

BARRY RUBIN'S LEGACY AND THE STUDY OF U.S. MIDDLE EAST POLICY

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In the following transcript Dr. Martin Kramer recounts his friendship and long acquaintance with Prof. Barry Rubin and their shared interest in U.S. Middle East policy, noting Rubin's deep concerns regarding the Obama administration in this regard. Also discussed is the administration's view of the region, contending that it has an appeal to the traditional American realist view of the Middle East, whose adherents tend to favor a U.S. withdrawal from the region. This, Kramer contends, is what has enabled the administration's approach to the region to gain wide currency in the United States, rather than any broad support for the leftist underpinnings of Obama's worldview. It is part of a symposium entitled, "Regime Collapse and Sectarian War: Where is the Middle East Headed?" The symposium was held on March 15, 2015, to mark the launch of the newly named Rubin Center for International Affairs in honor of MERIA founder and former editor the late Prof. Barry Rubin.

Editor's Note: Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, the world has witnessed the collapse of a number of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and the consequent opening of an ungoverned space. Two formerly strong states, Iraq and Syria, have ceased to exist. The result has been the emergence of a series of paramilitary and political organizations—most based on ethnic and sectarian identity—all competing for control on the ground of what were once those states. There has also been an attempt by existing and intact regional powers to move into that space to take advantage of it for themselves. The Islamic Republic of Iran now controls part—though not all—of Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, while Turkey is another contender. This symposium examines this issue from a number of different angles, including the role the West has played.

Thank you and good morning. It is a very great privilege to be included on this panel this morning, and it is also a cause for reflection. I had the pleasure of knowing Barry Rubin longer than most of those in this room, perhaps longer than anyone in this room. We first met in Cairo in 1979. Everyone who ever met Barry will attest that he made a powerful first impression, and this was even more so 36 years ago, well before Judy had domesticated him. My wife and I have a vivid memory of him appearing at the door of our Cairo apartment, a ball of electricity and eccentricity, showering sparks in all directions.

I may also be the only person here who didn't first meet him in America or Israel, but in Egypt—all the more far-fetched, since Barry and I were *landsmen*, who both grew up in Washington. So we began our exploration of the Arab Middle East more or less together, and for the decades that followed, we would discuss and argue over what made it tick—or not tick, as the case may be. It was a very long conversation.

Now in one obvious sense, that conversation is over. Yet in another, it's only just begun, with the establishment of the Rubin Center. That is because Barry generated ideas that continue to inspire, challenge, and provoke. Indeed, I would argue that Barry has provided the Rubin Center with an agenda, by which I mean a series of crucial questions which he defined and answered, but which are so important that they need to be constantly redefined and answered anew.

Whether it was the role of Islam in politics, or the impact of culture, or the weight of radical ideologies, or the outsized role of America, Barry made valuable contributions that are a point of departure for any serious student of the Middle East. So the Rubin Center isn't primarily about preserving Barry's name. The body of his work will do that. It should be about engaging with Barry's ideas. And I'm delighted to have the chance to do that this morning, in one area that always fascinated him: U.S. policy in the Middle East.

In fact, it would be accurate to say that Barry was drawn to the Middle East not because of the beauty of Arabic, or the aesthetic appeal of Persian carpets, or a fascination with its religious legacies. He came to it, in the first instance, as a problem facing U.S. foreign policy. Yes, he was a Middle East expert, but he was no less, and perhaps even more, an expert on U.S. Middle East policy.

And if I were to characterize his overall view of it, I would refer to the title of his most-cited book: *Paved with Good Intentions*. The complete adage, of course, is that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions,” and I think this succinctly summarized Barry's view of U.S. policy in the Middle East. Americans have tried again and again to fix the Middle East, but have usually ended up making things worse, because they lack a fundamental understanding of what makes the Middle East work.

This left Barry a perennial critic of U.S. policy in the Middle East. It is not difficult to trace this in his writings, sometimes in surprising ways. For example, although he is sometimes conflated with the neoconservatives, Barry had deep reservations about the Bush administration's choice to go to war in Iraq. He believed that Saddam Hussein had been effectively contained, and that imposing democracy on Iraq was misguided and, worse, a diversion from the

larger threat posed by Iran.

