

Sinking Ship

The attack on the Gaza relief flotilla jeopardizes Israel itself.

By John J. Mearsheimer

ISRAEL'S BOTCHED RAID against the Gaza-bound humanitarian flotilla on May 31 is the latest sign that Israel is on a disastrous course that it seems incapable of reversing. The attack also highlights the extent to which Israel has become a strategic liability for the United States. This situation is likely to get worse over time, which will cause major problems for Americans who have a deep attachment to the Jewish state.

The bungled assault on the *Mavi Marmara*, the lead ship in the flotilla, shows once again that Israel is addicted to using military force yet unable to do so effectively. One would think that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) would improve over time from all the practice. Instead, it has become the gang that cannot shoot straight.

The IDF last scored a clear-cut victory in the Six Day War in 1967; the record since then is a litany of unsuccessful campaigns. The War of Attrition (1969-70) was at best a draw, and Israel fell victim to one of the great surprise attacks in military history in the October War of 1973. In 1982, the IDF invaded Lebanon and ended up in a protracted and bloody fight with Hezbollah. Eighteen years later, Israel conceded defeat and pulled out of the Lebanese quagmire. Israel tried to quell the First Intifada by force in the late 1980s, with Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin telling his troops to break the bones of the Palestinian demonstrators. But that strategy failed and Israel was forced to join the Oslo Peace Process instead, which was another failed endeavor.

The IDF has not become more competent in recent years. By almost all accounts—including the Israeli government's own commission of inquiry—it performed abysmally in the 2006 Lebanon war. The IDF then launched a new campaign against the people of Gaza in December 2008, in part to “restore Israel's deterrence” but also to weaken or topple Hamas. Although the mighty IDF was free to pummel Gaza at will, Hamas survived and Israel was widely condemned for the destruction and killing it wrought on Gaza's civilian population. Indeed, the Goldstone Report, written under UN auspices, accused Israel of war crimes and possible crimes against humanity. Earlier this year, the Mossad murdered a Hamas leader in Dubai, but the assassins were seen on multiple security cameras and were found to have used forged passports from Australia and a handful of European countries. The result was an embarrassing diplomatic row, with Australia, Ireland, and Britain each expelling an Israeli diplomat.

Given this history, it is not surprising that the IDF mishandled the operation against the Gaza flotilla, despite having weeks to plan it. The assault forces that landed on the *Mavi Marmara* were unprepared for serious resistance and responded by shooting nine activists, some at point-blank range. None of the activists had their own guns. The bloody operation was condemned around the world—except in the United States, of course. Even within Israel, the IDF was roundly criticized for this latest failure.

These ill-conceived operations have harmful consequences for Israel. Failures leave adversaries intact and make Israeli leaders worry that their deterrent reputation is being undermined. To rectify that, the IDF is turned loose again, but the result is usually another misadventure, which gives Israel new incentives to do it again, and so on. This spiral logic, coupled with Israel's intoxication with military force, helps explain why the Israeli press routinely carries articles predicting where Israel's next war will be.

Israel's recent debacles have also damaged its international reputation. Respondents to a 2010 worldwide opinion poll done for the BBC said that Israel, Iran, and Pakistan had the most negative influence in the world; even North Korea ranked better. More worrying for Israel is that its once close strategic relationship with Turkey has been badly damaged by the 2008-09 Gaza war and especially by the assault on the *Mavi Marmara*, a Turkish ship filled with Turkish nationals. But surely the most troubling development for Israel is the growing chorus of voices in the United States who say that Israel's behavior is threatening American interests around the world, to include endangering its soldiers. If that sentiment grows, it could seriously harm Israel's relationship with the United States.

Life as an Apartheid State

The flotilla tragedy highlights another way in which Israel is in deep trouble. Israel's response makes it obvious that its leaders are not interested in allowing

the Palestinians to have a viable state in Gaza and the West Bank, but instead are bent on creating a “Greater Israel” in which the Palestinians are confined to a handful of impoverished enclaves.

