



THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Obama: The Reluctant Realist

Steven R. David



Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 113

**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES
BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**

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Obama: The Reluctant Realist

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many have asserted that Barack Obama's foreign policy lacks direction. He is seen as constantly improvising without any ideological or intellectual compass to guide him. I argue that this is not the case and that, in fact, Obama's foreign policy can be explained as adhering very closely to traditional realist theory. After explaining what I mean by realism, I show how Obama's rhetoric displays a strong realist core. I then demonstrate how Obama's key foreign policy decisions, including the pivot to Asia, the handling of Iran's nuclear program, the reaction to Russian intervention in Ukraine, and the response to the "Arab Spring," were all consistent with realism. The implications for Obama's realist policy for Israel are then considered. I conclude with the observation that a realist foreign policy is not necessarily an admirable one, and that critics of Obama's foreign policy should recognize their objections are as much with realism as they are with the President.

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INTRODUCTION

There is no shortage of criticism of President Obama's foreign policy, especially in Israel. The President is seen as weak, indecisive, naive, afraid to lead and fearful of using force. Most of all, many have argued, they just cannot figure him out. He seems to be constantly improvising without any ideological or intellectual compass to guide him. This failure to explain why he acts as he does and the underlying worry that Obama may not himself understand the rationale for his decisions lies at the heart of much of the unease many have for Obama, both in Israel and, for that matter, in the United States. I argue that, in fact, Obama's foreign policy is no mystery. It can be explained as adhering very closely to traditional realist theory. In each of his major foreign policy decisions, far from being random or inexplicable, Obama has behaved as a realist. To be sure, a realist foreign policy is not necessarily a good foreign policy, and Obama's actions demonstrate many of the shortcomings of this approach. Nevertheless, demonstrating that Obama's foreign policy follows realism goes against the view that his actions defy explanation. Those who criticize Obama's approach need to understand that their problem is as much with realism as it is with the President. This is all the more remarkable since many of Obama's fiercest critics describe themselves as realists.

My argument is put forth in three parts. First, I put forth my own understanding of realism. Second, in the bulk of the essay, I examine Obama's major foreign policy decisions, explaining why the great

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majority of them are consistent with realist precepts. I conclude by examining the implications of Obama's realism for American support of Israel and world order.

WHAT IS REALISM?

There are probably as many views of realism as there are scholars and practitioners who claim to abide by it.¹ In its simplest form, realism is an approach or theory that purports to describe the way the world behaves. Central to realism is the belief that the world today is the way it has always been and will always be. People may wish to believe that human nature can be transformed, that states will not go to war, or that the international system could somehow end its anarchic nature, but these are pipe dreams.² If humans seek to lessen the wars and conflicts that do erupt and make the best of a very bad situation, it is critical not to fall prey to the illusion that humankind can escape its condition. Instead, in order to survive and prosper in this grim world, people must work with the world as it is.

Just what is this realist world? Realism paints a very bleak picture of world politics where states struggle over power with the constant threat of war lurking in the background. Cooperation among states is severely limited and lasting peace impossible. The world is like this because of assumptions that realists make about international politics. First, as Hans Morgenthau argues, human nature is fixed and flawed. People are hardwired to struggle for power, which is stronger than any impulse to act for the good of all. This desire for power often leads to conflict, something for which we need to be prepared.³ For John Mearsheimer, international anarchy, not human nature, underlays the assumptions realism makes. Anarchy does not mean chaos, rather that people live in an international system composed of states in which there is no government above them to settle disputes. In this anarchic international system, states possess the ability to hurt and even destroy other states. Making matters worse, it is impossible to discern the intentions of other states. An arms buildup in a neighboring state may be offensive or defensive. Since a state cannot know for sure, in a world characterized by international anarchy, it

must assume the worst. For realists, the most important challenge for leaders is to figure out how to preserve the survival of their states in this threatening environment. Finally, realists assume that leaders are rational in the sense that they are sensitive to costs. Leaders may be evil and they may miscalculate, but they will reasonably weigh the costs and benefits of a given decision before acting.⁴

These assumptions drive state behavior. Since countries seek to survive in a threatening world in which there is no world government to come to their rescue, states must rely on themselves for their protection. Relying on other states or – even worse – international institutions, is foolish and potentially deadly.⁵ Given that nearly one-third of countries have been wiped off the world map from 1816 to the present, this concern about survival is understandable and pressing.⁶ Leaders cannot allow their personal morality to affect foreign policy if doing so imperils the existence of their state. The greatest immorality for realists is allowing their country to be destroyed. Humanitarian interventions that drain resources from states and make them ill-prepared to deal with challenges to their vital interests must not be undertaken. As Michael Mandelbaum argued, foreign policy should not be “social work.”⁷ In addition, states should avoid ideological crusades to spread their form of government to others. What matters in realism is the power and intent of potential adversaries, not the form of government a state has. Scarce resources should not be wasted on marginal concerns while vital interests are neglected. As the prominent American realist and commentator, Walter Lippmann warned, governments cannot allow its commitments to exceed its capabilities.⁸

For the United States, vital interests are protecting security, economic well-being and core values of itself and of its key allies in Europe, parts of Asia, and the Persian Gulf. For all other concerns, America is advised to adopt a strategy of “offshore balancing,” meaning, it should keep the bulk of its military forces away from conflicts and only intervene as a last resort when vital interests cannot be protected any other way.⁹ In order to be a successful offshore balancer, the United States needs to be a “buck-passer,” i.e., getting others who have more at stake to do the fighting while America watches from afar.¹⁰ Force must be used when necessary, but only as a last resort. Because states try to resist threats, forceful policies by one state will simply drive countries into the arms of

a competitor.¹¹ For the United States, abstaining from the use of force in most circumstances allows it to focus its efforts where they matter most while encouraging countries to do more for themselves.

Obama and Realism

What evidence exists that Obama is a realist? First, there are the claims that Obama follows realist principles by those who have worked closely with him. Upon assuming the presidency, Obama emphasized that he was going to pursue a different foreign policy than Bill Clinton and others who preceded him. In describing what that approach would be, his Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel said, “Everybody always breaks it down between idealist and realist. If you had to put him in a category, he’s probably more realpolitik, like Bush 41.”¹² In trying to explain why Obama praises realists such as George H.W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, but appointed liberal interventionists such as Samantha Power, an administration official remarked to David Remnick of the *New Yorker*, “I think Obama is basically a realist – but he feels bad about it.”¹³ Obama’s essential realism was also noted by former National Security Adviser Tom Donilon, who explained Obama’s lack of passion for spreading democracy by observing, “Obama is not really interested in that stuff. He’s just a realist.”¹⁴

Aside from the observations of others, the case for Obama following a realist foreign policy can be found in what he himself says. Despite his reputation as a starry-eyed idealist, Obama’s key speeches convey a strong realist message, which perhaps draw from the influence of realist theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Obama calls Niebuhr “one of my favorite philosophers.”¹⁵ In accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in December 2009 (largely for his rhetorical support of moving toward a world without nuclear weapons), Obama made clear his commitment to realism. After discussing the debt he owed to Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi’s teachings on non-violence, Obama went on to say,

But as head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their [King and Gandhi] examples alone. I face the world as it is and cannot stand idle in the face of threats

to the American people. For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince Al-Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism – it is a recognition of history, the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.¹⁶

These views echo Niebuhr's opposition to pacifism and the need to forcefully confront evil when it arises. As such, they are very much in the mainstream of classical realism.

Obama's rhetoric in support of realism continued with his speech at West Point in May 2014, billed as a major foreign policy address. In his remarks, Obama tried to place American foreign policy in a middle ground, between calls for military intervention in such places as Syria, and demands that the United States stay away from foreign entanglements altogether. For vital interests, Obama's message was clear and fully consistent with realism,

The United States will use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand it; when our people are threatened, when our livelihoods are at stake; when the security of our allies is in danger...[I]nternational opinion matters, but America should never ask permission to protect our people, our homeland, our way of life.

However, when vital American interests are not threatened, Obama made it clear that other states should bear much of the burden.