However critical Barry was toward the Bush administration, he was positively hostile to the Obama administration, even before Barack Obama was elected. Consider, for example, his predictions about the Obama administration made in May 2008. "If elected," said Barry, "Obama will be the most anti-Israel president in American history." On the same occasion, Barry warned that Obama would choose Robert Malley, whom he regarded as a dangerous man, for a top position (he thought it would be director of policy planning). Well, Barry was right, ultimately, now that we've seen the appointment of Malley to the top Middle East slot at the National Security Council.

Barry had just as jaundiced an opinion of the appointments of John Kerry, Chuck Hagel, and John Brennan in the second Obama administration. "They are all hostile to Israel," he wrote. "But this isn't the first time people who think that way held high office. Far worse is that they are pro-Islamist as well as being dimwitted about U.S. interests in a way no foreign policy team has been in the century since America walked onto the world stage."

In his last summer in America, in 2013, Barry announced that he was "in a position to describe to you with a high degree of confidence what U.S. policy regarding the Middle East will be for the remainder of Obama's term and perhaps far into the future. In short, the administration has crossed a line and is now backing the 'bad guys.'" By this, he meant in particular the Islamists. But he also warned against a "peace process" with the Palestinian Authority, whose leaders he believed could not be trusted to honor their word. "The greatest danger for Israel would be to listen to the advice of Obama, Kerry, and their supporters, and accept a dangerous and unworkable peace agreement that the other side would not implement."

In considering Obama's policy, Barry attributed its particular twists and turns to what he saw as a Third Worldist ideological predisposition. Barry, it should be recalled, started out politically on the far Left, and this left him with a very acute sense of how the Left construes the world. He had a kind of sixth sense, which allowed him to pick up the faintest scent of far left delusion, even when it was buried under layers of liberal-sounding rationale. So if you spent any time with him, you learned very quickly that he believed the Obama administration to be channeling the very sorts of far left ideas that Obama would have absorbed in his student days at Columbia, or later at the side of his Palestinian friend Rashid Khalidi at the University of Chicago.

I think Barry was onto something here, and I myself, even before Obama's election, traced these various influences on his foreign-policy thinking. I think

Obama came away from his primer on the Middle East, in particular, with two assumptions. First, the use of force in the Middle East invariably has unintended consequences, and should be avoided almost at all cost. And second, the primary source of America's problems in the Middle East has been the absence of a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Subsequent developments in the Middle East may well have disabused Obama, and Kerry, of the latter notion—there are certainly plenty of other sources of disorder in the Middle East that have nothing to do with Israel. But the former notion, that the use of force usually creates blowback, and is somehow inconsistent with America's role as a soft power, persists even now.

That said, you cannot become president of United States, and conduct a credible foreign policy, based solely upon a leftist ideological aversion to the use of force. The United States is the greatest military power in the history of humankind. It has built this capability with immense effort, and at some sacrifice. The notion that it cannot be put to any good use, in a place as troublesome to the United States as the Middle East, for fear of blowback, is hardly a position any Commander-in-Chief can put forward.

What is significant, then, about Obama's foreign policy is the way in which it has aligned itself with the mainstream realism which for so long has been a kind of swing constituency in foreign policy thought. It was the addition of the big names of realist thinking to the pool of Obama's advisers—people like Brent Scowcroft and Zbigniew Brzezinski—that gave the Obama foreign policy a patina of realist, hard-nosed rigor in pursuit of the American interest. So Barry got half the story right: the left-wing ideological predilections of Barack Obama. But just as he had a sixth sense for leftist ideology, I have one for realist strategy, and let me share with you how it relates to the Middle East.

Traditionally, the Middle East wasn't a high priority for Realists. They didn't share the Middle Eastern obsessions of religious missionaries and romantic Arabists. Europe and the Pacific—those parts of the world that abut the United States and possess industrial and technological capabilities of a high order—took top priority.

The Middle East was somewhere down in the middle of realist priorities. It had oil, and the supply of it had to be protected. There was Israel, the security of Israel was important, for various reasons. The Soviet Union had clients there, so the United States had to demonstrate a credible presence. This was especially true for Turkey and Iran, but also for the Arab underbelly.

But beyond this, the Realists looked at the Middle East with a certain amount of indifference. Young Americans who wanted to make their mark in foreign policy,

from Condoleezza Rice down to Dennis Ross, didn't begin by focusing on the Middle East. They focused on the Soviet Union, China, or Europe.

