By George Friedman

Last week's events off the coast of Israel continue to resonate. Turkish-Israeli relations have not quite collapsed since then but are at their lowest level since Israel's founding. U.S.-Israeli tensions have emerged, and European hostility toward Israel continues to intensify. The question has now become whether substantial consequences will follow from the incident. Put differently, the question is whether and how it will be exploited beyond the arena of public opinion.

The most significant threat to Israel would, of course, be military. International criticism is not without significance, but nations do not change direction absent direct threats to their interests. But powers outside the region are unlikely to exert military power against Israel, and even significant economic or political sanctions are unlikely to happen. Apart from the desire of outside powers to limit their involvement, this is rooted in the fact that significant actions are unlikely from inside the region either.

The first generations of Israelis lived under the threat of conventional military defeat by neighboring countries. More recent generations still faced threats, but not this one. Israel is operating in an advantageous strategic context save for the arena of public opinion and diplomatic relations and the question of Iranian nuclear weapons. All of these issues are significant, but none is as immediate a threat as the specter of a defeat in conventional warfare had been. Israel's regional enemies are so profoundly divided among themselves and have such divergent relations with Israel that an effective coalition against Israel does not exist — and is unlikely to arise in the near future.

Given this, the probability of an effective, as opposed to rhetorical, shift in the behavior of powers outside the region is unlikely. At every level, Israel's Arab neighbors are incapable of forming even a partial coalition against Israel. Israel is not forced to calibrate its actions with an eye toward regional consequences, explaining Israel's willingness to accept broad international condemnation.

Palestinian Divisions

To begin to understand how deeply the Arabs are split, simply consider the split among the Palestinians themselves. They are currently divided between two very different and hostile factions. On one side is Fatah, which dominates the West Bank. On the other side is Hamas, which dominates the Gaza Strip. Aside from the geographic division of the Palestinian territories — which causes the Palestinians to behave almost as if they comprised two separate and hostile countries — the two groups have profoundly different ideologies.

Fatah arose from the secular, socialist, Arab-nationalist and militarist movement of Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser in the 1950s. Created in the 1960s, Fatah was closely aligned

with the Soviet Union. It was the dominant, though far from the only, faction in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The PLO was an umbrella group that brought together the highly fragmented elements of the Palestinian movement. Yasser Arafat long dominated Fatah; his death left Fatah without a charismatic leader, but with a strong bureaucracy increasingly devoid of a coherent ideology or strategy.

Hamas arose from the Islamist movement. It was driven by religious motivations quite alien from Fatah and hostile to it. For Hamas, the liberation of Palestine was not simply a nationalist imperative, but also a religious requirement. Hamas was also hostile to what it saw as the financial corruption Arafat brought to the Palestinian movement, as well as to Fatah's secularism.

Hamas and Fatah are playing a zero-sum game. Given their inability to form a coalition and their mutual desire for the other to fail, a victory for one is a defeat for the other. This means that whatever public statements Fatah makes, the current international focus on Gaza and Hamas weakens Fatah. And this means that at some point, Fatah will try to undermine the political gains the flotilla has offered Hamas.

The Palestinians' deep geographic, ideological and historical divisions occasionally flare up into violence. Their movement has always been split, its single greatest weakness. Though revolutionary movements frequently are torn by sectarianism, these divisions are so deep that even without Israeli manipulation, the threat the Palestinians pose to the Israelis is diminished. With manipulation, the Israelis can pit Fatah against Hamas.

The Arab States and the Palestinians

The split within the Palestinians is also reflected in divergent opinions among what used to be called the confrontation states surrounding Israel — Egypt, Jordan and Syria.

Egypt, for example, is directly hostile to Hamas, a religious movement amid a sea of essentially secular Arab states. Hamas' roots are in Egypt's largest Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, which the Egyptian state has historically considered its main domestic threat. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's regime has moved aggressively against Egyptian Islamists and sees Hamas' ideology as a threat, as it could spread back to Egypt. For this and other reasons, Egypt has maintained its own blockade of Gaza. Egypt is much closer to Fatah, whose ideology derives from Egyptian secularism, and for this reason, Hamas deeply distrusts Cairo.