[W]hen issues of global concern do not pose a direct threat to the United States...then the threshold for military action must be higher. In such circumstances, we should not go it alone. Instead we must mobilize allies and partners to take collective action. We have to broaden our tools to include diplomacy and development ... and, if just, necessary and effective, multilateral military action.¹⁷

The view that military force should be reserved for the most dire threats while less pressing challenges require more of a cautious, multilateral effort that does not squander American resources is fully consistent with realism.

President Obama's speech to the United Nations in September 2014 also left little doubt of his realist inclinations. His remarks marked a departure from his previous speeches in that they contained little of the ambivalence about using force he had displayed earlier. In the face of Islamist militants threatening the security of key allies in the Middle East, world order, and potentially endangering America itself, Obama's response was clear and forthright as he asserted that, "First, the terrorist group known as ISIL, must be degraded and ultimately destroyed." He went on to declare that "There can be no reasoning – no negotiation – with this brand of evil. The language understood by killers like this is the language of force. So the United States of America will work with a broad coalition to dismantle this network of death."¹⁸ There would be no reliance on international norm or institutions or appeals for understanding. Where the threat is pressing and the adversary beyond redemption, only its annihilation will suffice. Obama's speech reminds us that realism is not isolationism. Pressing threats to world order and American interests exist in the world and, in a world of international anarchy, it is up to great powers to take action to end it.

These speeches, along with other remarks by Obama, present a vision of realism in which the United States should avoid the direct intervention of forces except where vital interests are threatened, not get dragged into conflicts of peripheral concern, stay away from costly humanitarian interventions, encourage other states to act on their own, and always be mindful that the costs of an action not exceed its benefits. A policy of realism, then, is a policy of restraint. It is an approach that best defines the foreign policy of Barack Obama.

OBAMA'S REALIST POLICIES

More important than what President Obama says he will do is what he actually does. Examining Obama's record of major foreign policy decisions, it is impossible not to be struck by how well they conform with realism. Obama's "pivot" to Asia, the handling of Iran's nuclear program, the reaction to Russia's intervention in Ukraine, and the response to the "Arab Spring" all followed realist precepts. This is not to suggest that

everything Obama has done fits neatly into the realist paradigm. Rather than, taken overall, Obama's policies have been consistent with realism, even when he has been reluctant to follow realist precepts.

Pivot to Asia

The Obama administration's decision to "pivot" to Asia is a clear demonstration of its realist inclinations. The decision to focus more of America's efforts on Asia was first made public by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in a spring 2011 article in *Foreign Policy*. Clinton made the point that after a decade of America expending resources in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States stands "at a pivot point" and needs to reorient itself in the next decade to the far more important region of Asia.¹⁹ President Obama reinforced Clinton's message when he told the Australian Parliament in November 2011 that "I have made a deliberate and strategic decision: as a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future." Other diplomatic messages stressing America's refocus on Asia followed. The message from Clinton and Obama marked a significant shift away from traditional American policy. While Asia had always been important to the United States, Clinton and Obama were now saying that the United States would no longer be diverted by secondary concerns in regions such as the Middle East, but would instead make focusing on Asia America's top priority. Obama's administration was the first to elevate Asia to this status.²⁰

The substance of the pivot to Asia includes security, economic and diplomatic initiatives. On the security front, Obama promised that any cuts in the future U.S. defense budget, some of which had been mandated by Congress, would not affect the American military budget for Asia. As the U.S. defense budget shrinks, Asia would be kept whole, accounting for an ever greater proportion of American defense expenditures.²¹ This translated into a greater military emphasis on Asia with particular attention toward naval expansion to reassure America's Asian friends of U.S. might.²² The United States already has over 300,000 military and civilian personnel in the Pacific theater, and former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta promised that 60 percent of American naval assets would be kept deployed in Asia.²³ The United States would also work to enhance its formal and informal alliances

with Asian states. The United States already maintains formal alliances with Japan, South Korea, Philippines, Thailand and Australia. It would enhance those relationships while concluding “strategic partnerships” with other states to ease the security costs of maintaining order in Asia. In just the past five years from 2009-2014, strategic partnerships were concluded with India, Singapore, Indonesia, New Zealand and Vietnam, providing for a range of informal collaborations with these key states.²⁴

The economic dimension of the pivot includes strengthening of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which expanded in 2012 and is designed to provide a free-market alternative to the Chinese model of state capitalism. By promoting free trade, the U.S. hopes to enhance prosperity in Asia while drawing Asian countries closer to the United States.²⁵ Washington would also work with other multilateral institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC) to further enmesh Asia into the American economic sphere. Moreover, greater attention would be paid to Asia. The President would visit more often, more American government personnel would be stationed there (the U.S. Embassy in Beijing has the largest U.S. embassy staff in the world), and additional agreements would be signed.²⁶ Tangible consequences of renewed attention to Asia flowed from Obama’s November 2014 visit, when the United States concluded agreements with China on restricting greenhouse emissions, easing trade and visa restrictions, and taking steps to avoid military confrontations between American and Chinese military forces.

From a realist perspective, it is easy to see why Asia needs to be the primary focus of the United States. Militarily, six of the world’s ten largest armies are in Asia – China, India, North Korea, South Korea, Pakistan and Vietnam. Two of these armies – China and North Korea – possess nuclear weapons.²⁷ Asia makes up more than half of the world’s global output and nearly half of worldwide trade, supporting 850,000 American jobs.²⁸ The United States trades more than twice as much with Asia than with Europe, and Asia is the largest source of imports and the second largest source of exports to America.²⁹ Sixty percent of the world’s population, over 4.2 billion people, live in Asia. By almost any measure, Asia is the most important continent to American interests and, for that matter, to the world.

The intrinsic importance of Asia has meant and continues to mean that the United States cannot allow the region to be controlled by any state. The United States went to war with Japan in 1941 to prevent its domination of Asia, and presumably would resist any other state from achieving dominance over this critical region. Today of course, that means preventing China from achieving hegemony in Asia, which in turn requires that the United States demonstrates its willingness to help Asian states counter Chinese expansion. China has the raw capability to dominate its Asian neighbors as a country with the world's largest population, second highest Gross Domestic Product (poised to overtake the United States in the coming years) and second highest (and one of the fastest growing) defense budgets. Chinese behavior in recent years has heightened American concerns.

Chinese aggressive moves in the South China Sea (an area that may contain more oil than Saudi Arabia) and especially its efforts to assert control over the Senkaku/Diayou islands have produced frightening confrontations with Japan, while raising fears in Vietnam and the Philippines. China's unilateral declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone in the East China Sea, which forces all aircraft including civilian airliners to announce themselves to China, raised hackles with the United States as well as with China's neighbors.³⁰ The United States is especially worried that China aims to push American naval operations beyond Japan and perhaps to the second island chain of the Marianas, limiting America's ability to defend Taiwan and other U.S. allies in Asia.³¹

The realist case for the "pivot" to Asia is, if anything, over determined. The military and economic role played by Asia itself justifies America's focus on the region while the rise of China adds urgency to American fears. Realists are quick to highlight the dangers of conflict when a rising hegemon (China) confronts an existing great power (the United States).³² Whether one believes war between China and the United States is a realistic possibility, the mere prospect of a clash and fears of growing Chinese influence in Asia explain the Obama administration's increased emphasis on Asian and Chinese affairs. From a realist view, expending scarce resources on intractable Middle East disputes while Asia receives scant attention makes no sense. Realists assert that a great power's interests must follow where the world's military and

economic assets are found, which means Asia and particularly China. Obama's decision to focus on Asia and China conforms fully with realism and is, if anything, long overdue.³³

Iran

President Obama has made it clear that the United States will not accept a nuclear armed Iran. The United States, he has repeatedly said, will not rely on containment or deterrence to deal with Iran but instead prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons in the first place.³⁴ In order to accomplish this, Obama has imposed harsh economic sanctions on Iran to force it to disable much of its nuclear enrichment capability, which could be used to produce an atomic bomb.

