

# MERIA

## IGNORANCE CANNOT BE REALISTIC: A CRITIQUE OF THE MEARSHEIMER-WALT THESIS

Ofira Seliktar\*

*John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's assertion that the Israel lobby, acting as an agent of Israel, has turned American foreign policy into a tool of Zionism and hurt the national interest is based on their realist view of international relations mixed with ignorance about the politics of the Middle East. This account either misrepresents or glosses over the complex realities in the region, among them such "non-rational" factors as the power of a messianic Islamist ideology and the existence of radical regimes that require continuous conflict in order to survive.*

The debate about American support for Israel has been part of the U.S. foreign policy discussion for more than half a century. In their 2007 book, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt depict this support in a negative light. The authors claim that the Israel lobby, acting as an agent of the State of Israel, has seized control of Washington's foreign policy and undermined the American national interest. Particularly damning is the accusation that the lobby pushed the United States into an unnecessary and disastrous war in Iraq.

While belief in the omnipotence of the Israel lobby is widely shared by the radical right and left, Mearsheimer and Walt, two leading international relations (IR) experts, produced the first major attempt by mainstream scholars to prove such a thesis. The book set off a heated discussion over the accuracy of the account, the authors' numerous factual errors and poor use of sources, and other such matters.

Far less attention has been paid, though, to the crucial role that their version of realist theory and views on other issues plays in shaping the Mearsheimer-Walt thesis. Mearsheimer, a so-called "offensive realist," holds that the anarchic nature of international relations is best overcome by a bipolar system bolstered by nuclear deterrence. He predicted that the collapse of Cold War bipolarity would

return Europe to a highly unstable multipolar system. To offset the destabilizing effects of this outcome, Mearsheimer advocated furthering nuclear proliferation in Europe. Writing a few months before September 11, Mearsheimer forecast a "coming crisis" of the Western alliance and predicted that "the powerful structural imperatives of the international system" would probably force the United States to "bring its troops home."

Walt, a "defensive realist," postulated that international reality is quite benign and that "normal"—that is, rational—states can learn how to pursue security by "balancing"—that is, forming alliances against external threats. Walt was reluctant to acknowledge that radical-messianic ideology and sub-state jihadi actors could affect the international order in ways that render realism meaningless. In a review of *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* by Samuel Huntington, Walt argued that the "clash of civilizations" theory is a "call for a new enemy" and a Cold War-style effort to build up "new bogeyman."<sup>1</sup> This view raised the question as to why someone would want to create such a bogeyman, leading the United States into unnecessary conflicts with illusory enemies.

September 11 caught them by surprise, especially since it did not match their theories. The threat was not so illusory after all, did not come from a state, and was not suited for

diplomatic resolution. Mearsheimer and Walt mounted an immediate effort to redeem realism from irrelevance. Though Usama bin Ladin portrayed the attack as part of an apocalyptic struggle between Islam and Christianity, Walt found that Islamist jihadism was primarily a response to Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory. Turned into an instant al-Qa'ida expert, Mearsheimer opined that "they hate us not because of civilization" but because of "our policies," including support of Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Offering a realist rationale for the unprecedented upheaval in the international system caused by al-Qa'ida was only part of the argument. Equally important was to prove that a proper U.S. policy could have prevented this confrontation. They identified the non-rational factor that had caused a detour from proper realism as the Israel lobby, which they described as a "loose coalition of individuals and organizations," the bulk of which is comprised of American Jews led by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Specifically, Mearsheimer and Walt claim that the lobby has sabotaged the American national interest, primarily on three crucial issues: the war in Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and relations with Iran and Syria

It should be noted that before becoming known "experts" on U.S. Middle East policy, Walt and Mearsheimer had never studied the Middle East (or, for that matter, U.S. policy in the region); had no particular knowledge about its history, politics, or culture; and clearly lacked familiarity with the main sources about the area. These shortcomings invalidated their conclusions. They were trying to solve an imaginary problem, since their puzzlement arose from their mistake of recasting the region into a tight realist mold that did not fit its realities.

### **OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM**

The authors state that the "driving force" behind the war was a "small band" of neoconservatives such as Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, and Richard Perle who utilized

September 11 to sell the administration and the "skeptical" American public on regime change in Iraq, part of a longstanding Israeli project of regional transformation. Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith were portrayed as having manipulated intelligence to justify the war.<sup>3</sup>

This realist narrative conveniently omits a number of crucial factors that contributed to the decision to depose Saddam Hussein. First, September 11 discredited the realist worldview and moved President George W. Bush, whose administration was once described as a "realist dream team," to claim that "skeptics who call themselves realists...have lost contact with a fundamental reality." Bush promised to pursue democratic reforms in the Middle East because "America is always more secure when freedom is on the march." Indeed, during the 1990s, many IR and Middle East experts had made the same argument, that a so-called "democratic peace" could bring stability to the region.<sup>4</sup>

Second, September 11, followed closely by the anthrax scare, prompted the administration to embrace the doctrine of preemption. Influenced by the second nuclear age debate, it emphasized that traditional Cold War deterrence--an idea at the center of Walt and Mearsheimer's most cherished thesis--could not be applied to unstable Third World dictatorships with possible links to shadowy Islamist groups driven by an apocalyptic agenda.