Jordan views Fatah with deep distrust. In 1970, Fatah under Arafat tried to stage a revolution against the Hashemite monarchy in Jordan. The resulting massacres, referred to as Black September, cost about 10,000 Palestinian lives. Fatah has never truly forgiven Jordan for Black September, and the Jordanians have never really trusted Fatah since then. The idea of an independent Palestinian state on the West Bank unsettles the Hashemite regime, as Jordan's population is mostly Palestinian. Meanwhile, Hamas with its Islamist ideology worries Jordan, which has had its own problems with the Muslim Brotherhood. So rhetoric aside, the Jordanians are uneasy at best with the Palestinians, and despite years of Israeli-Palestinian

hostility, Jordan (and Egypt) has a peace treaty with Israel that remains in place.

Syria is far more interested in Lebanon than it is in the Palestinians. Its co-sponsorship (along with Iran) of Hezbollah has more to do with Syria's desire to dominate Lebanon than it does with Hezbollah as an anti-Israeli force. Indeed, whenever fighting breaks out between Hezbollah and Israel, the Syrians get nervous and their tensions with Iran increase. And of course, while Hezbollah is anti-Israeli, it is not a Palestinian movement. It is a Lebanese Shiite movement. Most Palestinians are Sunni, and while they share a common goal — the destruction of Israel — it is not clear that Hezbollah would want the same kind of regime in Palestine that either Hamas or Fatah would want. So Syria is playing a side game with an anti-Israeli movement that isn't Palestinian, while also maintaining relations with both factions of the Palestinian movement.

Outside the confrontation states, the Saudis and other Arabian Peninsula regimes remember the threat that Nasser and the PLO posed to their regimes. They do not easily forgive, and their support for Fatah comes in full awareness of the potential destabilizing influence of the Palestinians. And while the Iranians would love to have influence over the Palestinians, Tehran is more than 1,000 miles away. Sometimes Iranian arms get through to the Palestinians. But Fatah doesn't trust the Iranians, and Hamas, though a religious movement, is Sunni while Iran is Shiite. Hamas and the Iranians may cooperate on some tactical issues, but they do not share the same vision.

Israel's Short-term Free Hand and Long-term Challenge

Given this environment, it is extremely difficult to translate hostility to Israeli policies in Europe and other areas into meaningful levers against Israel. Under these circumstances, the Israelis see the consequences of actions that excite hostility toward Israel from the Arabs and the rest of the world as less dangerous than losing control of Gaza. The more independent Gaza becomes, the greater the threat it poses to Israel. The suppression of Gaza is much safer and is something Fatah ultimately supports, Egypt participates in, Jordan is relieved by and Syria is ultimately indifferent to.

Nations base their actions on risks and rewards. The configuration of the Palestinians and Arabs rewards Israeli assertiveness and provides few rewards for caution. The Israelis do not see global hostility toward Israel translating into a meaningful threat because the Arab reality cancels it out. Therefore, relieving pressure on Hamas makes no sense to the Israelis. Doing so would be as likely to alienate Fatah and Egypt as it would to satisfy the Swedes, for example. As Israel has less interest in the Swedes than in Egypt and Fatah, it proceeds as it has.

A single point sums up the story of Israel and the Gaza blockade-runners: Not one Egyptian aircraft threatened the Israeli naval vessels, nor did any Syrian warship approach the intercept point. The Israelis could be certain of complete command of the sea and air without challenge. And this underscores how the Arab countries no longer have a military force that can challenge the Israelis, nor the will nor interest to acquire one. Where Egyptian and Syrian forces posed a profound threat to Israeli forces in 1973, no such threat exists now. Israel has

a completely free hand in the region militarily; it does not have to take into account military counteraction. The threat posed by intifada, suicide bombers, rockets from Lebanon and Gaza, and Hezbollah fighters is real, but it does not threaten the survival of Israel the way the threat from Egypt and Syria once did (and the Israelis see actions like the Gaza blockade as actually reducing the threat of intifada, suicide bombers and rockets). Non-state actors simply lack the force needed to reach this threshold. When we search for the reasons behind Israeli actions, it is this singular military fact that explains Israeli decision-making.

