

By George Friedman

A former head of Mossad, Meir Dagan, has publicly criticized the current Israeli government for a lack of flexibility, judgment and foresight, calling it “reckless and irresponsible” in the handling of Israel’s foreign and security policies. In various recent interviews and speeches, he has made it clear that he regards the decision to ignore the 2002 Saudi proposal for a peace settlement on the pre-1967 lines as a mistake and the focus on Iran as a diversion from the real issue — the likely recognition of an independent Palestinian state by a large segment of the international community, something Dagan considers a greater threat.

What is important in Dagan’s statements is that, having been head of Mossad from 2002 to 2010, he is not considered in any way to be ideologically inclined toward accommodation. When Dagan was selected by Ariel Sharon to be head of Mossad, Sharon told him that he wanted a Mossad with “a knife between its teeth.” There were charges that he was too aggressive, but rarely were there charges that he was too soft. Dagan was as much a member of the Israeli governing establishment as anyone. Therefore, his statements, and the statements of some other senior figures, represent a split not so much within Israel but within the Israeli national security establishment, which has been seen as being as hard-line as the Likud.

In addition, when pro-Palestinian demonstrators in the Golan Heights tried to force their way into Israeli-held territory, Israeli troops opened fire. Eleven protesters were killed in the Golan, and six were killed in a separate but similar protest in the West Bank. The demonstrations, like the Nakba-day protests, were clearly intended by the Syrians to redirect anti-government protests to some other issue. They were also meant to be a provocation, and the government in Damascus undoubtedly hoped that the Israelis would open fire. Dagan’s statements seem to point at this paradox.

There are two factions that want an extremely aggressive Israeli security policy: the Israeli right and countries and militant proxies like Hamas that are actively hostile to Israel. The issue is which benefits more.

3 Strategic Phases

Previously we discussed Israeli strategy. Now I want us to consider Palestinian strategy and to try to understand how the Palestinians will respond to the current situation.

There have been three strategies on Palestine. The first was from before the founding of Israel until 1967. In this period, the primary focus was not on the creation of a Palestinian state but on the destruction of Israel by existing Arab nation-states and the absorption of the territory into those states. Just a few years before 1967, the Palestine Liberation Army (PLO) came into existence, and after Israel’s victory in the June 1967 war, the Arab nations began to change

their stance from simply the destruction of Israel and absorption of the territories into existing nation-states to the creation of an independent Palestinian state. The PLO strategy at this time was a dual track divided between political and paramilitary operations and included terrorist attacks in both Israel and Europe. The political track tried to position the PLO as being open to a negotiated state, while the terrorist track tried to make the PLO seem extremely dangerous in order to motivate other nations, particularly European nations, to pressure Israel on the political track. The weakness of this strategy was that the political track lost credibility as the terrorist track became bound up with late Cold-War intrigues involving European terrorist groups like Italy's Red Brigade or Germany's Red Army Faction. Their networks ranged from the Irish Republican Army to the Basque terrorist group ETA to Soviet bloc intelligence services. The PLO was seen as a threat to Europe on many levels as well as a threat to the Arab royal houses that they tried to undermine.

For the Palestinians, the most significant loss was the decision by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to shift from the Soviet alliance and make peace with Israel. This isolated the Palestinian movement from any significant regional support and made it dependent on the Soviets. With the Cold War winding down, the PLO became an orphan, losing its sponsorship from the Soviets as it had lost Jordanian and Egyptian support in the 1970s. Two main tendencies developed during this second phase. The first was the emergence of Hamas, a radically new sort of Palestinian movement since it was neither secular nor socialist but religious. The second was the rise of the internal insurrection, or intifada, which, coupled with suicide bombings and rocket fire from Gaza as well as from Hezbollah in Lebanon, was designed to increase the cost of insurrection to the Israelis while generating support for the Palestinians.