Whatever the correctness of the Iraq invasion itself, experience tended to validate the idea that a long-term ideologically-based conflict that could not be solved by traditional alliances or great power diplomacy was underway. During the invasion of Afghanistan, for example, the CIA discovered a fairly advanced al-Qa'ida chemical-biological weapons program, codenamed al-Zabadi. Worse, representatives of the Umma Tameer-e-Nau (UTN), a group of Pakistani nuclear scientists and intelligence officials linked to the Taliban, had mediated bin Ladin's efforts to acquire a nuclear device from Abdul Qadir Khan, the architect of Pakistan's nuclear program. One of UTN's

cofounders, Sultan Bashirrudan Mahmood, a former head of Pakistan's Atomic Energy Commission and a devout Muslim, authored the 1989 treatise *Doomsday and Life After Death: The Ultimate Fate of the Universe as Seen by the Holy Quran*, which welcomed lethal technology in the Islamic struggle with the West.<sup>5</sup>

The surprise stumble upon the al-Zabadi laboratories and the difficulty of proving a connection between bin Ladin and Saddam Hussein crystallized the administration's thinking on emerging threats, pioneered by Thomas C. Schelling and Albert Wohlstetter. According to Vice-President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, the combination of insufficient intelligence--the norm in the analysis of rogue-terrorist networks--and the low threshold for error in WMD attacks mandated a preemptive strategy. The September 2002 National Security Directive, which formalized the Bush doctrine, noted that the cross between radicalism and technology posed the gravest danger to America.<sup>6</sup>

Third, misgivings about the poor performance of both the Directorate of Intelligence (DI) and the Directorate of Operations (DO) of the CIA have been longstanding. According to critics, the analytical branch was hobbled by architect of the DI Sherman Kent's strong positivist belief in a rational political universe in which objective experts could parse reality in order to reach a "truthful" conclusion based on incontrovertible evidence. The Kentian analytical tradition, bolstered by American legal culture, has put a premium on high evidentiary standards. Striving to reach the "smoking gun" grade made the understanding of complex, murky phenomena such as terrorism especially difficult. Critics were even more contemptuous of the protocols guiding covert operations in the DO, where operatives were subject to a long list of legal restrictions and advised to take out personal insurance against law suits, making the CIA highly risk-averse.<sup>7</sup>

Upon taking office, Rumsfeld, a longstanding critic of the CIA, decided to shift

some intelligence gathering to the Pentagon. Vice-President Dick Cheney was equally skeptical of the CIA's ability to provide timely intelligence. As defense secretary in the administration of George H. W. Bush, Cheney was well aware that the CIA not only failed to predict Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 but was totally unaware of its advanced nuclear program. While Bush refrained from criticizing the CIA in public, the failure to warn about September 11 and the al-Zabadi affair lent credence to the Cheney-Rumsfeld view that the agency was incompetent and dysfunctional.

The newly established Policy Counterterrorism Evaluation Group (PCTEG) in the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith was tasked with studying the "policy implications of terror and their sources of support." Although the CIA did not accept the PCTEG's finding that September 11 ringleader Muhammad Atta met with an Iraqi intelligence official in Prague, CIA Director George Tenet agreed with the Pentagon that there was tactical level cooperation between al-Qa'ida and Iraq with regard to safe havens, training, and chemical weapons production. Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, a senior al-Qa'ida operative and liaison to al-Ansar al-Islam, an Islamist Kurdish group that Saddam Hussein cultivated, was in charge of a chemical facility in Khurmali.<sup>8</sup>

As for Iraq's own WMD arsenal, the CIA and the Pentagon assumed that Saddam Hussein had some biological and chemical capability and was poised to reconstitute his nuclear program. Though part of the information underlying this assessment proved controversial, Iraqi Foreign Minister Naji Sabri, who was recruited by the CIA in 2002, confirmed that Hussein kept some chemical and biological production lines and might have tried to relaunch his nuclear program. This view was reflected in the 2002 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) and was shared by virtually all allied intelligence services. Paul R. Pillar, former National Intelligence Officer for Near East and South East Asia and a bitter critic of the Iraq War, admitted that the Bush administration's perception of Iraqi WMD was

“shared by the Clinton administration, congressional Democrats, and most other Western governments and intelligence services.”<sup>9</sup>

A number of investigations of prewar intelligence on Iraq have produced no clear culprit for the failure. Lord Butler, who headed the British inquiry, found the MI6 dossier, which alerted the CIA to the Niger yellow cake, to be sound. In retrospect, Saddam Hussein’s efforts to pursue “deterrence by ambiguity” contributed heavily to the widespread perception of Iraqi malfeasance. Isolated from the outside world and confident that France and Russia would protect him in the Security Council, Hussein hoped to outwit Bush and retain his status as a regional player, for which WMD was crucial. Tenet commented that Hussein’s ploy created an “implausible truth: “[We] had no previous experience with a country that did not possess such weapons but pretended that it did.”<sup>10</sup>