And while the break between Turkey and Israel is real, Turkey alone cannot bring significant pressure to bear on Israel beyond the sphere of public opinion and diplomacy because of the profound divisions in the region. Turkey has the option to reduce or end cooperation with Israel, but it does not have potential allies in the Arab world it would need against Israel. Israel therefore feels buffered against the Turkish reaction. Though its relationship with Turkey is significant to Israel, it is clearly not significant enough for Israel to give in on the blockade and accept the risks from Gaza.

At present, Israel takes the same view of the United States. While the United States became essential to Israeli security after 1967, Israel is far less dependent on the United States today. The quantity of aid the United States supplies Israel has shrunk in significance as the Israeli economy has grown. In the long run, a split with the United States would be significant, but interestingly, in the short run, the Israelis would be able to function quite effectively.

Israel does, however, face this strategic problem: In the short run, it has freedom of action, but its actions could change the strategic framework in which it operates over the long run. The most significant threat to Israel is not world opinion; though not trivial, world opinion is not decisive. The threat to Israel is that its actions will generate forces in the Arab world that eventually change the balance of power. The politico-military consequences of public opinion is the key question, and it is in this context that Israel must evaluate its split with Turkey.

The most important change for Israel would not be unity among the Palestinians, but a shift in Egyptian policy back toward the position it held prior to Camp David. Egypt is the center of gravity of the Arab world, the largest country and formerly the driving force behind Arab unity. It was the power Israel feared above all others. But Egypt under Mubarak has shifted its stance versus the Palestinians, and far more important, allowed Egypt's military capability to atrophy.

Should Mubarak's successor choose to align with these forces and move to rebuild Egypt's military capability, however, Israel would face a very different regional equation. A hostile Turkey aligned with Egypt could speed Egyptian military recovery and create a significant threat to Israel. Turkish sponsorship of Syrian military expansion would increase the pressure further. Imagine a world in which the Egyptians, Syrians and Turks formed a coalition that revived the Arab threat to Israel and the United States returned to its position of the 1950s when it did not materially support Israel, and it becomes clear that Turkey's emerging power combined with a political shift in the Arab world could represent a profound danger to Israel.

Where there is no balance of power, the dominant nation can act freely. The problem with this

is that doing so tends to force neighbors to try to create a balance of power. Egypt and Syria were not a negligible threat to Israel in the past. It is in Israel's interest to keep them passive. The Israelis can't dismiss the threat that its actions could trigger political processes that cause these countries to revert to prior behavior. They still remember what underestimating Egypt and Syria cost them in 1973. It is remarkable how rapidly military capabilities can revive: Recall that the Egyptian army was shattered in 1967, but by 1973 was able to mount an offensive that frightened Israel quite a bit.

The Israelis have the upper hand in the short term. What they must calculate is whether they will retain the upper hand if they continue on their course. Division in the Arab world, including among the Palestinians, cannot disappear overnight, nor can it quickly generate a strategic military threat. But the current configuration of the Arab world is not fixed. Therefore, defusing the current crisis would seem to be a long-term strategic necessity for Israel.

Israel's actions have generated shifts in public opinion and diplomacy regionally and globally. The Israelis are calculating that these actions will not generate a long-term shift in the strategic posture of the Arab world. If they are wrong about this, recent actions will have been a significant strategic error. If they are right, then this is simply another passing incident. In the end, the profound divisions in the Arab world both protect Israel and make diplomatic solutions to its challenge almost impossible — you don't need to fight forces that are so divided, but it is very difficult to negotiate comprehensively with a group that lacks anything approaching a unified voice.

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