Even the Iranian Revolution in 1979 didn't change this perception. Yes, it was a geopolitical headache. But the Islamic regime could be balanced, by a combination of seapower and support for American clients like the Saudis and even Saddam Hussein. The American approach to the region was one of offshore balancing, resting on a combination of arms sales, high-level diplomacy, and very infrequent interventions on the ground.

9/11 changed the American perception of the Middle East almost overnight. Suddenly it became the primary focus of American foreign policy and military planning. In a series of speeches, President George W. Bush emphasized the strategic importance of the region, and the depth of America's commitment to transforming it. It was Bush who declared:

The Middle East must be a focus of American policy for decades to come. In many nations of the Middle East—countries of great strategic importance—democracy has not yet taken root. Therefore, the United States has adopted a new policy, a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East. This strategy requires the same persistence and energy and idealism we have shown before. And it will yield the same results. As in Europe, as in Asia, as in every region of the world, the advance of freedom leads to peace.

Needless to say, this was a radical promotion of the Middle East, to a rank of significance it had never enjoyed in U.S. strategy or foreign policy. It now stood on the same plane with Europe and Asia. And for a while, it swept up the Realists too. The attack on the homeland strengthened the neoconservative view of the Middle East as a problem that had to be solved for America to stay secure at home, and Realists couldn't make a persuasive counterargument. The Iraq war was the result.

That war reinforced the traditional realist view, which goes something like this: The Middle East isn't the equivalent of Europe or Asia. It isn't an economic or technological competitor, and doesn't offer vast economic opportunities and markets. The threats that it generates are of a low order, given the absence of a strong technological and industrial base. On 9/11, terrorists got through America's porous defenses, but generally speaking, the terrorist threat posed by Middle Eastern instability isn't strategic.

From the realist point of view, even if Iran could double or triple its military capacity, and put its hands on a few nuclear weapons, it would pose no strategic threat to the United States. For the United States, it isn't 1938 in the Middle East, because there's no equivalent to either Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan, as a competitor to the United States. The Middle East is an agglomeration of weak states, resting on weak societies, capable of drawing our attention only because they spew incendiary words and, in our day, post snuff videos on the internet.

If we keep all this in proportion, there is no reason to invest massively in changing the Middle East, and the best America can and should do is work to contain its pathologies. What is the preferable distance for accomplishing this? A drone command center in the Nevada desert is the ideal distance, although of course the United States will sometimes have to lean forward. What it shouldn't do is get sucked into another Middle Eastern war. Instead, it should allow the region to burn itself out, and only when the internal fires subside, should the United States consider a larger role.

Now it doesn't take a lot of imagination to see the overlap between the leftist ideological revulsion at America's use of power, and the realist view of the Middle East, which sees deep American engagement in the region as a waste of resources and a fool's errand. It is this combination of left ideology and hard-nosed realism which gives Obama's foreign policy a coherence it might not otherwise have.

Because the fact of the matter is, that there is some merit to the realist position. Does anyone doubt that, for the United States, the Middle East can't pose a threat anywhere like the threat once posed by Germany or Japan, or later by Russia and China? Why can't the United States deter an Iran with a few nuclear weapons, when it managed to deter the Soviet Union with thousands of such weapons? And why should the United States plunge itself into the middle of a sectarian war in the Middle East, when all past conflicts of this sort eventually burned themselves out? Finally, why should the United States expend any effort to rid the Middle East of its pathologies—from a lack of democracy to a tolerance for extremism—when every past attempt to do so has ended an abject failure?

Realists also have a profound conviction that at the end of the day, realism always prevails in the foreign policy thinking of other countries. So Egypt could only remain in the grip of Arab nationalism for so long, before there arose the figure of Anwar Sadat—a genuine Realist who took Egypt out of its Soviet alliance and put it squarely in the orbit of the United States. China pulled itself out of an insane cultural revolution, ultimately embracing capitalism of a fiercely competitive sort, and placing itself in a close economic relationship with United

States. If this is true, then is it not inevitable that Iran will also undergo a realist transformation? Yes, admittedly, it's been rather a long time, but Realists always see evidence for realism wherever they look.

So the real problem, I would argue, isn't so much the left bias of key figures in the Obama administration, if not Obama himself. It is the alignment they have with the vastly larger number of Realists both inside and outside the administration, in the media, and in the think tanks. There is an interesting irony here too. The Obama view, one would think, is somehow particularly sympathetic to Middle Easterners, especially Muslims and Arabs. There is undoubtedly something to that, as was evidenced in Obama's famous Cairo speech, his recent comments about the Crusades, and so on. The realist view is actually quite the opposite: It regards the peoples of the region as incorrigible, and not really worth much American effort.