Whether or not one believes the Iraq War was a wise or necessary action, any serious analyst must acknowledge that the administration acted on the basis of perceived U.S. interests. There is no serious evidence that this was done either at Israel’s behest or for its benefit. In fact, as Walt and Mearsheimer have since admitted, Israel was unenthusiastic at best about the idea of invading Iraq, partly out of a belief that such an offensive would seriously damage Israel’s main priority, deterring Iran. Lawrence Wilkerson, chief of staff for Secretary of State Colin Powell, disclosed that the “Israelis were telling us Iraq is not the enemy--Iran is the enemy,” adding that warnings against the invasion were “pervasive” in Israel’s communications with the administration.<sup>11</sup>

## **THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT**

Again, given their realist perspective, it is hard for Walt and Mearsheimer to understand a conflict that seems to defy their categories. After all, it would seem from a superficial examination that rational considerations would make Arab states want to end the struggle,

while Palestinian leaders would be expected to seek to obtain a state even if this required considerable compromise. To them, then, the conflict would seem easy to solve and it would be in the U.S. interest--and within its capabilities--to solve it. Explaining how the United States failed to achieve this goal would therefore appear to require some malevolent force which pushed American policy off course.

As a result, the authors argue that the Israel lobby has blocked the United States from resolving the conflict, thereby generating anti-American animosity in the region and beyond, since supposedly all Arab states and Muslims would also want to achieve a quick resolution. They assert that upon taking office, George W. Bush, “who understood that it is in the American national interest” to settle the conflict, tried but “has not come close to achieving that goal” because “there has been little change in the balance of power between Bush and the lobby.” Mearsheimer and Walt credited the effectiveness of Elliott Abrams, an official on the National Security Council, and two other lobby members, John Hanna and David Wurmser, with undermining the efforts of Condoleezza Rice to reach out to Arafat’s successor, Mahmud Abbas. They charge that the same individuals, working with the Israeli government, prevented Rice from negotiating with Hamas, triggering the takeover of the Gaza Strip by the Islamists in 2007. “Absent the lobby” the United States “could hold out the promise of fulfilling their [Palestinians] dream of a viable state in the Occupied Territories coupled with massive long-term economic aid.” The authors suggest that the United States could have pressured Israel by withdrawing aid and, if necessary, isolated it as they did the apartheid regime in South Africa.<sup>12</sup>

Again, this rationalist account shows little or no understanding of how Middle East politics and ideology works, nor does it comprehend the true interests of most Arab regimes. It treats the Palestinians as a unitary rational actor that seeks not Israel’s elimination and total victory but merely wants to obtain a state as quickly and easily as

possible. This view ignores or misrepresents the complexities of the Oslo process, the goals and governing style of PLO leader Yasir Arafat, and the nature of Palestinian political culture and ideology.

Arafat and his movement did not fit the realist framework--at least one unadjusted to the particular ideology and goals it held--for many reasons. In the post-1993 period, four in particular stand out.

First, they did not accept the realist model of seeking a state among other states because the Palestinian movement did not accept the existing system. Rather, their goal remained the destruction of Israel and its replacement by a Palestinian Arab state. This doomed any chance for peace in advance, and this will remain the case until this conception is changed.

Second, the tactical goal of Arafat and his movement was not to achieve a state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, even as a complete stage before a potential future total victory, but remained deeply ambiguous toward this prospect. The obvious realist objective of doing what was necessary to get a short-term material benefit was simply not at the heart of their motivation.

Third, as a result of the above two factors, plus his own style and the movement's organization, Arafat was uninterested in state-building. He did not assemble institutions, promote a stable economy, or do the other things necessary to launch a state successfully. Similarly, he had no interest in transforming his movement into one ready for peace and compromise. This would have been a difficult task because of the movement's history and ideas, but Arafat literally made no effort whatsoever toward education or reorganization in this direction. Rather than make the necessary compromises and undertake the actions needed to achieve peace with Israel--notably making a serious effort to end terrorism--Arafat preferred the process to fail, which is what happened at Camp David in 2000. It was then easy for him to return to armed struggle since he had never really left that traditional path in the first place.

