

By George Friedman

The Russo-Georgian war continues to resonate, and it is time to expand our view of it. The primary players in Georgia, apart from the Georgians, were the Russians and Americans. On the margins were the Europeans, providing advice and admonitions but carrying little weight.

Another player, carrying out a murkier role, was Israel. Israeli advisers were present in Georgia alongside American advisers, and Israeli businessmen were doing business there. The Israelis had a degree of influence but were minor players compared to the Americans. More interesting, perhaps, was the decision, publicly announced by the Israelis, to end weapons sales to Georgia the week before the Georgians attacked South Ossetia. Clearly the Israelis knew what was coming and wanted no part of it.

Afterward, unlike the Americans, the Israelis did everything they could to placate the Russians, including having Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert travel to Moscow to offer reassurances. Whatever the Israelis were doing in Georgia, they did not want a confrontation with the Russians. It is impossible to explain the Israeli reasoning for being in Georgia outside the context of a careful review of Israeli strategy in general.

From that, we can begin to understand why the Israelis are involved in affairs far outside their immediate area of responsibility, and why they responded the way they did in Georgia. We need to divide Israeli strategic interests into four separate but interacting pieces: The Palestinians living inside Israel's post-1967 borders. The so-called "confrontation states" that border Israel, including Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and especially Egypt. The Muslim world beyond this region. The great powers able to influence and project power into these first three regions.

The Palestinian issue

The most important thing to understand about the first interest, the Palestinian issue, is that the Palestinians do not represent a strategic threat to the Israelis. Their ability to inflict casualties is an irritant to the Israelis (if a tragedy to the victims and their families), but they cannot threaten the existence of the Israeli state. The Palestinians can impose a level of irritation that can affect Israeli morale, inducing the Israelis to make concessions based on the realistic assessment that the Palestinians by themselves cannot in any conceivable time frame threaten Israel's core interests, regardless of political arrangements.

At the same time, the argument goes, given that the Palestinians cannot threaten Israeli interests, what is the value of making concessions that will not change the threat of terrorist attacks? Given the structure of Israeli politics, this matter is both substrategic and gridlocked. The matter is compounded by the fact that the Palestinians are deeply divided among themselves.

For Israel, this is a benefit, as it creates a de facto civil war among Palestinians and reduces the threat from them. But it also reduces pressure and opportunities to negotiate. There is no one on the Palestinian side who speaks authoritatively for all Palestinians. Any agreement reached with the Palestinians would, from the Israeli point of view, have to include guarantees on the cessation of terrorism. No one has ever been in a position to guarantee that -- and certainly Fatah does not today speak for Hamas. Therefore, a settlement on a Palestinian state remains gridlocked because it does not deliver any meaningful advantages to the Israelis.

The confrontation states

The second area involves the confrontation states. Israel has formal peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan. It has had informal understandings with Damascus on things like Lebanon, but Israel has no permanent understanding with Syria. The Lebanese are too deeply divided to allow state-to-state understandings, but Israel has had understandings with different Lebanese factions at different times (and particularly close relations with some of the Christian factions). Jordan is effectively an ally of Israel. It has been hostile to the Palestinians at least since 1970, when the Palestine Liberation Organization attempted to overthrow the Hashemite regime, and the Jordanians regard the Israelis and Americans as guarantors of their national security.

Israel's relationship with Egypt is publicly cooler but quite cooperative. The only group that poses any serious challenge to the Egyptian state is The Muslim Brotherhood, and hence Cairo views Hamas -- a derivative of that organization -- as a potential threat. The Egyptians and Israelis have maintained peaceful relations for more than 30 years, regardless of the state of Israeli-Palestinian relations.

The Syrians by themselves cannot go to war with Israel and survive. Their primary interest lies in Lebanon, and when they work against Israel, they work with surrogates like Hezbollah. But their own view on an independent Palestinian state is murky, since they claim all of Palestine as part of a greater Syria -- a view not particularly relevant at the moment. Therefore, Israel's only threat on its border comes from Syria via surrogates in Lebanon and the possibility of Syria's acquiring weaponry that would threaten Israel, such as chemical or nuclear weapons.

The wider Muslim world

As to the third area, Israel's position in the Muslim world beyond the confrontation states is much more secure than either it or its enemies would like to admit. Israel has close, formal strategic relations with Turkey as well as with Morocco. Turkey and Egypt are the giants of the region, and being aligned with them provides Israel with the foundations of regional security.

