also spend scarce readiness for a photograph nobody needed.



Herman

The proper comparison is the additional cost and risk against the alternatives. Aircraft hours, tanker availability, maintenance, crew workload, exposure, and the missions postponed all matter. We do not have a reliable price for this sortie, so attaching a dramatic dollar figure would be decoration.



Corn

Military accounting by adjective. Very expensive, exceptionally expensive, strategically expensive.



Herman

A long flight might simultaneously provide training value. That does not make its signaling component free. It means you should separate what the force would have flown anyway from the extra distance, composition, timing, and risk chosen to deliver a message.



Corn

Then ask why a quieter training mission would not have done. If the difference is visibility to Iran, the planner needs to defend that difference.



Herman

I would expect a justification along these lines. We want a particular hostile preparation to stop. We think the opponent doubts our readiness or willingness. This flight addresses that doubt more effectively than a warning alone, while costing less and risking less than an attack.



Corn

Provided that assessment exists. Otherwise, the presence of aircraft is being mistaken for a plan.



Herman

Cost alone never proves sincerity. A government can spend heavily for domestic display. A signal is informative when the choice would be meaningfully less attractive to a government without the willingness being claimed.



Corn

You were about to fall in love with the expensive-signal explanation.



Herman

I was giving it a respectful inspection.



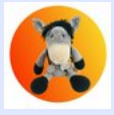
Corn

You already had a shelf cleared.



Herman

Fine. Expense can be waste. The recipient needs a reason to connect it to intent.



Herman

Consider the provocation hypothesis. The reported American suspicion was that Israel hoped Iranian forces would shoot, creating justification for retaliation. That would give the flight a contingent purpose. If nothing happens, return. If Iran fires, a different option becomes available.



Corn

That makes Daniel's reading coherent without requiring the entire mission to fail at deterrence. The planners could prefer Iranian restraint and still have a response ready. Or they could prefer the response opportunity. From outside, those look unpleasantly similar.



Herman

Schelling's brinkmanship logic helps here. He described aircraft buzzing one another in the Berlin corridor. Ordinarily, no collision. But a small chance of a sudden, grave, irreversible event can change decisions before anything actually happens.



Corn

Risk is doing the coercion. Nobody needs to intend the collision for the possibility to matter.



Herman

Yes... although I would narrow that. Deliberately creating risk is different from merely accepting the ordinary risk of a mission. We cannot infer the first solely because the second exists.



Corn

The contemporary reporting pointed out the apparent contradiction. Israeli officials warned about miscalculation, while aircraft approached a place where Iranian air defenses were expected to notice them. That could be carefully controlled pressure. It could also make a nervous operator's mistake more consequential.



Herman

The distinction depends on details we do not have, including instructions, communications, and how each side interpreted the approach. Advance notice to Washington reduces one uncertainty. It does not remove uncertainty in an Iranian command post.



Corn

A warning sent to your ally is not automatically a warning received by your adversary.



Herman

What would you accept as a sensible reason to take that risk, Corn?



Corn

Preventing a substantially worse, reasonably imminent confrontation. Not merely improving the mood at a cabinet meeting. I would want to know what danger the flight was expected to reduce, and why a diplomatic warning could not reduce it with less chance of a shot.



Herman

A planner might answer that words had lost credibility. Or that demonstrating preparation made a private warning believable. But that answer needs an assessment of the adversary, not a general claim that strength always speaks for itself.



Corn

Strength frequently needs an interpreter.



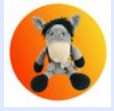
Herman

Provocation also interacts with the American audience. If Washington opposed renewed fighting, Iranian fire might change the political argument. That is a possible logic, not proof of a plan. American decision-makers might instead regard the approach as manufacturing the very incident they wanted avoided.



Corn

Getting shot at does not erase the flight before the shot. Allies can remember the opening paragraph.



Herman

Nor does it automatically settle the legal or strategic case for whatever follows. A contingent option is still subject to decisions. There is no machine that turns an incoming missile into unanimous permission.



Corn

Domestic politics complicates the accounting further. The sortie was shortly before the election. Commentary questioning Netanyahu's threat framing treats that timing as central. I think it deserves scrutiny without pretending the calendar tells us what Iranian forces were doing.



Herman

A genuine security objective and an electoral benefit can coexist. The important question is whether the political benefit changed the military choice. Would the government authorize the same mission on the same intelligence after the election?



Corn

Difficult to observe. More useful than assuming either immaculate military judgment or pure campaign theater, though.



Herman

The audience imposing the tightest limit may tell us more than the audience receiving the loudest message. Washington might constrain escalation. Iran's posture might constrain the route. Domestic politics might constrain how restraint is presented.



Corn

A public demonstration can even make restraint harder next time. If voters hear that you have drawn a line, they may expect you to enforce a line you intended only to suggest.



Herman

That is a real political cost, though air demonstrations can be easier to walk back than other deployments. The task is to communicate enough willingness to deter without promising an automatic war.



Corn

An impractical standard for a neighborhood visibility patrol, let alone a military. Everyone has to know what the display means, while half the value comes from leaving something uncertain.



Herman

Perfect agreement is impractical. A shared understanding of the particular behavior being discouraged is a more realistic aim. The patrol does not need a theory of every possible incident. It needs the person watching to understand what happens at this gate.



Hilbert

That sounds right, Corn. My visibility patrol is having trouble with the gate this month. Gerald supplies a raccoon for the Tuesday circuit. It is his raccoon. Our arrangement is forty shekels a night and I return it before the pharmacy closes. We walk the block in yellow jackets. I have been doing the circuit for years. The raccoon is new. Gerald says it gives the patrol local knowledge. It spends most of the evening inside the recycling enclosure.



Corn

Your visible presence has taken cover.



Hilbert

It is on the attendance sheet. The committee requires six participants and we have five. Gerald signs for it. Herman, you separate capability from willingness very carefully. The raccoon can open the gate. It will not open it while anyone is watching. Gerald charges the same either way. The jackets say neighborhood watch on the back. The raccoon's jacket says supervisor. That is Gerald's condition, not mine.



Herman

Then Gerald is supplying both a participant and the person certifying participation.



Hilbert

He sends the invoice as well. I am disputing Tuesday because the supervisor spends forty-seven minutes in a bin. The committee says that counts as inspecting a vulnerable location. Nobody is stealing anything from that bin while it is in there. My torch goes flat at nine. We finish the circuit using the light from the pharmacy sign. The chairman wants a photograph at every gate. We are now stopping longer for photographs than for gates.



Corn

Gerald can raise the price without supplying a different patrol. He only has to refuse to sign the sixth space.



Hilbert

Fifty shekels from next Tuesday. He says the signature is included.



Herman

A useful question for the next reported demonstration is whether its planners can name a changed behavior, rather than merely produce evidence that the operation took place. This sortie could serve deterrence, training, political presentation, and a contingent response option together. The reporting does not establish which purpose drove the decision.



Corn

My answer to Daniel is that a show of force is a real instrument, but the name does not justify the expense. The justification has to connect this display to a particular decision someone else might make.



Herman

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing the show.



Corn

If you enjoyed this one, try episode eighteen fifty-three, Emergency Symposium on the Iran-Israel-US Crisis; episode fourteen oh eight, Israel Wartime Readiness Field Guide; and episode twenty-two eleven, How Iran Lost the Air War in Six Weeks. This has been My Weird Prompts, the human-AI collaboration podcast.



Herman

If you enjoy these conversations, leave a review wherever you listen. It helps people find us.



Corn

See you tomorrow.

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