When Arafat signed the Deceleration of Principles in September 1993, he faced a major challenge of creating a state and reorienting the movement from revolutionary struggle to peacemaking and administration. Following his past model, however, Arafat fragmented the Palestinian Authority by setting up rival bureaucracies with overlapping jurisdictions and encouraging corruption as a way to ensure his control over more venial colleagues. In addition, he presided over an ever-growing network of police, general intelligence, special security services, and paramilitary units. With no clear chain of command, the various organs engaged in often violent struggles against each other or presided over "mafia style" criminal enterprises that specialized in kickbacks, extortion, and kidnappings. Self-appointed vigilante gangs dispensed their own brand of justice and terrorized the population.<sup>13</sup>

The virtual breakdown of law and order was matched by the corruption and patronage that enveloped the Palestinian economy. The 1994 Paris Protocol, the economic annex to the Oslo agreement, envisaged a liberal economy within a customs union with Israel and open borders for goods and labor. International donors pledged billions of dollars to help spur economic development, with monies to be disbursed by the Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction (PEDCAR). However, efforts to promote economic prosperity were thwarted by a combination of factors. Arafat granted numerous import monopolies to supporters, raising the prices of goods and services. State companies run by the Palestine Development and Investment Company (PADICO) under Arafat's chief financial adviser, Muhammad Rashid, dominated the economy and stifled private enterprise. As chairman of PEDCAR, Arafat had unprecedented control over foreign aid money, most of which was embezzled and mismanaged. A dramatic increase in suicide attacks forced security measures that severely restricted access to the Israeli labor market, a mainstay of the Palestinian economy. Before the first intifada in the late 1980s, close to 70 percent of the Palestinian labor force worked

in Israel; in January 1994, a mere 11 percent held work permits.<sup>14</sup>

A new issue was how Arafat was to deal with the emergence of an Islamist opposition. Hamas, an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, was established in 1987 and declared all historical Palestine to be a *waqf*, a holy possession consecrated for all Muslims until Judgment Day. To liberate it from Israel, the Hamas charter advocated violent jihad, a task that fell to its military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qasam Brigade. At times, Arafat tried to rein in Hamas, but he never completely forced it into submission, not only because this would have been difficult, but also because he viewed it as a future ally against Israel. Arafat and Hamas signed the 1995 Cairo Agreement, which allowed the Islamists to launch attacks within Israeli-controlled territories, a step that completely undermined the Oslo Accords.<sup>15</sup>

The continuation of terrorism by Hamas, other groups, and at times even by Arafat's own Fatah group ensured Israeli distrust, continued Palestinian militancy, and economic misery. However, underlying all this was Arafat's own ambiguity for peace. Rather than acting as a realist revolutionary-turned-statesmen--a step taken by scores of Third World nationalist leaders who had succeeded in obtaining states in the past--Arafat at most changed only his rhetoric, and even that incompletely and mainly only when he spoke in English, not Arabic. At times, he compared the process to the al-Hudaybiyya agreement--a reference to the truce that Muhammad reached with the Jewish Quraysh tribe of Mecca, only to violate it and wipe them out when the balance of power turned in his favor. The anti-Israeli, sometimes anti-Semitic incitement in the official PA media prompted the United States, which mediated the Wye Agreement in 1998, to establish a special commission to monitor the situation.

It should hardly be surprising that the attempt to reach peace at Camp David in 2000 failed. To attribute this to a lack of personal chemistry among the leaders or some mistake in the framing of the details misses the point. A realist view might *a priori* assume Arafat

wanted to reach an agreement if the other side only took his interests and needs into consideration. In fact, his real views, strategy, tactics, and goals pointed in a quite different direction. The problem then is not that Arafat wanted too little--a deal that was explicitly defined as a framework for further negotiations--but that he wanted too much. His worldview simply did not match what it was "supposed to be."

In spite of a major public relations effort by the PA and its supporters to offer a revisionist account of Camp David, there was a virtual consensus that the Palestinians had rejected a good offer. President Clinton concluded that Arafat "could not make the final jump from a revolutionary to a statesman," a view shared by CIA director Tenet. Secretary of State Madeline Albright faulted Arafat for a "lack of vision" and inability to compromise.<sup>16</sup>

Yet when Walt and Mearsheimer apply a realist perspective, their basic line of reasoning runs as follows: Arafat would not have turned down a good offer since he was acting as a statesman pursuing Palestinian national interests; therefore, what he was given at Camp David must not have been a good offer. Yet why would the United States, which wanted to resolve the conflict, not make a good offer to Arafat? Clearly, this must have been due to Israeli influence on U.S. policy.

Even at this point, they might have concluded that Israel judged reasonably the minimum needed to preserve its own national interest (and survival) and that the United States, rationally assessing the situation, agreed. Given their presumptions, however, they instead accept the idea (which is constantly reiterated by the Arab and radical sources they use) that Israel really did not want peace. This is the kind of analysis that leads them into irrelevancy at best and fantasy at worst.

A similar chain of logic relates to the next development, the launching of a second intifada. In subjective terms, renewed armed struggle fits perfectly with the strategy, tactics, goals, and ideology of the Palestinian movement and its leadership. However, to Walt and Mearsheimer, since this was a losing

proposition--that is, an unrealistic one not in Palestinian interests--it could have happened only if they had no choice. Once again, Israel made them do it. The same idea is applied to Hamas, which rejects peace because of its own radical Islamist vision. To Walt and Mearsheimer, either disregarding or ignorant of the role of ideology and worldview, however, Hamas is also a rational actor that merely needs be engaged to bring about a negotiated, stable solution.