Economic sanctions, which began in 1979, have become especially effective during the Obama Administration owing to their adoption by many other countries including those of the European Union.³⁵ The imposition of sanctions led to Iran signing an interim agreement (the Joint Plan of Action) in November 2013 that froze parts of its nuclear program in exchange for limited relief from sanctions.³⁶ The interim accord was designed as a precursor to a comprehensive agreement that was supposed to end the potential for Iran to develop nuclear weapons in exchange for the removal of all sanctions. The prospects for concluding a comprehensive deal brightened with the successful conclusion of a framework for agreement in April 2015. The framework curtailed (but did not eliminate) Iran's nuclear capability for 10 to 15 years, in exchange for an end to sanctions. The agreement holds out the promise of delaying Iran's march towards developing nuclear weapons, but at the cost of legitimizing its status as a nuclear threshold state.

Although it looks like Obama is taking a tough stance towards Iran, his policy is more conciliatory than it might appear. While Obama has stressed that "all options are on the table" to stop Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, the prospect of an American military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities appears increasingly remote.³⁷ Especially with the onset of negotiations, virtually no one believes the United States is about to attack Iran. Uncertainty about the ability to destroy Iran's

nuclear facilities, the prospect of horrific Iranian retaliation in the wake of an attack, and the hope that diplomacy will eventually secure an agreement has apparently convinced American officials not to launch a strike.³⁸ Those who argue an American military attack could succeed and that at least maintaining a military option would be useful in pressuring Iran have been sidelined.³⁹

Obama has not only virtually eliminated the prospect of an American attack, he has also worked to ensure that Israel would not attack Iran either. The American policy of “no Iranian nuclear weapon” is pointedly less demanding than the Israeli policy of “no Iranian nuclear weapons *capability*”.⁴⁰ By raising the threshold for an American attack, Obama is signaling the Israelis that they too must hold off on striking Iran until an actual weapon is produced. This message has been reinforced by virtually every senior official from the Obama administration. The fear is that an Israeli attack, even one carried out without American support, would nonetheless implicate the United States, hurting American interests. The message is clear. Especially as diplomacy looks like it is bearing fruit, the United States will not strike Iran and it expects Israel to follow suit.

Obama’s policy towards Iran follows a realist path in that it expends limited means for limited ends. Obama does not want the Iranians to get nuclear weapons, but he is not willing to pay much of a price to stop them from doing so. American policy seeks to dissuade Iran from acquiring a nuclear capability because Washington recognizes that a nuclear armed Iran would threaten Israel, other American allies, and may spur proliferation elsewhere. Countering these threats justifies the effort to apply sanctions and pursue diplomacy to prevent a nuclear armed Iran.⁴¹ Obama’s focus on sanctions to bring about a negotiated agreement and his refusal to seriously contemplate a military attack against Iran’s nuclear program, reflects not only the costs of such an attack but also the limited threat that a nuclear armed Iran poses to America. Although Iran threatens American allies, such as Israel, the threat it poses to the United States is less direct, making the use of American force less attractive. Hurting Iran economically is one thing, going to war with Iran is something else. The threshold to use force in a realist world is high, and is not met by an Iran that does not directly threaten American vital interests and is apparently willing to agree to limit its nuclear capabilities.

Obama's reluctance to use force is also explained by the forgiving attitude that realists have toward the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Most realists are sympathetic to countries that seek to acquire nuclear arms. In an anarchic and threatening world, where a country only has itself to rely on, nuclear weapons provide an indispensable life insurance policy for insecure states. Far from being a threat, some realists see nuclear weapons as a stabilizing force for peace. In this view, nuclear acquisition by Iran may not be welcomed, but in the final analysis, a nuclear armed Iran could be contained and deterred. Far better to accept an Iran with the ability to make nuclear arms than launch a risky attack.⁴²

Although Obama has maintained that he will not accept a nuclear armed Iran, there is little doubt that he is planning for that eventuality, if not during his administration, then during his successor's. It is noteworthy that Vice President Biden chose as his Chief Security Adviser Colin H. Kahl, who wrote a major study of how to contain an Iran armed with nuclear weapons.⁴³ Just as former Presidents Clinton and Bush eventually accepted an "unacceptable" North Korean nuclear weapon, Obama's reluctance to use force directly or countenance the Israeli use of force suggests that he too would accept an Iranian nuclear capability should diplomacy fail. A policy of using limited means to deal with what is seen a limited threat of Iranian nuclear acquisition is fully in accord with the benign view of nuclear weapons that is at the heart of contemporary realism.

Ukraine

Obama's response to Russia's actions toward Ukraine is what one would expect from a realist president. The initial crisis grew out of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich's November 2013 decision to reject closer economic ties with the European Union, and instead accept a \$15 billion offer from Russia. The decision angered many in Ukraine, especially young adults, who saw their future with the freedom and dynamism of the West, rather than what they perceived as the stultifying and repressive path taken by Putin's Russia. Demonstrations followed over the next several months, resulting in the deaths of some one hundred protestors. As the protests grew and violence escalated, Yanukovich escaped to Russia, and a new, pro-Western government took charge in Ukraine. Putin

responded by sending Russian forces into Crimea (disguised in uniforms devoid of any designation) and (following a rigged vote) incorporated it into Russia.⁴⁴ Previous Russian efforts to pressure former republics refrained from annexing territory or deposing local governments, making Putin's move in Ukraine a significant escalation.⁴⁵ In addition to incorporating Crimea into Russia, Putin provided arms and advisers to pro-Russian Ukrainian separatists in eastern Ukraine, fomenting civil war. He did so to convince the Ukrainian government not to align with the West (especially not to become a member of NATO) by making it clear that Ukraine's survival depended on Putin.⁴⁶

Obama's reaction to Putin's moves is more noteworthy for what he did not do than what he did. At no point did Obama or NATO threaten military action to counter Russian aggression. Instead, Obama and NATO sought to punish Russia by employing escalating economic sanctions that target wealthy supporters of Putin and high-level officials of the Russian government. Insofar as a Western threat exists, it is to expand the sanctions to other parts of the Russian economy and perhaps transfer some arms to the Ukrainian military. No one seriously believes the United States (or NATO) is prepared to use force to reverse Putin's gains, and no one expects NATO to offer membership or protection to Ukraine. America and its European allies' response to the first forcible takeover of territory in Europe since World War II has been to limit itself to mild economic punishment that is unlikely to reverse Russian actions.⁴⁷

While some may bemoan the lack of a more forceful policy, Obama and the West are behaving consistently with realism in several respects. Ukraine is a vital interest to Russia and is only of secondary importance to the United States and the West. Russians consider Ukraine to be part of their country and see Ukrainians as fellow Russians. Ukraine has served as an invasion point for countless invasions into Russia. Therefore, Russians understandably fear a pro-Western Ukraine on their border, and millions of ethnic Russians look to Moscow for support against a government they do not trust.⁴⁸

For the United States, the plight of Ukraine is mostly humanitarian, which, in a realist world, cannot match Moscow's stakes. Realists emphasize that the direct use of force should be reserved for threats to

one's vital interests. Ukraine meets that criteria for Russia; it does not for the United States. Moreover, despite its decline, Russia is a great power with thousands of nuclear weapons and a formidable conventional military force. To start down a road that may lead to war for secondary concerns would be a blatant violation of realism, and one that Obama is apparently not prepared to exercise. Equally important, realists tell us that states are far more likely to counter threats rather than appease them.⁴⁹ Seen in this light, Russian aggression can be expected to move Ukraine (and other endangered countries) closer into the Western orbit, eventually giving Washington what it seeks without the costs and risks of using military force.⁵⁰ If ever there was a case for realist restraint, responding to Putin's moves against Ukraine is it.