Israel insists that its blockade is solely intended to keep weapons out of Gaza. Hardly anyone would criticize Israel if this were true, but it is not. The real aim of the blockade is to punish the people of Gaza for supporting Hamas and resisting Israel’s efforts to maintain Gaza as a giant open-air prison. Of course, there was much evidence that this was the case before the debacle on the *Mavi Marmara*. When the blockade began in 2006, Dov Weisglass, a close aide to Prime Ministers Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert, said, “The idea is to put the Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger.” And the Gaza onslaught 18 months ago was designed to punish the Gazans, not enforce a weapons embargo. The ships in the flotilla were transporting humanitarian aid, not weapons for Hamas, and Israel’s willingness to use deadly force to prevent a humanitarian aid convoy from reaching Gaza makes it abundantly clear that Israel wants to humiliate and subdue the Palestinians, not live side-by-side with them in separate states.

Collective punishment of the Palestinians in Gaza is unlikely to end anytime soon. Israel’s leaders have shown little interest in lifting the blockade or negotiating sincerely. The sad truth is that Israel has been brutalizing the Palestinians for so long that it is almost impossible to break the habit. It is hardly surprising that Jimmy Carter said last year, “the citizens of Palestine are treated more like animals than human beings.” They are, and they will be for the foreseeable future.

Consequently, there is not going to be a two-state solution. Instead, Gaza and the West Bank will become part of a Greater Israel, which will be an

apartheid state bearing a marked resemblance to white-ruled South Africa. Israelis and their American supporters invariably bristle at this comparison, but that is their future if they create a Greater Israel while denying full political rights to an Arab population that will soon outnumber the Jewish population in the entirety of the land. In fact, two former Israeli prime ministers—Ehud Olmert and Ehud Barak—have made this very point. Olmert went so far as to argue, “as soon as that happens, the state of Israel is finished.”

He’s right, because Israel will not be able to maintain itself as an apartheid state. Like racist South Africa, it will eventually evolve into a democratic binational state whose politics will be dominated by the more numerous Palestinians. But that process will take many years, and during that time, Israel will continue to oppress the Palestinians. Its actions will be seen and condemned by growing numbers of people and more and more governments around the world. Israel is unwittingly destroying its own future as a Jewish state, and doing so with tacit U.S. support.

America’s Albatross

The combination of Israel’s strategic incompetence and its gradual transformation into an apartheid state creates significant problems for the United States. There is growing recognition in both countries that their interests are diverging; indeed this perspective is even garnering attention inside the American Jewish community. *Jewish Week*, for example, recently published an article entitled “The Gaza Blockade: What Do You Do When U.S. and Israeli Interests Aren’t in Synch?” Leaders in both countries are now saying that Israeli policy toward the Palestinians is undermining U.S. security. Vice President Biden and Gen. David Petraeus, the head of Central Command, both made

this point recently, and the head of the Mossad, Meir Dagan, told the Knesset in June, “Israel is gradually turning from an asset to the United States to a burden.”

It is easy to see why. Because the United States gives Israel so much support and U.S. politicians routinely laud the “special relationship” in the most lavish terms, people around the globe naturally associate the United States with Israel’s actions. Unfortunately, this makes huge numbers of people in the Arab and Islamic world furious with the United States for supporting Israel’s cruel treatment of the Palestinians. That anger in turn helps fuel terrorism against America. Remember that the 9/11 Commission Report, which describes Khalid Sheikh Muhammad as the “principal architect of the 9/11 attacks,” concludes that his “animus toward the United States stemmed not from his experiences there as a student, but rather from his violent disagreement with U.S. foreign policy favoring Israel.” Osama bin Laden’s hostility toward the United States was fuelled in part by this same concern.

Popular anger toward the United States also threatens the rulers of Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, key U.S. allies who are frequently seen as America’s lackeys. The collapse of any of these regimes would be a big blow to the U.S. position in the region; however, Washington’s unyielding support for Israel makes these governments weaker, not stronger. More importantly, the rupture in Israel’s relationship with Turkey will surely damage America’s otherwise close relationship with Turkey, a NATO member and a key U.S. ally in Europe and the Middle East.

