

The Gaza Flotilla Incident: Impact on Three Key Arab Actors

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Brief Analysis

The following summary is part two of Robert Satloff's presentation to a June 18, 2010, Washington Institute Policy Forum on the impact of the Gaza flotilla incident. Part one, issued yesterday as [PolicyWatch #1670 \(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3216>\)](#), focused on implications for U.S. policy.

For full audio of the event, which also included presentations by Michael Eisenstadt, Soner Cagaptay, and David Makovsky, click [here \(/templateC07.php?CID=533\)](#).

The Gaza flotilla episode pitted Israel versus Turkey, with Arabs as bystanders and observers. Yet reverberations of the incident have had a keen impact across Arab capitals.

Egypt: Policy Adrift

The country most negatively affected has been Egypt. Cairo has been a quiet partner with Israel in maintaining the tight blockade on Hamas-ruled Gaza, and Turkey's decision to champion Hamas's cause has exposed this poorly kept secret of Egyptian foreign policy. More important, by offering himself as the selfless Sunni mediator trying to reconcile a nasty fraternal squabble between Fatah and Hamas, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has -- in one fell swoop -- sidelined Iran's suspect patronage of the rejectionist front and challenged Egypt's role as the dominant external power in Palestinian politics.

So far, Egypt has been adrift in dealing effectively with its Gaza problem. Part of this is due to the political immobility besetting Egypt today, as it finds itself consumed with domestic transition. For three years, Egyptian intelligence tried -- and failed -- to secure Hamas-Fatah reconciliation on terms favorable to the latter. Now, Turkey will attempt its own form of reconciliation, on terms that would surely not comport with either the Quartet (i.e., the UN, European Union, United States, and Russia) requirements on Hamas or U.S.-Israeli notions of acceptability.

Given that Gaza used to be governed by Egypt, it is remarkable how far Cairo's influence has sunk over the years. It was embarrassing that Egypt had to compete with Turkey's regional gambit by dispatching former foreign minister (and current Arab League secretary-general) Amr Mousa to the strip on a visit that effectively lent unprecedented legitimacy to Hamas.

Still, Egypt has no interest in ending the blockade completely, given the nightmarish memories of hundreds of thousands Gazans streaming into Sinai in early 2008, many armed and keen to link up with Egypt's own Muslim Brotherhood. Although it partially opened its Rafah border gate following the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident, Cairo still refuses to allow certain convoys into Gaza and restricts movement out of the strip as well. Whether it will maintain even this semi-opening of Rafah for the foreseeable future is uncertain; the Egyptians are almost surely waiting to see if Israel and the naval blockade can weather the fallout from the flotilla incident. Given how quickly events change in the Middle East, it is a fair bet that something will come along soon to give Cairo cover for reimposing most, if not all, of the pre-flotilla closures.

More generally, a bolder and more self-confident Egyptian leadership would be in an excellent position to warn fellow Arabs about the Erdogan's allure as a modern-day Gamal Abdul Nasser, as so many Arab and Western pundits have begun to depict him. Better than anyone, Egyptians can point out that Nasser was, in the end, a terrible failure. He destroyed Egypt's economy; drove the country into the hands of the Soviets, whom Egyptians grew to despise; led Egypt into a disastrous war with Israel; and forced two Egyptian presidents to spend forty years trying to repair the damage of Nasserism. A stronger, more robust Egyptian government would tell Arabs to beware the collective political suicide that Erdogan offers. Washington laments the absence of that government.

Syria: Increasing Irrelevance

One obvious implication of Turkey's decisions to side with Iran against Washington in the nuclear standoff and to dismantle its strategic partnership with Israel is that any role for Ankara as a mediator on the Israeli-Syrian peace track is now over, at least as long as Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) is in power. Of course, there is more talk of war than diplomacy on this front in recent days. Just last week, for example, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad told the BBC that war was likely. Whether Asad has the savvy to manage this sensitive moment is unclear.

Recent events have also fueled talk about the emergence of a full-fledged "northern alliance" that would include Turkey, Syria, and Iran. Ironically, such a development would almost certainly limit Asad's strategic options and come at Syria's expense. Until now, Damascus has viewed its improving relations with Ankara as a strategic alternative to its growing dependence on Iran. But it would not be to Asad's advantage to find himself as the junior partner in an alliance between regional heavyweights Turkey and Iran. Indeed, the way regional politics are shifting, he may even find himself as a less important player than the fourth leg of the "northern alliance" table, Hassan Nasrallah's Hizballah.

If Asad were a shrewd leader, now would be the moment for him to test the diplomatic waters with Israel; he may find the Israelis willing to pay handsomely in a peace deal that would effectively sever the link between Ankara and Tehran. But Asad has shown remarkably little strategic creativity during his years in power, other than a penchant for ceding his independent decisionmaking to lesser powers in Lebanon. Accordingly, the end result for Syria of Erdogan's emergence as a modern-day Nasser is much the same as the emergence of the original Nasser a half-century ago -- it heralds further decline in relevance for the rulers in Damascus.

Palestinians: Old Politics, New Challenges

One key implication of the flotilla incident is that despite weakening Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas's image internationally, it did nothing to boost Hamas's standing domestically. Although Abbas visited Washington last week, his relative decline in international standing -- as measured by the relative increase in Hamas's standing -- has been underway for some time. Interestingly, this has been most apparent among non-Arab actors such as Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, Erdogan, and certain former American diplomats, who have been calling for Hamas's inclusion as a legitimate player in any Middle East diplomatic process. The Mavi Marmara incident only added fuel to this movement.

Among Palestinians themselves, however, the flotilla episode did not give Hamas any measurable political "bump." As a June 10-13 poll by Palestinian public opinion expert Khalil Shikaki shows, Fatah leads Hamas in public approval 45 percent to 25 percent, approximately the same spread as in March 2010. It seems clear that Palestinians still reject the Hamas model and prefer the Palestinian Authority alternative, even if the tide of international sentiment outside the Middle East is moving in Hamas's direction.

These numbers suggest that Abbas does have the constituency to adopt a more courageous stand by engaging Israel directly rather than through indirect "proximity" talks. Moreover, this shift would further strengthen his position at home. But he is likely to find himself busy in coming weeks fending off Turkish efforts to scale back the Gaza blockade (which he wants to maintain) and forge Hamas-Fatah reconciliation on terms that would torpedo any prospect of Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic progress. Abbas could silence his international critics by boldly restarting direct talks with Israel, which would almost surely trigger an extension of Israel's moratorium on settlement construction. But although Abbas clearly opposes war with Israel, it is unclear whether he embraces his role as the brave leader willing to take steps necessary to forge peace, or whether he is waiting for some deus ex machina -- in the form of President Obama -- to do the hard work of peacebuilding on his behalf.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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