Afghanistan

Obama's policy toward Afghanistan reflects his conflicting objectives to cope with the very real threats he believes the Afghan insurgency presents to American interests, while not getting bogged in an Iraqi/Vietnamese-type conflict that would drain American resources to no good end. Obama came into office in January 2009 after having campaigned on a platform that although Iraq was a war of choice, defeating the Taliban, who had harbored the 9/11 Al Qaeda terrorists, was a "war of necessity."⁵¹ The new president confronted a Taliban, which after being routed following the 9/11 attacks had regained its strength and threatened to topple the Afghan regime creating a foreign policy disaster for the United States. Although Obama wanted to focus his attention on domestic concerns, he accepted the military's recommendation for additional troops to cope with the rising Taliban threat. In a December 2009 speech at West Point, Obama announced a "surge" of an additional 30,000 American troops (bringing the total to around 100,000), but was careful to emphasize that these forces would begin withdrawing in July 2011. The surge supported three American objectives: denying a safe haven for Al Qaeda so that the 9/11 attacks would not be repeated, preventing the Taliban from toppling the Afghan government, and providing time for the Afghan regime to train its own forces and develop good governance so that the United States and allied troops could return home.⁵²

The surge initially worked as American and NATO forces halted the momentum of the Taliban, resulting in a reduction of violence throughout Afghanistan.⁵³ Encouraged by this initial success, the November 2010 Lisbon NATO Summit declared that responsibility for fighting the Afghan war would be transferred to the Afghans themselves, with the completion of the process to occur at the end of 2014.⁵⁴ In June 2011, Obama reinforced the message of disengagement by announcing that the surge troops would be gone by the summer of 2012. At the same time, talks were being conducted with the Taliban, raising hopes that a negotiated solution might be achieved.⁵⁵

Any optimism that the United States could leave Afghanistan a relatively secure place quickly faded. The Taliban stepped up their insurgency, taking over territories they had previously relinquished. If anything, setbacks in Afghanistan hastened rather than diminished Obama's desire to leave Afghanistan, culminating in the issuance of a May 2014 timetable for withdrawal. The timeframe called for reducing American troops to 9,800 by 2015 with all troops gone by the end of 2016. Despite the likely possibility that Obama would be leaving Afghanistan unable to protect itself against the Taliban, it appeared that Obama had soured on the Afghan intervention and wanted to depart regardless of the circumstances. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates remarked, "For him [Obama] it's all about getting out."⁵⁶

The policy pursued by Obama in Afghanistan fits the realist model of not expending resources for peripheral or hopeless causes. Afghanistan mattered because if the Taliban seized power, they might destabilize Pakistan or again harbor anti-American terrorists. These interests were important, but not vital. When Obama approved the surge, he did so in the belief that the additional troops combined with a cooperative attitude from Pakistan and better governance from the Afghans would enable the Taliban to be defeated at an acceptable (American) cost.⁵⁷ It soon became obvious, however, that the 30,000 extra American troops would not stem the Taliban tide because the conditions necessary for success were not present. The Afghan government remained corrupt and ineffective, Pakistan continued to support the Taliban, and the Afghan leader Hamid Karzai remained maddeningly uncooperative.⁵⁸ Under these circumstances, only a major new American intervention held out

the hope of defeating the Taliban since the Afghan forces themselves were not up to the task.⁵⁹ While Afghanistan might be worth a limited American effort (and Obama did accede to military requests that U.S. forces be allowed to undertake combat missions against the Taliban in 2015) it certainly was not worth the deployment of hundreds of thousands of additional troops, especially given the American public's souring of the whole affair.⁶⁰ Far better, Obama concluded, to keep a token force of several thousand American advisers in Afghanistan to bolster the Afghan forces in the hope that perhaps at some point they could do the job themselves. Obama's frequent announcements of troop withdrawal deadlines ensured that the United States would not spend needless blood and treasure on what he believed to be a losing cause. In effect, Obama was boxing himself in to make certain that the military would not be able to get more troops for the Afghan war. In so doing, he was trying to guarantee that America would not again be wasting scarce resources on an unworthy prize, a realist approach if there ever was one.

The Arab Spring

One of the most demanding tests of Obama's commitment to realism, stemmed from the events surrounding what became known as the "Arab Spring."

Most observers agree that the Arab Spring began in December 2010 when a Tunisian street vendor set himself on fire to protest being struck by a female police officer because he lacked a license to sell his wares. His action spurred massive protests across the Arab world, toppling leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. The United States initially reacted hopefully to the changes sweeping the Arab Middle East. The Middle East had long been a source of deep concern by Washington given fears about access to oil, the spread of weapons of mass destruction and threats to Israeli security. If the Arab Spring could bring about a democratic transformation to this region, these concerns might be lessened, if not eliminated altogether. As such, Obama initially welcomed the mass demonstrations against dictatorial rule saying, "Across the region, those rights that we take for granted are being claimed with joy by those who are prying loose the grip of the iron fist."⁶¹

It soon became clear, however, that the Arab Spring would not usher in a new era of freedom and democracy for the Middle East. Instead of American interests being reinforced by the wave of protests, they were increasingly being undermined. Coping with this danger forced Obama to do exactly what he did not want to do, that is, pay ever increasing attention to the Middle East to the detriment of other regions.

Obama's reaction to the Arab Spring did not always follow the realist paradigm. The nature of the challenges he confronted differed as did the kind of threat they posed to American interests, which helps account for the lack of uniformity in the American response. Nevertheless, most of the policies Obama eventually settled upon were in conformity with realism. In those instances where he departed from realist principles, he made sure to limit his exposure. This can be seen by focusing on four of the key American policies followed in the wake of the Arab Spring: the reaction to the toppling of Mubarak in Egypt, the intervention in Libya, the ability to cope with the Syrian rebellion, and the mounting threat posed by ISIS.

Egypt

Obama's policy toward Egypt was marked by two quandaries, both of which were resolved in a manner supportive of realism. The first predicament dealt with how to deal with the escalating protests against Hosni Mubarak in the winter of 2010-2011. The United States had maintained a close relationship with Mubarak ever since he had assumed power following the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981. Washington welcomed Mubarak's adherence to the peace treaty with Israel, his cooperation with Washington on anti-terrorist measures, and his stewardship over the strategic Suez Canal. As such, when demonstrations erupted in Egypt demanding Mubarak's ouster, Obama and his advisers were conflicted. Obama's national security chiefs including Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, National Security Adviser Tom Donilon and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wanted the United States to stand by Mubarak, to urge reforms, but not to call for his immediate ouster. They were concerned not only with who would follow Mubarak (especially with the powerful Muslim Brotherhood waiting in the wings), but also with how this would

look to other leaders who depended on American support.⁶² Many of the more junior members on the National Security Staff, however, sided with the protestors, with their quest for democracy and dignity. They wanted Obama “to be on the right side of history” and pushed the President to demand that Mubarak leave immediately. Obama resolved this dispute in favor of the National Security Staff when he told Mubarak on February 2 that he had to leave office “now.”⁶³ Following an intensification of the mass protests demanding his ouster, Mubarak did indeed resign his post on February 18, and was replaced by a transitional government. Elections followed, resulting in the selection of Mohammed Morsi, a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, who took office in June 2012.

Obama initially welcomed Morsi’s election. By most accounts, Morsi was chosen in a free and fair election, and it set a good example to demonstrate that religious Muslims will prosper if they play by the rules. Moreover, Morsi agreed to continue to adhere to the peace treaty with Israel and played an important role in ending the 2012 Gaza war. Obama’s embrace of Morsi, however, proved to be short lived. Morsi began to rule Egypt as a dictator, eliminating centers of power that did not adhere to the Muslim Brotherhood’s line, suspending the power of the judiciary to review presidential decisions, and purging military officers he suspected of being disloyal. Morsi’s actions produced a renewal of major protests in Egypt, leading to his overthrow by the military on July 3, 2013 and eventual replacement by the head of the Egyptian military, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

Sisi’s takeover created the second dilemma for Obama. On the one hand, the President did not want to endorse the toppling of a democratically elected president, especially one in the Muslim world. To do so reinforced the view that Washington only backed democracy when it supported American policy. On the other hand, Obama did not want to alienate the Egyptian military, the one force for stability in Egypt. Nor did Obama wish to upset Egyptian liberals, who had backed the effort to remove the autocratic Morsi. In the end, Obama elected to support Sisi, though with some qualifications. A limited amount of American aid was suspended and the Bright Star military exercise between the United States and Egypt was postponed. Although these measures angered Sisi, they were minor pinpricks. Far more important, Obama refused to label Sisi’s toppling of Morsi a “coup” (which it was, but would have led to

the end of American aid if declared as such); he largely ignored Sisi's brutal crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and his arrest of Morsi, and continued to provide generous American assistance to Egypt.⁶⁴

Obama's decisions to abandon Mubarak and back Sisi followed realist principles. It is true that Obama's demand of Mubarak to leave office went against the self-styled realists of his administration and seemingly supported the promotion of democracy over hard headed American interests. But Obama's decision was dictated as much by pragmatism – what the United States could accomplish with reasonable means – as it was by any adherence to ethical practice. At the point that Obama demanded Mubarak's departure, the Egyptian president was already on the ropes, the target of ever increasing, violent demonstrations. With the Egyptian army showing signs of ending its support of Mubarak, there was little America could do short of a massive intervention to save the Egyptian leader. Washington might not have been on the “right side of history” in backing Mubarak's demise, but it was on the right side of the balance of power in Egypt, making it a very pragmatic decision. Obama's move to support Sisi was even more in the realist tradition. By choosing to overlook the forceful overthrow of a democratically elected leader and the brutal policies of his successor in order to curry favor with the Egyptian military, Obama clearly placed himself in the realist camp that values the furthering of the national interest over the promotion of democracy.