## RELATIONS WITH IRAN AND SYRIA

Mearsheimer and Walt acknowledge that Iran and Syria have a history of supporting terrorist organizations and are known to possess chemical and possibly biological weapons and, in the case of Iran, nurture a nuclear ambition. Still, the authors argue that none of this should be viewed as a threat to the United States, "apart from the U.S. commitment to Israel itself" and blame the Israel lobby for sabotaging Washington's relations with Tehran and Damascus.

Here, too, the problem is with their view that the rulers in Tehran and Damascus are also realists, pursuing reasonable national interests (if only allowed to do so). The ideological line of these countries—which includes all their leaders' and media's statements in Persian and Arabic every day—is of no account to them. The idea that Iran wishes to dominate the region and Syria seeks hegemony in the Arab world is not part of their calculations. These countries are thought merely to be seeking security and stability, the supposed goal of all states.

Mearsheimer and Walt point out that Israel and its American supporters urged the Clinton administration to "pursue a confrontational policy toward Iran." They describe former Iranian President Muhammad Khatami as "enthusiastic" about improving relations with the United States" and accuse Israel of sabotaging détente between the two countries. Yet it is a simple matter to note that Khatami was unable to achieve a single change in Iranian policy, at home or abroad, because hardliners continued to be in control of the

real power. The idea that he could have engineered any shift in Tehran's most controversial issue, U.S.-Iran relations, whatever his personal preferences, simply has no basis in reality.

The problem of Mearsheimer and Walt is to insist that the United States has no reason of its own—from a sound realist, national interest perspective—for opposing Iran and Syria. Lacking knowledge about Middle Eastern history, they do not understand that these two states are merely the latest in a long series of dictators seeking to destabilize their neighbors, overthrow America's Arab allies in the region, and expel U.S. influence. Washington needed no urging from Israel to oppose Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1960s and 1970s; radical Syria and Iraq in the 1970s and 1980s; and Iraq's Saddam Hussein in the 1990s and thereafter. Aside from such issues as Soviet power and oil resources, it was concern about the overthrow of such regimes as those in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon, and (after 1977) Egypt that motivated American action more than any threat to Israel.

The authors describe Syrian President Bashar al-Asad as "a Shiite [sic] leader of a secular state," disregarding the fact that Syria has become the main state sponsor of radical Islamist groups (Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hizballah, the Sunni insurgents in Iraq, and many others) in the Arab world. They argue that Iran started to support Islamic Jihad only after "its exclusion from the 1991 Madrid Conference," which led "Tehran to resist correctly what it saw as a broad U.S. effort to isolate it and deny it a significant role in the region."

This is as if up to 1991 Iran did not seek the total destruction of U.S. interests in the region and the overthrow of all existing Arab regimes other than Syria. It also assumes that Iran wanted to go to a peace conference with Israel. Again, though, the error is to assume that the leaders of Iran and Syria think like Walt and Mearsheimer. When American policymakers, based on their experience, reach a different conclusion, the authors simply cannot figure out how they could be so wrong. In every

case, the “mistake” is attributed to Israeli influence.

Their energetic rejection of what Arab and Iranian leaders actually think is shown by their view of Iranian attitudes toward Israel. While admitting that some Iranian leaders “made some deeply disturbing remarks” about the Holocaust and Israel’s right to exist, Mearsheimer and Walt claim it is a mistranslation that does not amount to “a call for Israel’s physical destruction.” In particular, President Mahmud Ahmadinejad’s rhetoric should be seen as “tactical measures” aimed at improving “Iran’s position in the region.” This kind of thing cries out for comparison to diplomacy in the 1930s, which simply insisted on viewing Germany as being ruled by a realist regime that would be moderate if only its legitimate (and limited) interests were recognized.

The authors are equally sanguine about Iran’s budding nuclear program. They admit a preference for a nuclear-free Iran but state that “there is good reason to think that a nuclear Iran can be contained and deterred, just as the Soviet Union was contained during the Cold War.” Mearsheimer and Walt assure their readers that Iran would neither use nuclear weapons nor give one to a terrorist group, since “giving away the nuclear weapons that they had run grave risks to obtain is probably the last thing such regimes would ever do.” The authors accuse the Israel lobby of launching a massive campaign to portray both states as rogues, a tactic that hides Israel’s own intransigence, especially with regard to Syria. The latter is said to have made repeated peace overtures to Israel, including the 2000 offer, which was thwarted when Prime Minister Barak “got cold feet” at the last moment.<sup>17</sup>

In order to blame America’s problems with Iran and Syria on the Israel lobby, Mearsheimer and Walt either misrepresent or provide erroneous information on all counts. To begin with, an official Iranian translation confirms that Ahmadinejad called for Israel being wiped off the map.<sup>18</sup> The containment policy was originally fashioned as a response to the Islamic Revolution in Iran led by