Ultimately, the split between Hamas and Fatah, the dominant faction of the PLO that had morphed into the Palestinian National Authority, was the most significant aspect of the third strategic phase. Essentially, the Palestinians were simultaneously waging a civil war with each other while trying to organize resistance to Israel. This is not as odd as it appears. The Palestinians had always fought one another while they fought common enemies, and revolutionary organizations are frequently split.

But the Hamas-Fatah split undermined the credibility of the resistance in two ways. First, there were times in which one or the other faction was prepared to share intelligence with the Israelis to gain an advantage over the other. Second, and more important, the Palestinians had no coherent goal, nor did anyone have the ability to negotiate on their behalf. Should Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas engage in negotiations with Israel he could not deliver Hamas, so the whole point of negotiations was limited. Indeed, negotiations were likely to weaken the Palestinians by exacerbating intra-communal tensions.

Post Cold-War weakness

One of the significant problems the Palestinians had always had was the hostility of the Arab world to their cause, a matter insufficiently discussed. The Egyptians spent this period opposed to Hamas as a threat to their regime. They participated in blockading Gaza. The Jordanians hated Fatah, having long memories about the Black September rising in 1970 that almost destroyed the Hashemite regime. Having a population that is still predominantly Palestinian, the

Hashemites fear the consequences of a Palestinian state. The Syrians have never been happy with the concept of an independent Palestinian state because they retain residual claims to all former Syrian provinces, including Lebanon, Israel and Jordan. When they invaded Lebanon in 1976, they were supporting Maronite Christians and trying to destroy the PLO. Finally, the constant attempts by Fatah and the PLO to overthrow the royal houses of Arabia — all of which failed — created massive mistrust between a number of Arab regimes and the fledgling Palestinian movement. Therefore, the strategic position of the Palestinians has been extremely weak since the end of the Cold War. They have been able to put stress on Israel but not come anywhere close to endangering its survival or even forcing policies to change. Indeed, their actions tended to make Israel even more rigid. This did not displease the Palestinians as an outcome. The more rigid the Israelis were, the more intrusive they would be in the Palestinian community and the more both Fatah and Hamas could rely on Palestinian support for their policies. In a sense, the greatest threat to the Palestinian movement has always been the Palestinians losing interest in a Palestinian state in favor of increased economic wellbeing. The ability to force Israel to take aggressive measures increased public loyalty to each of the two groups. During a time of inherent civil conflict between the two, provoking Israel became a means of assuring support in the civil war. From Israel's point of view, so long as the suicide bombings were disrupted and Gaza was contained, they were in an extraordinarily secure position. The Arab states were indifferent or hostile (beyond public proclamations and donations that frequently wound up in European bank accounts); the United States was not prepared to press Israel more than formally; and the Europeans were not prepared to take any meaningful action because of the United States and the Arab countries. The Israelis had a problem but not one that ultimately threatened them. Even Iran's attempt to meddle was of little consequence. Hezbollah was as much concerned with Lebanese politics as it was with fighting Israel, and Hamas would take money from anyone. In the end, Hamas did not want to become an Iranian pawn, and Fatah knew that Iran could be the end of it. In a sense, the Palestinians have been in checkmate since the fall of the Soviet Union. They were divided, holding on to their public, dealing with a hostile Arab world and, except for the suicide bombings that frightened but did not weaken Israel, they had no levers to change the game. The Israeli view was that the status quo, which required no fundamental shifts of concessions, was satisfactory.

A new 4th phase?

As we have said many times, the Arab Spring is a myth. Where there have been revolutions they have not been democratic, and where they have appeared democratic they have not been in any way mass movements capable of changing regimes. But what they have been in the past is not necessarily what they will be in the future. Certainly, this round has bought little democratic change, and I don't think there will be much.

But I can make assumptions that the Israeli government can't afford to make. One does not have to believe in the Arab Spring to see evolutions in which countries like Egypt change their positions on the Palestinians, as evidenced by Egypt's decision to open the Rafah border crossing. In Egypt, as in other Arab countries, the Palestinian cause is popular. A government that would make no real concessions to its public could afford to make this concession, which costs the regime little and is an easy way to appease the crowds. With the exception of Jordan, which really does have to fear a Palestinian state, countries that were hostile to the Palestinians

could be more supportive and states that had been minimally supportive could increase their support.