But Israel also has excellent relations with countries where formal relations do not exist, particularly in the Arabian Peninsula. The conservative monarchies of the region deeply distrust the Palestinians, particularly Fatah. As part of the Nasserite Pan-Arab socialist movement, Fatah on several occasions directly threatened these monarchies. Several times in the 1970s and 1980s, Israeli intelligence provided these monarchies with information that prevented assassinations or uprisings.

Saudi Arabia, for one, has never engaged in anti-Israeli activities beyond rhetoric. In the aftermath of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah conflict, Saudi Arabia and Israel forged close behind-the-scenes relations, especially because of an assertive Iran -- a common foe of both the Saudis and the Israelis. Saudi Arabia has close relations with Hamas, but these have as much to do with maintaining a defensive position -- keeping Hamas and its Saudi backers off Riyadh's back -- as they do with government policy. The Saudis are cautious regarding Hamas, and the other monarchies are even more so.

More to the point, Israel does extensive business with these regimes, particularly in the defense area. Israeli companies, working formally through American or European subsidiaries, carry out extensive business throughout the Arabian Peninsula. The nature of these subsidiaries is well-known on all sides, though no one is eager to trumpet this. The governments of both Israel and the Arabian Peninsula would have internal political problems if they publicized it, but a visit to Dubai, the business capital of the region, would find many Israelis doing extensive business under third-party passports. Add to this that the states of the Arabian Peninsula are afraid of Iran, and the relationship becomes even more important to all sides.

There is an interesting idea that if Israel were to withdraw from the occupied territories and create an independent Palestinian state, then perceptions of Israel in the Islamic world would shift. This is a commonplace view in Europe.

The fact is that we can divide the Muslim world into three groups. First, there are those countries that already have formal ties to Israel. Second are those that have close working relations with Israel and where formal ties would complicate rather than deepen relations. Pakistan and Indonesia, among others, fit into this class. Third are those that are absolutely hostile to Israel, such as Iran.

It is very difficult to identify a state that has no informal or formal relations with Israel but would adopt these relations if there were a Palestinian state. Those states that are hostile to Israel would remain hostile after a withdrawal from the Palestinian territories, since their issue is with the existence of Israel, not its borders.

The point of all this is that Israeli security is much better than it might appear if one listened only to the rhetoric. The Palestinians are divided and at war with each other. Under the best of circumstances, they cannot threaten Israel's survival. The only bordering countries with which the Israelis have no formal agreements are Syria and Lebanon, and neither can threaten Israel's security. Israel has close ties to Turkey, the most powerful Muslim country in the region. It also has much closer commercial and intelligence ties with the Arabian Peninsula than is generally acknowledged, although the degree of cooperation is well-known in the region. From a security standpoint, Israel is doing well.

The broader world

Israel is also doing extremely well in the broader world, the fourth and final area. Israel always has needed a foreign source of weapons and technology, since its national security needs

outstrip its domestic industrial capacity. Its first patron was the Soviet Union, which hoped to gain a foothold in the Middle East. This was quickly followed by France, which saw Israel as an ally in Algeria and against Egypt. Finally, after 1967, the United States came to support Israel.

Washington saw Israel as a threat to Syria, which could threaten Turkey from the rear at a time when the Soviets were threatening Turkey from the north. Turkey was the doorway to the Mediterranean, and Syria was a threat to Turkey. Egypt was also aligned with the Soviets from 1956 onward, long before the United States had developed a close working relationship with Israel.

That relationship has declined in importance for the Israelis. Over the years the amount of U.S. aid -- roughly \$2.5 billion annually -- has remained relatively constant. It was never adjusted upward for inflation, and so shrunk as a percentage of Israeli gross domestic product from roughly 20 percent in 1974 to under 2 percent today. Israel's dependence on the United States has plummeted. The dependence that once existed has become a marginal convenience. Israel holds onto the aid less for economic reasons than to maintain the concept in the United States of Israeli dependence and U.S. responsibility for Israeli security. In other words, it is more psychological and political from Israel's point of view than an economic or security requirement.

Israel therefore has no threats or serious dependencies, save two. The first is the acquisition of nuclear weapons by a power that cannot be deterred -- in other words, a nation prepared to commit suicide to destroy Israel. Given Iranian rhetoric, Iran would appear at times to be such a nation. But given that the Iranians are far from having a deliverable weapon, and that in the Middle East no one's rhetoric should be taken all that seriously, the Iranian threat is not one the Israelis are compelled to deal with right now.