Libya

Obama's decision to intervene in Libya for essentially humanitarian purposes marked a departure from realism, but the limited extent of American involvement ensured that the deviation did not undermine the overall realist direction of his foreign policy. The seeds of the intervention were planted in February 2011 when Libya's dictator, Muammar Qaddafi, violently suppressed peaceful protests against his rule. The United Nations Security Council reacted by imposing sanctions, an asset freeze and an arms embargo on Libya. Meanwhile, the violence in Libya escalated to the point where a virtual civil war erupted, with rebels in the eastern section of the country acting to topple Qaddafi's rule. With Qaddafi's forces having the upper hand,

fears grew in Libya and throughout the international community that he would unleash a blood bath, particularly in Benghazi, which had become the source of much of the revolt.

In response to these concerns, and under intense American prodding, the United Nations Security Council accepted a request from the Arab League for a no-fly zone and authorized international action to use “all necessary measures” to protect Libyan civilians.⁶⁵ This was one of the first instances of the United Nations employing its “responsibility to protect” doctrine in which outside states have the right (and perhaps the obligation) to intervene to safeguard the lives of civilians in other countries.⁶⁶ The next day, March 18, President Obama declared that the United States, together with its NATO and Arab allies, would enforce the UN resolution. The U.S.-led coalition (taken over later by NATO) then launched a series of air and missile strikes blunting Qaddafi’s offensive.⁶⁷ The rebels achieved superiority by the summer, killed Qaddafi in October, and set up a new transitional government. Without a single American or NATO casualty and at a cost of only a few billion dollars, an impressive victory appeared to have been won.⁶⁸

As successful as the Libyan operation may have seemed, it certainly did not appear to be driven by realist concerns. Although odious, Qaddafi did not threaten the United States. On the contrary, he cooperated with American efforts against Al Qaeda, ended his weapons of mass destruction programs, and generally moved his country in a pro-Western direction.⁶⁹ Robert Gates, who opposed the intervention (along with National Security Adviser Donilon and Vice President Biden) so strenuously that he considered resigning over the issue, argued that America had no vital interests in Libya to justify getting involved.⁷⁰ For Obama, however, the limited costs of the intervention and the opportunity to stop a massacre carried the day. As Obama explained,

[the risks of intervention] cannot be an argument for never acting on behalf of what’s right. In this particular country – Libya – at this particular moment, we were faced with the prospect of violence on a horrific scale. We had a unique ability to stop that violence: an international mandate for action, a broad coalition prepared to join us, the support of Arab countries, and a plea for

help from the Libyan people themselves. We also had the ability to stop Qaddafi's forces in their tracks without putting American troops on the ground. To brush aside America's responsibility as a leader and – more profoundly – our responsibilities to our fellow human beings under such circumstances would have been a betrayal of who we are.⁷¹

For some, Obama's ignoring of national interests to intervene in Libya simply to protect people from a brutal government not only contradicted realism, but marked a new "post-realist" chapter in American foreign policy whereby humanitarian interventions would become much more frequent.⁷²

In fact, there is less to Obama's departure from realism than meets the eye. As Obama himself noted, the Libyan intervention brought together a set of distinct conditions – an impending humanitarian disaster; UN, NATO and Arab support; the ability to act in a way that did not put American troops at risk – that would only rarely be repeated elsewhere. Indeed, the refusal of Obama to intervene in the far more deadly Syrian civil war suggests that when intervention is costly to the United States, America will stay away. Moreover, the United States had a realist interest in preventing Libya from disintegrating and spreading instability to the Middle East and Africa. Despite his overall opposition to the Libyan intervention, Gates noted that although the vital interests of America were not engaged, U.S. allies felt their vital interests were affected, "and therefore we had an obligation to protect them."⁷³ As for the costs incurred in protecting innocent lives, even realists will not balk at acting for humanitarian interests if the price in blood and dollars to the United States is minimal, and if key allies do the heavy lifting.⁷⁴ Finally, even given the unique and compelling set of circumstances that surrounded the Libyan action, Obama was still conflicted about acting, telling Gates that his decision to support the intervention came down to a 51/49 split.⁷⁵ Insofar as Libya represented a divergence from Obama's realist path, it was a reluctant and anomalous one.

Syria

Obama's reactions to the Syrian civil war both violated and supported the realist approach. Obama's clearest violation of realism came in his response to the use of chemical weapons by Bashar al-Assad's government. Beginning with peaceful protests in the spring of 2011, disturbances in Syria escalated quickly to a full-scale civil war that threatened Assad's hold on power. Fearing that Assad would be tempted to use his vast quantities of chemical weapons to defeat the insurgents, Obama publicly tried to deter him from doing so. In August 2012, following reports that the Syrian government was transferring large amounts of chemical weapons out of storage and mixing chemicals to ready them for immediate use, Obama announced that moving or using substantial amounts of chemical weapons would cross a "red line" that would "change my calculus" regarding American involvement in the civil war.⁷⁶ Despite Obama's warning, Syria launched a series of chemical attacks including a massive strike in August 2013, which killed over 1,400 civilians, including 400 children. With Secretary of State John Kerry lambasting the Syrians for their use of chemical weapons, it appeared that an American military strike was imminent. Instead of launching an attack, however, Obama turned to Congress to seek its approval and, when it appeared that Congress would not support a military strike, Obama seized upon a Russian initiative for Syria to disarm on its own.

Syria did indeed give up its chemical weapons, but this success did little to tarnish the damage done to American credibility. After all, Obama had set up a "red line" implying American military action if Syria crossed it. Syria crossed the line anyway, and no military action followed. As former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta remarked, "(Obama) sent a mixed message, not only to Assad, not only to the Syrians, but (also) to the world. And that is something you do not want to establish in the world, an issue with regard to the credibility of the United States to stand by what we say we're gonna do."⁷⁷ For realists, the minor victory of getting Syria to rid itself of chemical weapons was not worth the damage done to American credibility. In this instance, Obama could hardly be called acting in a realist manner.

Meanwhile, the rebellion in Syria continued, raising questions as to whether the United States would assist the Syrian insurgents in their

efforts to topple Assad. In what many saw as a surprising move, Obama in 2012 rejected the advice of his Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense and Director of the CIA by deciding against providing major assistance to the Syrian rebels.⁷⁸ Obama certainly wanted Assad gone but questioned whether American support could accomplish this at an acceptable cost. Unlike Qaddafi's Libya, Assad had an effective military willing to fight for him and important allies in Iran and Russia that would not look too kindly on seeing him deposed by an American-supported effort. Obama doubted that U.S. arms would make much of a difference given the large amounts of weapons already flowing to Syrian rebels from countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Moreover, it was unclear to Obama whether enough "moderate" Syrian rebels existed to make a difference or whether, "(an) opposition made up of former doctors, farmers (and) pharmacists" could bring down the Syrian dictator.⁷⁹ More likely, weapons supplied by the United States would fall into the hands of radical insurgents in a manner similar to what happened with American support of the Afghan mujahideen.⁸⁰ Equally important, the Syrian insurgency did not threaten American vital interests. To be sure, the revolt created an enormous humanitarian disaster as tens of thousands of innocents were killed and millions more driven from their homes. As the fighting spilled over borders, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon found themselves imperiled as refugees burdened their support services. Nevertheless, vital American interests were not at stake in Syria, a country that shared few values with the United States, had no American military bases, and was not a major oil producer.⁸¹ Syria mattered, but not enough for the United States to do much to end its civil war.