This is precisely what the Palestinians want, and the reason that Hamas and Fatah have signed a grudging agreement for unity. They see the risings in the Arab world as a historic opportunity to break out of the third phase into a new fourth phase. The ability to connect the Palestinian cause with regime preservation in the Arab world represents a remarkable opportunity. So Egypt could, at the same time, be repressive domestically — and even maintain the treaty with Israel — while dramatically increasing support for the Palestinians.

In doing that, two things happen: First, Europeans, who are important trading partners for Israel, might be prepared to support a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders in order to maintain relations in the Arab and Islamic world on an issue that is really of low cost to them. Second, the United States, fighting wars in the Islamic world and needing the support of intelligence services of Muslim states and stability in these countries, could support a peace treaty based on 1967 borders.

The key strategy that the Palestinians have adopted is that of provocation. The 2010 flotilla from Turkey presented a model: select an action that from the outside seems benign but will be perceived by the Israelis as threatening; orchestrate the event in a way that will maximize the chances for an Israeli action that will be seen as brutal; shape a narrative that makes the provocation seem benign; and use this narrative to undermine international support for the Israelis. Given the rigid structure of Israeli policy, this strategy essentially puts the Palestinians or other groups in control of the Israeli response.

The Palestinians understand Israeli limits, which are not dynamic and are predictable, and can trigger them at will. The more skillful they are, the more it will appear that they are the victims. And the conversation can shift from this particular action by Israel to the broader question of the Israeli occupation. With unrest in the Arab world, shifting evaluations of the situation in the West and a strategy that manages international perceptions and controls the tempo and type of events, the Palestinians have the opportunity to break out of the third phase. Their deepest problem, of course, is the split between Hamas and Fatah, which merely has been papered over by their agreement. Essentially, Fatah supports a two-state solution and Hamas opposes it. And so long as Hamas opposes it, there can be no settlement. But Hamas, as part of this strategy, will do everything it can — aside from abandoning its position — to make it appear flexible on it. This will further build pressure on Israel.

How much pressure Israel can stand is something that will be found out and something Dagan warned about. But Israel has a superb countermove: accept some variation of the 1967 borders and force Hamas either to break with its principles and lose its support to an emergent group or openly blow apart the process. In other words, the Israelis can also pursue a strategy of provocation, in this case by giving the Palestinians what they want and betting that they will reject it. Of course, the problem with this strategy is that the Palestinians might accept the deal, with Hamas secretly intending to resume the war from a better position.

Israel's bet has three possible outcomes. One is to hold the current position and be constantly

manipulated into actions that isolate Israel. The second is to accept the concept of the 1967 borders and bet on the Palestinians rejecting it as they did with Bill Clinton. The third outcome, a dangerous one, is for the Palestinians to accept the deal and then double-cross the Israelis. But then if that happens, Israel has the alternative to return to the old borders. In the end, this is not about the Israelis or the Palestinians. It is about the Palestinian relationship with the Arabs and Israel's relationship with Europe and the United States. The Israelis want to isolate the Palestinians, and the Palestinians are trying to isolate the Israelis. At the moment, the Palestinians are doing better at this than the Israelis. The argument going on in Israel (and not with the peace movement) is how to respond. Benjamin Netanyahu wants to wait it out. Dagan is saying the risks are too high. But on the Palestinian side, the real crisis will occur should Dagan win the debate. The centre of gravity of Palestinian weakness is the inability to form a united front around the position that Israel has a right to exist. Some say it, some hint it and others reject it.

An interesting gamble is to give the Palestinians what the Americans and Europeans are suggesting — modified 1967 borders. For Israel, the question is whether the risk of holding the present position is greater than the risk of a dramatic shift. For the Palestinians, the question is what they will do if there is a dramatic shift. The Palestinian dilemma is the more intense and interesting one — and an interesting opportunity for Israel. .

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