Finally, there is the danger that Israel might attack Iran’s nuclear facilities, which could have terrible consequences for the United States. The last thing America needs is another war with an Islamic country, especially one that could easily interfere in its ongoing wars

in Afghanistan and Iraq. This is why the Pentagon opposes striking Iran, whether with Israeli or U.S. forces. But Netanyahu might do it anyway if he thinks it would be good for Israel, even if it were bad for the United States.

Dark Days Ahead for the Lobby

Israel's troubled trajectory is also causing major headaches for its American supporters. First, there is the matter of choosing between Israel and the United States. This is sometimes referred to as the issue of dual loyalty, but that term is a misnomer. Americans are allowed to have dual citizenship—and in effect, dual loyalty—and this is no problem as long as the interests of the other country are in synch with America's interests. For decades, Israel's supporters have striven to shape public discourse in the United States so that most Americans believe the two countries' interests are identical. That situation is changing, however. Not only is there now open talk about clashing interests, but knowledgeable people are openly asking whether Israel's actions are detrimental to U.S. security.

The lobby has been scrambling to discredit this new discourse, either by reasserting the standard argument that Israel's interests are synonymous with America's or by claiming that Israel—to quote a recent statement by Mortimer Zuckerman, a key figure in the lobby—“has been an ally that has paid dividends exceeding its costs.” A more sophisticated approach, which is reflected in an AIPAC-sponsored letter that 337 congresspersons sent to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in March, acknowledges that there will be differences between the two countries, but argues that “such differences are best resolved quietly, in trust and confidence.” In other words, keep the differences behind closed doors and away from the American public. It is too late, however, to quell

the public debate about whether Israel's actions are damaging U.S. interests. In fact, it is likely to grow louder and more contentious with time.

This changing discourse creates a daunting problem for Israel's supporters, because they will have to side either with Israel or the United States when the two countries' interests clash. Thus far, most of the key individuals and institutions in the lobby have sided with Israel when there was a dispute. For example, President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu have had two big public fights over settlements. Both times the lobby sided with Netanyahu and helped him thwart Obama. It seems clear that individuals like Abraham Foxman, who heads the Anti-Defamation League, and organizations like AIPAC are primarily concerned about Israel's interests, not America's.

This situation is very dangerous for the lobby. The real problem is not dual loyalty but choosing between the two loyalties and ultimately putting the interests of Israel ahead of those of America. The lobby's unstinting commitment to defending Israel, which sometimes means shortchanging U.S. interests, is likely to become more apparent to more Americans in the future, and that could lead to a wicked backlash against Israel's supporters as well as Israel.

The lobby faces yet another challenge: defending an apartheid state in the liberal West is not going to be easy. Once it is widely recognized that the two-state solution is dead and Israel has become like white-ruled South Africa—and that day is not far off—support for Israel inside the American Jewish community is likely to diminish significantly. The main reason is that apartheid is a despicable political system that is fundamentally at odds with basic American values as well as core Jewish values. For sure there will be some Jews who will

defend Israel no matter what kind of political system it has. But their numbers will shrink over time, in large part because survey data shows that younger American Jews feel less attachment to Israel than their elders, which makes them less inclined to defend Israel blindly.

The bottom line is that Israel will not be able to maintain itself as an apartheid state over the long term because it will not be able to depend on the American Jewish community to defend such a reprehensible political order.

Assisted Suicide

Israel is facing a bleak future, yet there is no reason to think that it will change course anytime soon. The political center of gravity in Israel has shifted sharply to the right and there is no sizable pro-peace political party or movement. Moreover, it remains firmly committed to the belief that what cannot be solved by force can be solved with greater force, and many Israelis view the Palestinians with contempt if not hatred. Neither the Palestinians nor any of Israel's immediate neighbors are powerful enough to deter it, and the lobby will remain influential enough over the next decade to protect Israel from meaningful U.S. pressure.

Remarkably, the lobby is helping Israel commit national suicide while also doing serious damage to American security interests. Voices challenging this tragic situation have grown slightly more numerous in recent years, but the majority of political commentators and virtually all U.S. politicians seem blissfully ignorant of where this is headed, or unwilling to risk their careers by speaking out. ■

John J. Mearsheimer is a professor of political science at the University of Chicago and coauthor of The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy.

Copyright of American Conservative is the property of American Conservative and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.