ISIS

Obama's restrained reaction to the Syrian insurgency changed somewhat with the advent of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – though also known by other names as well). ISIS developed from Al Qaeda in Iraq, drawing strength from the rebellion in Syria and Sunni resentment against Iraq's discriminatory Shi'ite government, and exploded onto the world scene in 2013. Facing little resistance, ISIS conquered large swaths of territory in Syria, developing into one of the most potent insurgent forces. With Syria as a base, ISIS then moved into Iraq where, facing a crumbling Iraqi military,

it conquered city after city, getting so far as the outskirts of Baghdad by the spring of 2014. The success of ISIS alarmed a large cast of characters that had nothing in common except their fear of ISIS's growing influence. They included Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, the Kurds, Iraqi Shi'ites, and even Assad himself (who belatedly woke up to the threat it posed to his rule). At the same time ISIS inflamed public opinion in the United States (and throughout much of the Western world) by filming the decapitation of some of its prisoners, including three Americans.⁸²

Obama reacted to ISIS's surge by calling for direct American involvement against ISIS (but no ground troops) and increasing support for insurgents in Syria. Initially, American support was limited to air strikes against ISIS targets in Iraq to protect American diplomatic personnel stationed in the Iraqi city of Erbil and the Yazidis, a religious minority targeted by ISIS. Although the air attacks were the first direct American involvement in Iraq since the withdrawal of U.S. troops, Obama was careful to limit the U.S. commitment declaring that, "I will not allow the United States to be dragged into another war in Iraq."⁸³ A month later, in September 2014, reacting to continued ISIS advances and a shift in American attitudes toward a more activist response, Obama announced a further escalation of American involvement. The United States would now launch air strikes against ISIS targets throughout Iraq (not simply to protect the Yazidis or American diplomats) and against a range of targets in Syria as well. The goal went beyond humanitarian objectives to "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIS.⁸⁴ To that end, in addition to the air strikes, additional American military advisors would be sent to Iraq, bringing their numbers to around 1,500 and military assistance to Syrian insurgents would be ramped up. Despite this increased support, Obama was careful to maintain that the overall American effort would be limited to supporting indigenous forces in the region and he took pains to once again emphasize that, "We will not get dragged into another ground war in Iraq."⁸⁵ Two months later, in November, Obama doubled the American presence by ordering an additional 1,500 troops to Iraq to train Iraqi and Kurdish troops in anticipation of a spring offensive against ISIS. Once again, Obama was careful to emphasize that the American forces would not engage in direct combat, but simply advise the Iraqi and Kurdish forces.⁸⁶

With the exception of Obama's clumsy "red line," his policy closely followed realist guidelines. The Syrian civil war and the ISIS threat it spawned justifiably provoked American concerns, but never really endangered vital American interests. To be sure, Obama worried about the effects of the conflict on important American friends in the region (such as Turkey, Jordan and Iraq), on American citizens radicalized by the civil war returning to the United States bent on committing mayhem, and on the humanitarian tragedy that grew worse with each passing day. As important as these concerns were, none rose to the level of endangering core interests of American security or economic well-being. As such, it made sense for Obama to limit America's response, especially when the Syrian civil war was largely confined to Syria.

As the threat to American interests grew with the rise of ISIS, so too did American actions to defeat it, but always with the qualification that there would be no major intervention of United States forces. Reinforcing the limited nature of the American response was Obama's belief that the actors most threatened should do the most to defeat the threat they faced. The Iraqis, Kurds and Syrian rebels, therefore, needed to play the principal role in this drama. America would support them with weapons, training, and advisors, but in the final analysis, it was up to them to save themselves. In this manner, the United States is acting very much as a "buck passer," placing the main responsibility on those who have the most at stake, which is exactly what realists would recommend.

IMPLICATIONS OF OBAMA'S REALISM FOR ISRAEL

Thus far, it appears that the overwhelming thrust of Obama's foreign policy adheres closely to realism. This is bad news for Israel for two reasons. First, Israel remains dependent on American assistance. The United States is by far the most important ally of Israel, which relies on the U.S. for critical military and political support. Second, the main reasons why the United States has been so generous in its backing of Israel are not supported by realism. Insofar as Obama (or his successors) pursue a realist policy, therefore, Israel is in trouble.

There is no question that Israel depends greatly on American help. Militarily, the United States provides Israel with over \$3 billion of assistance each year. The United States, by far, is the single largest provider of military equipment to Israel. Israel's air force is made up of American-made F-15s and F-16s and will acquire the ultra-modern F-35s as soon as they leave the assembly line. Israeli tanks, artillery, missiles, and helicopters overwhelmingly come from the United States. The United States is committed to preserving qualitative superiority for Israel in its arms sales, so that when arms are transferred to Arab states, Washington makes certain that Israel receives enough advanced weaponry to more than make up for any threat that is engendered.⁸⁷ While it is true that Israel produces some of its own arms, it cannot produce top-of-the-line aircraft or missiles, and what it does manufacture often uses American parts, perpetuating its dependence on Washington. Aside from military equipment, the United States engages in a wide range of security cooperation with the Israeli military. They include joint maneuvers, the development of the Arrow and Iron Dome missile defense systems, and the creation of the Stuxnet cyberwarfare worm used against the Iranian nuclear program.⁸⁸ If the United States ever withdrew its military support and cooperation with Israel, the Israeli Defense Forces would be reduced to a shadow of what they are today.

American support is also critical in the diplomatic sphere. Israel is frequently the target of a hostile international community, making American political backing especially important. Nowhere is this more evident than in the United Nations, an institution that legitimized Israel's birth but since has adopted a harshly critical posture. In the last decade, the United Nations has passed far more resolutions against Israel than all the Arab states combined. Roughly 40 percent of all UN resolutions condemning human rights have been directed against Israel – an even higher percentage than the resolutions against Iran, North Korea, Sudan and Syria put together.⁸⁹ The UN passed (though later rescinded) the infamous “Zionism is Racism” resolution in 1975, a move that effectively nullified its 1947 decision to create Israel.

Against this onslaught, the United States has stood with Israel, vetoing or modifying Security Council resolutions deemed one-sided and ending financial support from United Nations organizations (such as UNESCO)

that have accepted Palestine as a state. Similarly, the United States has worked to shield Israel from ostracism in other international arenas, such as boycotting the two Durban international conferences on human rights because of their strident anti-Israeli tones. The United States, particularly the American Congress, has resisted the efforts of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions group, and academic groups, like the American Studies Association, to demonize and isolate Israel.⁹⁰

The critical support that the United States provides for Israel is called into question by Obama's adherence to realism. American backing for Israel stems from three sources – the strategic value of Israel, common values between Israel and the United States, and the purported influence of the “Israel lobby.” In none of these areas would realism justify the extraordinary level of American support provided to Israel.

A realist case can be made for Israel providing strategic benefits for the United States, but it is not nearly as strong as it once was. As a powerful, dependable ally in a turbulent and vital region, Israel is the “unsinkable” aircraft carrier that America can rely upon to protect its interests. It is significant that major American support for Israel began in 1970, when Israel proved its strategic worth to Washington by quickly and effectively responding to an American request to protect Jordan from a Syrian invasion.⁹¹ Thereafter, Israel has assisted American efforts by providing intelligence across a wide range of areas including Soviet weapons systems and terrorist groups. The backing of Israel, however, is a two edged strategic sword, complicating American efforts to befriend the Arab world, contributing to making the United States a target of terrorist groups, and tarnishing America's reputation through its steadfast support of a very unpopular country. Moreover, with the end of the Cold War, Israel's intelligence help regarding Soviet weapons systems and providing a bulwark against communist expansion are no longer relevant.⁹² Few would suggest that Israel has no strategic value to Washington, but the benefits it provides have declined over the years, while the costs of associating with it remain high and are likely to climb. In such a situation, it is difficult to base the overwhelming support America provides Israel on its strategic worth alone.

