

## **Realism For Beginners: A Primer for Obama on Middle East Peace**

**By John C. Hulsman, Ph.D.**

### *An Instructive Crisis*

The recent schism between Washington and Jerusalem is instructive in that it was not some sort of Machiavellian power play by either the US or Israel, but came about due to the culprit most often responsible for diplomatic spats—plain old-fashioned human error.

It seems clear that Prime Minister Netanyahu was not aware of the explosive announcement by his Interior Ministry approving a planned Jewish housing expansion in north Jerusalem in 2-3 years. The timing was accidental, but devastating, with indirect talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians just set to resume. Even worse, Vice President Biden happened to be visiting when the announcement was made. The whole thing might then have died down....if that had been all there was to it.

But all hell broke loose, with Secretary of State Clinton reportedly haranguing Netanyahu on the phone for 45 minutes, and publicly questioning the Israeli government's commitment to peace.

So much for the foreground. But what is truly going on here is far more interesting. Like a weary gambler down a great deal of money in the early hours of the morning, it seems to just have occurred to the Obama White House that Israel has taken its measure...and won. This explains both the private rage and the public sniping.

What do I mean by this? In the course of the last year, both the President and the Secretary of State have publicly prided themselves on their 'realism;' but I am not at all sure that they know what this actually means. Realism is not and should not be synonymous with 'mental toughness;' it is a foreign policy school of thought with antecedents stretching back to Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, and Thomas Aquinas. The administration finds itself in its current predicament in the Middle East precisely because in this most nakedly realist of regions, it has failed to understand what realism

truly is about. So rather than just piling on the White House's haplessness, let's use its failures as an instructive course in what realism actually is, and how it can yet save the Obama team from themselves.

*Lesson #1: Never value words over deeds, or fail to worry about the disconnect between the two.*

The trouble all started with the Cairo speech of June 4, 2009. While the vast majority of the global commentariat was swooning following the president's eloquent effort at outreach to the Muslim world, I was worrying about the already yawning gap between the stardust of his rhetoric and the prosaic realities governing foreign policy in the region. For on substance rather than style there was not a lot new, beyond the impressive delivery.

About the only novel initiative in the address—one which the Palestinians reacted to with joy—was a call that talks should not be resumed until the Israelis had halted all settlement expansion, as a way not to prejudge ultimate territorial swaps that would have to be made if a deal was to be struck. Netanyahu, a cagy survivor of the rough-and-tumble world of Israeli politics, gamed out the new team and then said... 'no.'

What, the president's rhetoric had failed to snake charm the Israeli Prime Minister into fundamentally altering his view of his country's national interests? To a realist ear (and Netanyahu, like most leaders in the Middle East is undoubtedly a realist) all this American wishful thinking must have seemed more than a little absurd. A realist would have bluntly told Obama that speeches, however well delivered, only matter when power buttresses words. Whether a president is eloquent or not is always a secondary concern; the reason people listen to him is that he remains, even in this multipolar world, the single most powerful person on the face of the earth. That is why his words matter, not because the quality of his argument is sufficiently Socratic to alter other leaders' conception of the primary interests of their countries. This fundamental misreading of human nature was the first step on Obama's road to perdition in the Middle East.

*Lesson #2: Always Have a Plan B--one involving leverage--if initial policies run into trouble.*

Assuming the latent power of America was not enough to get Israel to sign onto what the president proposed at Cairo, which was certainly always a strong possibility, where was the Plan B, the follow-up tactics that could make the Cairo strategy work? In this case, as seems true with Iran, the answer seems to be....there isn't one.

Incredibly, self-mesmerized by their own rhetoric, by their belief that the president is a world-historical figure who can blithely transcend all divisions, there was precious little thought devoted to what to do when the Israelis gamed out that they could safely respond with a humiliating 'no' to the president's plea. But like Charles Dickens's Mr. Micawber, instead the White House adopted the generic philosophy of all historical failures—they merely waited for something good to turn up.

Unlike the realist administration of George H.W. Bush, wherein Secretary of State Baker had made it crystal clear that the continued intransigence of Prime Minister Shamir of Israel would lead the US to rethink its entire relationship with its closest ally in the region—critically including the vast amount of aid America yearly gives to Israel to sustain its economy—the Obama team threatened Netanyahu, but not seriously. While he had to endure annoying lectures, both public and private, in the end, as Shakespeare had it, it all amounted to sound and fury signifying nothing. Gaming the Obama White House out, Netanyahu was right to see that as there were no practical sticks on the line that would be used to change his behavior; in essence he had a free pass to pursue Israeli interests as he thought fit. The Americans, without understanding realism's perennial use of carrots and sticks to change other's behavior, were nothing more than impotent scolds.