The second threat would come from the emergence of a major power prepared to intervene overtly or covertly in the region for its own interests, and in the course of doing so, redefine the regional threat to Israel. The major candidate for this role is Russia. During the Cold War, the Soviets pursued a strategy to undermine American interests in the region. In the course of this, the Soviets activated states and groups that could directly threaten Israel.

There is no significant conventional military threat to Israel on its borders unless Egypt is willing and well-armed. Since the mid-1970s, Egypt has been neither. Even if Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak were to die and be replaced by a regime hostile to Israel, Cairo could do nothing unless it had a patron capable of training and arming its military.

The same is true of Syria and Iran to a great extent. Without access to outside military technology, Iran is a nation merely of frightening press conferences. With access, the entire regional equation shifts.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, no one was prepared to intervene in the Middle East the way the Soviets had. The Chinese have absolutely no interest in struggling with the United States in the Middle East, which accounts for a similar percentage of Chinese and U.S. oil consumption. It is far cheaper to buy oil in the Middle East than to engage in a geopolitical struggle with

China's major trade partner, the United States. Even if there was interest, no European powers can play this role given their individual military weakness, and Europe as a whole is a geopolitical myth. The only country that can threaten the balance of power in the Israeli geopolitical firmament is Russia.

Israel fears that if Russia gets involved in a struggle with the United States, Moscow will aid Middle Eastern regimes that are hostile to the United States as one of its levers, beginning with Syria and Iran. Far more frightening to the Israelis is the idea of the Russians once again playing a covert role in Egypt, toppling the tired Mubarak regime, installing one friendlier to their own interests, and arming it. Israel's fundamental fear is not Iran. It is a rearmed, motivated and hostile Egypt backed by a great power.

The Russians are not after Israel, which is a sideshow for them. But in the course of finding ways to threaten American interests in the Middle East -- seeking to force the Americans out of their desired sphere of influence in the former Soviet region - the Russians could undermine what at the moment is a quite secure position in the Middle East for the United States.

This brings us back to what the Israelis were doing in Georgia. They were not trying to acquire airbases from which to bomb Iran. That would take thousands of Israeli personnel in Georgia for maintenance, munitions management, air traffic control and so on.

And it would take Ankara allowing the use of Turkish airspace, which isn't very likely. Plus, if that were the plan, then stopping the Georgians from attacking South Ossetia would have been a logical move.

The Israelis were in Georgia in an attempt, in parallel with the United States, to prevent Russia's re-emergence as a great power. The nuts and bolts of that effort involves shoring up states in the former Soviet region that are hostile to Russia, as well as supporting individuals in Russia who oppose Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's direction. The Israeli presence in Georgia, like the American one, was designed to block the re-emergence of Russia.

As soon as the Israelis got wind of a coming clash in South Ossetia, they - unlike the United States - switched policies dramatically. Where the United States increased its hostility toward Russia, the Israelis ended weapons sales to Georgia before the war. After the war, the Israelis initiated diplomacy designed to calm Russian fears. Indeed, at the moment the Israelis have a greater interest in keeping the Russians from seeing Israel as an enemy than they have in keeping the Americans happy. U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney may be uttering vague threats to the Russians. But Olmert was reassuring Moscow it has nothing to fear from Israel, and therefore should not sell weapons to Syria, Iran, Hezbollah or anyone else hostile to Israel.

Interestingly, the Americans have started pumping out information that the Russians are selling weapons to Hezbollah and Syria. The Israelis have avoided that issue carefully. They can live with some weapons in Hezbollah's hands a lot more easily than they can live with a coup in Egypt followed by the introduction of Russian military advisers. One is a nuisance; the other is an existential threat. Russia may not be in a position to act yet, but the Israelis aren't waiting for the situation to get out of hand.

Israel is in control of the Palestinian situation and relations with the countries along its borders. Its position in the wider Muslim world is much better than it might appear. Its only enemy there is Iran, and that threat is much less clear than the Israelis say publicly. But the threat of Russia intervening in the Muslim world - particularly in Syria and Egypt - is terrifying to the Israelis.

It is a risk they won't live with if they don't have to. So the Israelis switched their policy in Georgia with lightning speed. This could create frictions with the United States, but the Israeli-American relationship isn't what it used to be.

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