The second source of support stems from the belief that Israel and the United States share common values, which has engendered popular American support for the Jewish state. Israel is seen by many Americans as a fellow democratic state, founded by immigrants, struggling to survive in a rough neighborhood.⁹³ Beginning with the founding of Israel in 1948, the American belief in shared values has provided consistent and overwhelming support for Israel, typically two or three times the level of Israel's Arab adversaries.⁹⁴ The favorable attitude of the American people has come in good times and bad, with the United States citizenry often standing alone in the world in their backing of Israel during crises.⁹⁵

There are problems, however, with relying on common values to cement the American-Israeli relationship. First, for realists, common values, should not drive foreign policy. Instead, a focus on material factors such as security and economic benefits should influence the way a country acts, not some romantic notion of shared ideology. Obama's foreign policy has not promoted the spread of democracy or demonstrated any keen concern for human rights, calling into question how much he would be swayed by America and Israel's supposed shared ideals. Even if Obama cared more about the affinity between the U.S. and Israel, there are signs that the impact of this affinity is diminishing. Decades of reports of harsh treatment of Palestinians, periodic wars in which Palestinian civilians are killed, and the continuing occupation of the West Bank have had a chilling effect. A recent study by the political scientist Amnon Cavari argues that in spite of high levels of pro-Israeli feelings among the American public, there has recently been a decline in support for Israel among non-evangelical Protestants and among the younger generation. Especially worrisome for Israel is the growing gulf between Democrats (51 percent supporting Israel) and Republicans (80 percent support) given the traditionally bipartisan nature of American backing.⁹⁶ Even among Israel's core constituency in the United States – American Jews – there are signs of wavering allegiance. As Peter Beinart shows, young non-Orthodox Jews in the United States, many of whom are politically liberal, are not nearly as supportive of Israel as their parents. If their indifference and even hostility to Israel is maintained as they assume positions of responsibility, Israel will have lost an important voice in its favor.⁹⁷ No one is suggesting that the American people will stop being pro-Israel overnight. Nevertheless, as reports of Israeli injustices (accurate or

not) mount, the common values that bind America to Israel are likely to weaken. The Palestinians do not have to achieve the moral high ground as few expect America to embrace the Palestinian cause. All they need to do is present a morally mixed picture of the Arab-Israeli conflict to weaken the affection Americans hold toward Israel, something that appears to be already occurring. Decreased American popular support for Israel along with a sense of moral equivalency provides space for leaders such as Obama to pursue realist policies free from the fear that they will be punished at the ballot box.

The third leg of American support for Israel is the work of the “Israel Lobby” – those individuals and groups that seek to foster closer American-Israeli ties. There are a number of organizations that fit this description, with AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) being the most well-known. Just how powerful pro-Israeli groups are in the United States (and just who they are) is controversial, especially when allegations of dual loyalty are made or implied against American Jews.⁹⁸ It is certainly true that pro-Israeli organizations have financed candidates and advocated positions supportive of Israel, which is their right. How much of a difference this has made in American policy, especially given the robust support for Israel from the majority of the American people, and whether an identifiable “Israel Lobby” even exists, is questionable.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, insofar as pro-Israeli forces have played an important role in American policy, there are signs that influence may be shrinking. The pro-Israeli community itself is divided with the emergence of lobbies such as J Street that take a far more critical position towards Israeli policies than AIPAC. If young American Jews continue to distance themselves from Israel and if support of Israel becomes the near exclusive hallmark of the Republican party, lobbying influence will decline – especially when the Democrats are in power.

This diminished power of domestic groups promoting stronger American-Israeli ties would be especially likely to occur under a leader pursuing a realist foreign policy. Self-styled realists will work hard to limit the influence of domestic groups they believe are not acting in the national interest. They will take pride in countering lobbying efforts that, for them, distort America’s “true” priorities. Given the toxic reputation that groups such as AIPAC have developed in some circles, it is easy to see how

Obama would take special care to ensure that his policy would not bow to their pressure, exaggerated or otherwise, and instead he would make certain that the United States would pursue a policy based on tangible, hard-headed interests. Seen in this light, confronting Israel would bestow a kind of realist “badge of honor”; not succumbing to “special interests” in violation of what is best for the United States.

Obama’s relationship with Israel strongly supports the notion that a realist foreign policy spells hard times for the Jewish state. It is difficult to think of a time when American-Israeli relations have been more troubled than during Obama’s tenure. The abortive peace talks, American criticism of Israel’s behavior during the 2014 Gaza War, and the increasing acrimony between Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu are just some indicators of problems in the relationship.¹⁰⁰ Thus far, the tangible manifestations of American support remain. The United States still provides Israel with over \$3 billion in aid and diplomatic cover in international forums such as the United Nations. Nevertheless, if realism has its way, the “special relationship” between Israel and the United States will end. It is not inconceivable that one day the United States will follow the lead of Russia, Britain, and France (all former allies of Israel) and abandon or significantly withdraw support from Israel. If that happens, the consequences would be harmful for the Jewish state. Israel’s military would lose its primary source of weaponry and technological edge. The protection Israel receives in the international arena would vanish, leaving it in a similar position as South Africa under apartheid, a pariah state in a hostile world.

Even if a United States in thrall to realist principles lessens its support for Israel, all would not be lost. Israeli leaders also follow realist lessons, not the least of which is not to depend on any one country for survival. Israel is in a strong position globally, recognized by most of the world’s states and with improving ties to the emerging powers of India and China.¹⁰¹ Over the past twenty years, Israel’s economy, bolstered by the high-tech sector, has grown almost five-fold, from a Gross Domestic Product of \$44 billion to \$200 billion.¹⁰² With the exception of Iran, Israel faces no major external threats and its potential adversaries have no superpower patron, which helps explain why the last major state-to-state war Israel fought occurred in 1973 – over forty years ago. Terrorism

is in decline, the price of oil is falling, and new natural gas deposits have been discovered opening up the prospect of near-energy independence. Israel benefits greatly from its relationship to the United States but it also realizes that in a world of international anarchy and changing interests, one can only rely on oneself. It will not be easy, but at the end of the day, Israel will survive the realist inclinations of Obama and, if need be, the realist policies of his successors.

CONCLUSION: ASSESSING OBAMA'S REALISM

With few exceptions, each of Obama's major foreign policy decisions conformed to realist precepts. The pivot to Asia followed the realist admonition to focus one's efforts in those areas of the world that possess the greatest military threats and economic wealth. The nuclear negotiations with Iran show the willingness to use economic sanctions to contain a dangerous adversary, but is also in conformity with the realist belief that nuclear proliferation is not a major threat (because adversaries can be deterred) and certainly not worth going to war. Also not worth a war was confronting Russia over its incursion into Ukraine and the seizure of Crimea. Although this represented the first forcible change of borders in Europe since World War II, it did not pose a threat to American vital interests and thus did not justify a major power confrontation. The decision to leave Afghanistan conformed well to the realist view of not sinking resources into a losing cause, especially one whose impact was peripheral to American concerns. Obama's acquiescence to the removal of Mubarak, the ascendancy of Morsi and his replacement by Sisi represented the recognition of the limits of American power to control the internal politics of another state and the willingness to overlook objectionable leaders who are supportive of American interests. Obama's view that the principal burden of defeating Assad and ISIS must rest with indigenous forces in the Middle East who are most threatened and not with American troops is fully consistent with the realist practice of buck passing. To be sure, Obama's humanitarian intervention in Libya and his abandonment of the "red line" in Syria marked departures from realism, but neither action proved costly to the United States and did not undermine the overall realist thrust of his foreign policy.

It is easy to imagine Obama following a different, non-realist path. An Obama intent on transforming the world may have chosen to delay reaching out to China until it reformed its human rights policy, launch a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities, remain in Afghanistan, attempt to roll back the Russians from Crimea, stand by Mubarak (or Morsi), arm the Syrian rebels much earlier, and deploy ground troops to eliminate ISIS. Alternatively, a more isolationist Obama may have decided to make little effort to embrace Asia, end sanctions against Iran, leave Afghanistan long ago, accept Russian moves in Crimea as legitimate, and allow the Arab Spring to unfold without any American interference. That Obama's policy fell into the middle of these extremes does not make it right, but it reinforces its realist credentials.