Ayatollah Ruhallah Khomeini, who seized American hostages and launched a terrorist-based effort to destabilize the Middle East under the Pasdaran, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). With the help of the Lebanon-based Hizballah, Teheran was able to strike at Americans as well. On orders from MOIS, in 1983 Hizballah bombed the American embassy and the Marine barracks in Beirut where hundreds perished. To punish Iran, the Reagan administration tightened its containment policy in the 1980s and, taking a page from the realist textbook, attempted “offshore balancing” by tilting toward Iraq. Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 compelled the Clinton administration to look for new options. Bruce W. Jentleson, a scholar working in policy planning at the State Department, credited his writings with the decision to add Iraq to the containment policy, which created the actual dual containment in 1993. As envisaged by the increasingly desperate administration, dual containment was America’s last ditch effort to thwart the rapid growth of terrorism and proliferation of WMDs in the Middle East.<sup>19</sup>

Far from being a creation of the Israel lobby, Iran and Syria’s reputation as state sponsors of terrorism is well established. The IRGC founded Hizballah in 1982 to destabilize Lebanon and harass Israel across its northern border. The 1989 military coup in Sudan that brought to power the National Islamic Front of Hasan al-Turabi provided Iran with a connection in Africa. In October 2007, the State Department put the IRGC and its elite unit al-Quds on its list of terrorist organizations.<sup>20</sup>

In October 1991, Tehran convened the International Conference in Support of the Islamic Revolution of the People of Palestine. The attendees reaffirmed that Palestine is an Islamic *waqf* and issued a *fatwa* against peace with Israel. This was not due to pique at not being invited to the Madrid Conference but fit perfectly into the Iranian revolutionary regime’s ideology and worldview. Tehran’s backing of Hamas and Islamic Jihad are part of a continuous effort to block a negotiated



settlement with Israel, no matter what the terms. A rather typical statement by Spiritual Guide Khamene'i called Israel a "cancerous tumor" that must be removed from the Middle East.<sup>21</sup> Walt and Mearsheimer simply will not believe that Iranian leaders sincerely mean what they say.

Syria's long history of sponsoring terrorism has been detailed in the State Department's annual *Patterns of Global Terrorism* report. To control Lebanon, Damascus resorted to terrorism and assassinations, a strategy continuing after Syrian troops left in 2005. Syria also used terrorist groups to sabotage the peace process. In 1993, Damascus created the Alliance of Palestinian Forces (APF), composed of all the Oslo rejectionist secular Palestinian factions and joined by Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The Syrian capital is home to the most extremist Palestinian organizations, including the external leaders of Islamic Jihad and Hamas. The APF repeatedly denounced Arafat and his successor Mahmud Abbas and called for liberating Palestine from "the river to the sea."<sup>22</sup>

The regime's adamant rejection of a comprehensive peace with Israel is rooted in the structure of power in Syrian society. The long-ruling Asad family and virtually the entire political-military elite are Alawites, a small minority in a predominantly Sunni country. The regime has used the conflict to justify its rule at home. If the conflict were to end, the government's rationale for ruling the country, controlling the economy so tightly, funneling so much of the country's resources into the military, and denying its citizens rights would simply disappear. Peace with Israel spells the beginning of the end for the Syrian regime. Thus, its intransigence is a very realistic response to the regime's interests. Yet it is this kind of analysis that is lacking from Walt and Mearsheimer's work. For them, Iran and Arab states are basically black boxes that will inevitably produce a definition of self-interest that fits with the two professors' thesis, rather than with the regimes' own needs, experience, goals, and ideology.

The same criteria apply to Syrian policy toward Lebanon. Its control of Lebanon has enriched the elite through counterfeiting and drug trafficking while providing payoffs to the masses through jobs and other benefits. Turning Lebanon into a satellite compensates for the failure of Syria's own economy. American policymakers have more or less understood these factors, problems having little or nothing to do with Israeli interests.

Consequently, moderation and a negotiated settlement, long hoped for by American realists, would go against the rationally conceived interest of the regime. Indeed, "Western attempts to negotiate, bargain with or appease Syria" make things worse, since it gives "the regime the impression that it has nothing to fear" if it continues existing policies.<sup>23</sup>

If Iranian and Syrian support for terrorism has strained their relations with Washington for decades, Teheran's nuclear ambition pushed it over the edge. Iran's interest in developing WMD stemmed from its bloody war with Iraq in the 1980s, when Iranian forces were subject to a number of chemical attacks. Under the personal control of President Hashemi Rafsanjani and the IRGC, the nuclear and missile program was given top priority. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed that Iran had a more advanced uranium enrichment program in a secret facility in Natanz and a heavy water reactor in Arak, apparently built with the help of Pakistan's A.Q. Khan and North Korea.

The discovery alarmed the international community, which has used sanctions to persuade Iran to give up the program. Israel's attack on a Syrian facility, widely reported to be for nuclear weapons purposes, warned that Damascus might follow the same path. Israel is the country most concerned and outspoken about these threats, but many Arab leaders are also quite worried about them, especially in private.