*Lesson #3: Never accept process as a substitute for policy.*

The end result was oh so predictable. Just 4 months on from Cairo, flummoxed by Obama's failure to part the seas, the administration accepted a humiliating climb-down. In return for unofficial talks resuming, Prime Minister Netanyahu agreed to a 10-month settlement freeze in the West Bank. He also made it clear that Jerusalem was not

part of his initiative. More than a little shocked, and faced with the prospect that this was a take-it-or-leave-it offer (for the Prime Minister *did* have a Plan B, which was to do nothing), Secretary Clinton meekly acquiesced, even praising the move, which fell canyons short of what Obama had outlined at Cairo. The psychological significance of this was devastating: the Palestinians felt rightly betrayed by the honeyed words of the new President, just as the Israelis felt both annoyed and contemptuous. Such is the price tag for not understanding how the world really works.

Worse, all Secretary Clinton could think to say was that this all had been a grand victory, as unofficial talks were set to start. But—again contrary to Wilsonian wishful thinking—talking itself does not matter. At some point, it is content that reigns supreme. The best example of this realist insight is that a decade and half of constant dialogue at resorts throughout the world has done precious little to fundamentally alter facts on the ground in the Middle East. If both Palestinians and Israelis game out that the concession they must make to the Americans and the Europeans is simply to agree to talk—the ultimate nod to style over substance—both main protagonists can quickly see that in return for giving in on form, they do not have to make significant concessions on what they truly care about—the details of the talks and the possible settlement. And this is what has happened, explaining years of fruitless negotiations.

The process is depressingly repeating itself a further time in the wake of the US-Israeli spat. The State Department is just now excitedly scurrying about, saying that Netanyahu has put forward vague guarantees that he is ‘serious’ about negotiating a peace with the Palestinians, and that by standing tough Obama has won a major diplomatic ‘victory’ here. But in practice what does this mean? Does the administration conceptually still not understand the difference between symbolism and substance?

For its not about talking, about the west collectively ramming its head into a conceptual brick wall for the umpteenth time. What’s lacking here is not effort on our part, nor do we need to make a fetish of form in lieu of any new thoughts on practical substance. Rather, what’s needed is a realization of the reasons as to why we keep hitting the wall in the first place.

*Where to Start*

For the president's edification here are a few suggestions in sentence form as to where a realist might go from here on Middle East peace. First, scrap Oslo; a confidence building strategy does not work for two communities so badly traumatized over the past half century; in terms of timing neither can go first in politically making any concessions. That means the only way forward is a secret, comprehensive agreement where everything is decided on and acted upon at once.

Second, before undertaking this mammoth effort, find out the pressure points of both sides, where the west can have maximum leverage to push the process forward. For the Israelis the sticks involve American aid levels, with the carrots revolving around an explicit security guarantee by the west (forever mitigating Israel's rightful sense of its own insecurity) and broader regional acceptance of Israel as well as its further economic integration into the region.

For the Palestinians the stick involves private western pressure that failure to deal will lead to our lessening interest in the settlement; the train is at last leaving the station. Given the dawning of the new multipolar era, the rise of the China and India, and the global economic crisis, America has plenty of other things to do with its time. We cannot want peace more than the regional players do. The carrots involve ultimate statehood, and the economic betterment of the Palestinian people. Be prepared to use these sticks—to privately threaten Israel with a significant cut in its aid and the Palestinians with a significant diminution in our involvement—if either side proves balky. And lastly, concentrate on substance. That's the best a realist can do for you, Mr. President. The rest is up to you.

*--Dr. John C. Hulsman is the Senior Research Fellow at The Hague Center for Strategic Studies ([www.hcss.nl](http://www.hcss.nl)). The President and co-founder of his own successful international relations consulting firm ([www.john-hulsman.com](http://www.john-hulsman.com)), Hulsman has just completed work on his fifth book, a biography of Lawrence of Arabia, *To Begin the World Over Again: Lawrence of Arabia From Damascus to Baghdad*. It is available on Amazon.com.*