In sum, Obama's foreign policy has not tried to transform the world but has accepted it "as is." He has been cautious in the use of force, restrained in efforts to spread democracy and human rights, opposed to the direct involvement of American troops, and insistent on others sharing the burden for world order. As the same time, in accordance with realist principles, Obama's foreign policy is not isolationist or pacifist. He has not shrunk from the use of force when he believed it could do good at an acceptable cost. Moreover, he proved sensitive to the realist concern not to squander resources on what he believed to be marginal threats, leaving America ill prepared to deal with future challenges from powerful adversaries. Obama's foreign policy has been one of restraint and retrenchment, reflecting what he believes to be the limits of American power and avoiding the squandering of American resources on what he has concluded are futile causes.

None of this is to suggest that Obama's realism has necessarily produced an admirable foreign policy. For many, Obama's foreign policy has been a disaster. They see Obama's restraint not as something to be welcomed, but as an abdication of American responsibility in the world. The United States, critics argue, remains the world's only "indispensable" power. The U.S. alone provides what order there is in an otherwise anarchic world. This role, however, is challenged by adhering too closely to realist principles. A policy of realism for the United States can easily morph into a policy of isolationism similar to what was practiced in the 1920s and 1930s, even if this is not the intention of the policymakers. America is

fortunate that its “vital interests” are not under serious threat anywhere. As such, a convincing case can be made against the use of force, especially the direct use of American troops, for almost any threat. Indeed, as we have seen, Obama has been skillful in limiting American involvement across a wide range of issues. Over time, however, the cumulative effect of non-involvement can erode American credibility and promote challenges to American core concerns. If the weak can get away with more, this will encourage disruptive behavior (as the “indispensable” nation looks the other way). Just as a frog will supposedly not leap from a frying pan if the heat is raised ever so slowly, the growing recognition that America cannot be depended upon to enforce international order may create a threat to American interests so great that by the time the United States wakes up to the danger, it can only be met at a terrible cost.¹⁰³

Whether Obama’s realist approach contributes to world order or supports the American national interest remains to be seen. On the one hand, he has avoided costly quagmires such as the 2003 Iraqi intervention while ending America’s longest war in Afghanistan. On the other hand, China is extending its influence over East Asia, Iran continues on its path towards achieving a capability to produce nuclear weapons, Russia is increasing its influence over Ukraine, the Taliban are poised to take over Afghanistan as soon as the United States departs, and the Middle East is wracked with an unprecedented level of mayhem. Obama may reassure us that America’s vital interests are not yet threatened by any of these developments, but their overall impact is frightening nonetheless. The point, however, is not to declare that realism is good or bad for the world, the United States, or Israel. Rather, that far from being arbitrary, naive and muddled, Obama’s foreign policies are consistent with realism. If one wishes to understand what he has done and is likely to do in the future, realism, for better or worse, is the best guide.

NOTES

¹ Three of the most distinguished works that inform modern realism are Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (Seventh Edition) (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006); Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2010); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2014). For ways in which realism should inform American foreign policy see, Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: Norton, 2005).

² On why warfare will never end because of the nature of mankind, states, and the international system, nobody does it better than Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) especially chapter VIII (conclusion).

³ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, pp. 3-4.

⁴ John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 30-32; On why leaders are not likely to be “irrational,” see also, Kenneth N. Waltz, “More May Be Better,” in Kenneth N. Waltz and Scott D. Sagan, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: Norton, 2003), pp. 13-14.

⁵ Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 33.

⁶ Tanisha M. Fazal, *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation and Annexation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 3.

⁷ Michael Mandelbaum, “Foreign Policy As Social Work,” *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 75, No. 1, pp. 16-32, 1996.

⁸ The difference between capabilities and interests came to be known as the “Lippmann Gap.” See Colin Dueck, “Obama’s Strategic Denial,” *The National Interest*, March 27, 2013; <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/obamas-strategic-denial-8275>.

⁹ Stephen Walt, *Taming American Power*, pp. 222-3.

¹⁰ For a description of “buck-passing,” see Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 159-62.

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¹³ David Remnick, "Watching the Eclipse: Putin's New Creed," *The New Yorker*, August 11, and 18, 2014, p. 57;

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁵ Obama praised Niebuhr in an interview with David Brooks, "Obama, Gospel and Verse," *New York Times*, April 26, 2007.

¹⁶ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>

¹⁷ http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/29/us/politics/transcript-of-president-obamas-commencement-address-at-west-point.html?_r=0.

¹⁸ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>

¹⁹ <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11americas-pacific-century>; p. 1; See also, Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014, Chapter 3 "Asia: The Pivot"), pp. 39-64.

²⁰ David Shambaugh, "Assessing the U.S. 'Pivot' to Asia," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* (Summer 2013), pp. 10, 13-14.

²¹ Tan Seng Chye, "Changing Global Landscape and Enhanced U.S. Engagement with Asia – Challenges and Emerging Trends," *Asia Pacific Review*, Volume 19, No. 1 (2012), p. 119.

²² Robert E. Kelly, "The 'Pivot' and its Problems: American Foreign Policy in Northeast Asia," *The Pacific Review*, Volume 27, No. 3, p. 491 (May 2014).

²³ Shambaugh, "Assessing the U.S. 'Pivot' to Asia," p. 16.

²⁴ Prashanth Parameswaran, “Explaining U.S. Strategic Partnerships in the Asia-Pacific Region: Origins, Developments and Prospects,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Volume 36, No. 2 (2014), p. 262, 266.

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²⁶ Shambaugh, p. 14.

²⁷ Arun Kumar Sahu, “Two to Tango: The U.S. and China in the Asia-Pacific,” *Strategic Analysis*, Volume 38, No. 4 (2014), p. 551.

²⁸ Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” p. 13.

²⁹ Shambaugh, p. 11.

³⁰ Arun Sahu, “Two to Tango,” p. 548.

³¹ Kelly, “The ‘Pivot’ and its Problems,” p. 484.

³² For an excellent analysis on why a rising China may conflict with the United States, see Aaron L. Freidberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

³³ Two prominent realists that worry about the rise of China are, Aaron Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*, and John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, see especially chapter 10.

³⁴ See for example, Obama’s remarks to the 2012 United Nations General Assembly, as cited in Zachary K. Goldman and Mira Rapp-Hooper, “Conceptualizing Containment: The Iranian Threat and the Future of Gulf Security,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Volume 128, Number 4 (Winter, 2013/2014), p. 589.

³⁵ For a background on the sanctions (and why they might not work), see Steven Hurst, “Obama and Iran,” *International Politics*, Volume 49, Number 5 (2012), pp. 546-9.

³⁶ For the text of the Joint Program of Action, see http://eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2013/131124_03_en.pdf. For a criticism of the plan, see Matej Drotar, “Nuclear Negotiations Revisited: Challenges and Prospects toward a Final Deal with Iran,” *Strategic Assessment*, Volume 17, Number 2, July (2014), pp. 53-63.

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³⁹ On why an American strike against Iran might make sense, see Matthew Kroenig, "Time to Attack Iran: Why a Strike is the Least Bad Option," *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 91, Number 1, January/February 2012, pp. 76-86; See also, Efraim Inbar, "The Need to Block a Nuclear Iran," *The Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Volume 10, Number 2 (2006).

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⁴³ Colin H. Kahl, et al, "If All Else Fails." Kahl writes that the United States "is not likely" to acquiesce in a nuclear armed Iran, but his study is designed to prepare for exactly that outcome.

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⁴⁷ On the damage done to the Russian economy because of its intervention in Crimea, see Jouko Rautava, “Crimean crisis will cost Russia too,” *BOFIT Policy Brief* (1/2014), pp. 4-5.

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⁵² <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>

⁵³ Jamie Lynn De Coster, “Negotiating the Great Game: Ending the U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan,” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Volume 38, Number 2 (Summer 2014), p. 77.

⁵⁴ De Coster, “Negotiating the Great Game,” p. 78.

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⁶³ Gates, *Duty*, p. 505; Hillary Clinton, *Hard Choices*, p. 343.

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⁶⁵ On the intense U.S. efforts to get the UN resolution passed, see Hillary Clinton, *Hard Choices*, especially pp. 363-75.

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