While Israel has certainly had influence on these issues, U.S. policymakers did not need to be convinced that the Palestinians sabotaged peacemaking or that Iran and Syria were threats to U.S. interests. It is worth

noting that Arab states and European allies also had influence in setting these policies. Experience--the outcome of past efforts to negotiate with Iran, Syria, Iraq under Saddam Hussein and the PLO--was also a factor. The authors' ignorance about all this history helps once again to skew their conclusions.

### **CONCLUSION: REALIST THEORY, PREDICTIONS, AND POLICY PRESCRIPTIONS**

As leading realists, both Mearsheimer and Walt have been well aware that however diffuse, political theory forms the basis of predictions and policymaking. *The Israel Lobby* is their latest attempt to use realism to define international reality and guide American foreign policy accordingly. Although ostensibly focused on the lobby, much more is at stake here. As September 11 made it hard to argue that radical Islam is a new bogeyman, Mearsheimer and Walt have used the book to push the view that Islamist terror organizations and their state patrons, Syria and Iran, are quite rational and limited in their demands.

In this view, the United States could go a long way to assuage their concerns by discarding the shackles of the Israel lobby. If, on the other hand, the anti-Israel animus of radical Islam is only one piece in a struggle for regional and even world domination, the Walt-Mearsheimer approach poses a tremendous danger to Western interests, equivalent to the mistaken assessments of Nazi Germany and the Stalinist USSR in the past.

To make their case for realism, the authors use the same methodology that led Mearsheimer to advocate supporting the Soviet Union in order to prolong the Cold War. This time around they refuse to acknowledge the possibility that, in Barry Rubin's words, "radical regimes and movements are dangerous due to their radical ideology, violent methods, and totalitarian goals." Rubin and others provide compelling evidence that regardless of the status of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Islamists have worked hard to implement their theocratic vision for

the Middle East and beyond. The powerful Muslim Brotherhoods, Hizballah, Hamas, and the Algerian GIA have all demanded the imposition of Shari'a law in Muslim lands.<sup>24</sup>

Most troubling, the realist analysis leads Mearsheimer and Walt to conclude that American foreign policy is essentially a tool of Zionism, an argument that radical Arab nationalists and Islamists have been making for decades. Indeed, their sources often lie with this literature. Yet, as Rubin makes clear in his book *The Tragedy of the Middle East*, nothing could be further from the truth. In 12 major conflicts where "Muslims had a conflict with non-Muslims or secular forces, or Arabs had a conflict with non-Arabs," the United States sided with the former in 11 cases. Still, Rubin is resigned to the fact that "no amount of factual presentation" can penetrate the "web of illusions" spun by willful denial of reality by many Western observers who insist on interpreting Middle Eastern politics through a framework developed for European ones.<sup>25</sup>

Certainly, a realist approach can be developed for the Middle East. However, it must rest on a basis of assessing the view of Middle Eastern leaders and regimes as to their interests and worldview. Once this is established, there are usually "rational actors" within these parameters. Their logical behavior springs from premises which to Western observers might seem objectively wrong and ultimately disastrous for their authors. Yet what is important is the reality of the Middle East, not what Western political scientists with no knowledge of the region think that it should be.

*\*Ofira Seliktar is author of Failing the Crystal Ball Test: The Carter Administration and the Fundamentalist Revolution in Iran (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000); Politics, Paradigms, and Intelligence Failures: Why So Few Predicted the Collapse of the Soviet Union (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004); and The Politics of Intelligence and American Wars with Iraq (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008).*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After The Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990), pp. 6-8; John J. Mearsheimer "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War," *Atlantic Monthly* (August 1990), pp. 35-50; John J. Mearsheimer, "The Future of the American Pacifier," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 5 (September-October 2001), pp. 48-49, 52; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), p. 373; Stephen M. Walt, "Building Up New Bogymen," *Foreign Policy*, No. 106 (Spring 1997), pp. 186-87, 189.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "Commentary on the Terrorist Attack Against the United States," *Boston Globe*, September 30, 2001; John Mearsheimer, "Hearts and Minds," *National Interest*, No. 69 (Fall 2002), pp.13-16.

<sup>3</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), pp. 17, 112-15, 229-62.

<sup>4</sup> Jack Snyder, "One World, Rival Theories," *Foreign Policy*, No. 145 (2004), p. 52.

<sup>5</sup> George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years in the CIA* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), pp. 272-87.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffery Goldberg, "The Unknown," *New Yorker*, February 10, 2003; Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America's Pursuit of Its Enemies Since 9/11* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), pp. 272-87.

<sup>7</sup> Ofira Seliktar, *Failing the Crystal Ball Test: The Carter Administration and the Fundamentalist Revolution in Iran* (Westport, CT; Praeger, 2000), pp. 189-92; Ofira Seliktar, *Politics, Paradigms, and Intelligence Failures: Why So Few Predicted the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), pp. 214-91.

<sup>8</sup> Tenet, *At the Center*, p. 154.

<sup>9</sup> Paul R. Pillar, "A Dysfunctional Relationship," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 3 (March/April 2006), pp. 15-28.

<sup>10</sup> *Report on the U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessment on Iraq*, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, July 7, 2006, <http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/2004-rpt/ssci-irga.pdf>; *Report of the Select Committee on Postwar Findings About WMD Program and Links to Terrorism and How They Compare with Prewar Assessment*, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, September 8, 2006, <http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/2006-rpt/sept109-331.pdf>; Lord Butler, *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction Ordered by the House of Commons*, Report of a Committee of Privy Council, July 14, 2004, <http://www.butlerreview.org/uk/-6k>; Kevin Wood, James Lacey, and William Murrey, "Saddam's Delusion: The View from the Inside," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 3 (May-June 2006), pp. 2-26; Tenet, *At the Center*, pp. 331-32.

<sup>11</sup> Mearsheimer and Walt quote a number of articles in the Israeli and American press to the effect that Israel saw Iran, not Iraq, as a priority, *The Israel Lobby*, p. 421; Martin Kramer, "Israel and the Iraq War," *Sandbox*, April 12, 2006; Martin Kramer, "Mearsheimer, Walt and the Cold Feet," *Sandbox*, December 10, 2007; Gareth Porter, "Politics: Israel Warned Us Not to Invade Iraq After 9/11," *IPS*, August 28, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Mearsheimer and Walt, *Israel Lobby*, pp. 211, 223-24, 219, 226.

<sup>13</sup> Some of the harshest criticism of the failed state-to-be came from high-profile Palestinian advocates: Edward Said, *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000), p. 3; Lisa Hajjar, "Human Rights in Israel/Palestine: The History and Politics of a Movement," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Summer 2001), pp. 21-38; Sara Roy, "The Seeds of Chaos, and of Night: The Gaza Strip After the Oslo Agreement," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Spring 1994), pp. 85-89; Sara Roy, "Civil Society in the Gaza Strip: Obstacles to Social Reconstruction," in August Richard Norton (ed.), *Civil Society in*

*the Middle East* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), pp. 221-58. Amnesty International listed torture and death in detention and violence against alleged collaborators with Israel as major problems in *Israel/Occupied Territories and the Palestinian Authority* (New York: Amnesty International, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> George T. Abed, "Interview: Developing the Economy," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Summer 1994), pp. 41-51; Said K. Aburish, *Arafat: From Defender to Dictator* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), pp. 34, 279; Cheryl A. Rubenberg, *The Palestinians: In Search of a Just Peace* (Boulder: Lynn Rienner, 2003), pp. 249-50, 256-59; Sara Roy, "Alienation and Accommodation," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Summer 1995), pp. 73-82; Kenneth R. Timmerman, *Preachers of Hate: Islam and the War on America* (New York: Crown Forum, 2003), p. 172; Markus E. Bouillon, *The Peace Business: Money and Power in the Palestine-Israel Conflict* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004), pp. 92-94; Sari Nusseibeh, *Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007), pp. 403-04.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Levitt, *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 8-28; Andrew Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, "Sabotaging the Peace: The Politics of Extremist Violence," *International Organization*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (2002), pp. 263-96; Wendy Kristianassen, "Challenge and Counterchallenge: Hamas's Response to Oslo," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Spring 1999), pp. 19-36.

<sup>16</sup> Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), p. 943; Tenet, *At the Center*, p. 96; Madeline Albright, *Madame Secretary: A Memoir* (New York, 2003), p. 492.

<sup>17</sup> Mearsheimer and Walt, *Israel Lobby*, pp. 70-73, 262, 265-66, 280, 282, 283-86, 289.

<sup>18</sup> The official translation, including the description on Ahmadinejad's website, refers to wiping Israel away. Ethan Bronner, "Just How Far They Go, These Words Against Israel," *New York Times*, June 11, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Bruce W. Jentleson, *With Friends like These: Reagan, Bush, and Saddam 1982-1990* (New York: Norton, 1994), p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> *9/11 Commission Report*, [http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911R\\_eport.pdf](http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911R_eport.pdf), pp. 60-61, 468.

<sup>21</sup> Steven Erlanger, "Iran's Top Cleric Calls For Boycott of Peace Talks," *New York Times*, October 14, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Andres Strinberg, "The Damascus-Based Alliance of Palestinian Forces," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Spring 2000), pp. 60-76.

<sup>23</sup> Barry Rubin, *The Truth About Syria* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007), pp. 5, 235-36.

<sup>24</sup> Barry Rubin, "Without Illusion," October 22, 2007, [http://gloriacenter.org/index.asp?pname=submenus/articles/2007/rubin/10\\_22.asp](http://gloriacenter.org/index.asp?pname=submenus/articles/2007/rubin/10_22.asp);

Barry Rubin, ed., *Revolutionaries and Reformers: Contemporary Islamist Movements* (New York: SUNY Press, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> Barry Rubin, *The Tragedy of the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).