These approaches would seem to be irreconcilable, but they actually reinforce a shared preference to refrain from any use of American muscle in the Middle East—in the left view, because Middle Easterners would resent it; and in the realist view, because Middle Easterners don't deserve or warrant it.

Now it isn't hard to make a critique of the realist perspective. We all know the problem with realism: People don't perceive reality in the same way. They have religions, they have ideologies, they have resentments and grievances, aspirations and visions, and all these give rise to surprises, often unpleasant ones, emanating from the Middle East. From the Iranian Revolution, to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, to the rise of the Palestinian Hamas, to the depredations of the Islamic State—all these are examples of developments that one could not have predicted, if one had simply assumed that all parties in the Middle East were driven by American-style realism.

But that's neither here nor there. This sort of realism runs much deeper than Obama-style Third World sympathies. And that's why I believe that the American preference for withdrawing from the Middle East, from disengaging from the region, is quite likely to outlast Barack Obama. In fact, I think it will characterize the next administration, whether it is Democrat or Republican.

There is little we can do to stop this shift—perhaps we would call it drift—in the American perception of the Middle East. What we do have, however, is our own interests. We do not sit on a distant continent, half a world away from the Middle East. We are part of this region, it is never going to be marginal or secondary or tertiary to us. It will always be our primary concern. And so we must assume that as we go forward, our interests and those of United States may well diverge. When that happens, we need to have enough independence

to make our own calculation.

Just how to do that, within the parameters of our dependence on the United States, will be the pressing policy issue for Israeli decisionmakers in the next decade to come.

My best wishes to Judy, Jonathan Spyer, and to Prof. Reichman on the establishment of the Rubin Center. We have great aspirations and hopes placed on this wonderful initiative.

Audience Question: A question to the panel... When the Ottoman Turks in 1517 conquered this area, and they conquered Egypt, they used modern weaponry. The Mameluks, whom they defeated in Egypt, wrote afterwards making fun of the Ottomans, "You didn't fight like men. You rode on your horses. You didn't have a man-to-man battle." Why am I bringing this up? The question is, are we in the same situation right now? Are we using outdated methods to try to deal with problems?

Dr. Martin Kramer: I think that what we see now is indeed a changing of the rules. The rules are being changed by sub-state actors. The rules that we regard as rules of war were formulated by nation-states, but look across the region. The wars are between states and sub-state actors, sometimes between sub-state actors and themselves. We see that in the case of Hizballah and ISIS. And they're rewriting rules, or they're taking rules from another rulebook, which is Islamic history and the Koran. It is Israel and the United States that have to stand at the forefront of beginning to modify, to tweak, the rules, which are enshrined in international law but which we find increasingly at odds with the reality on the ground. Israel and the United States, more than any other two states, face this kind of warfare, but I don't see a lot of coordination between them in beginning a rethinking of those rules. Until we get that, we will condemn ourselves for waging war by illegitimate means, while they continue to claim they are not bound by our rules at all. How long we can go like this without losing our technological advantage is an open question.

Audience Question: Is Israel able to fight a prolonged war without a 1973-style airlift?

Dr. Martin Kramer: I don't want to answer specifically the question regarding the nature of that war and how prolonged it would have to be, but let's face it; we are not as independent as we'd like to think. There was recently a televised elections advertisement which drew on historical analogies. Its premise: Ben-Gurion defied George Marshall in declaring independence, Israel needs a leader who can do the same. One could add to that list: Look at what Ben-Gurion did in defying the United States in the Sinai campaign, or look at what

Ben-Gurion did, again, in defying the United States over the Dimona reactor. The paradox is that at a time when there were only 600,000 Israelis, and then later, a million and some, Israel in many respects was more independent, because it didn't feel the need to go to Washington to ask for permission to act. I would argue that we are now in a situation where, rather than *do*, we must first *plead*, as Prime Minister Netanyahu did in his recent speech before Congress. Basically, when you cannot do, you have to plead to the United States to modify its policy, do a better deal. These are signs of our growing dependence. So there was a trade-off after 1967 when we entered into this very close strategic partnership, or "special relationship," with the United States. The "special relationship" gives us advantages, but let's admit it, there are downsides to it as well, most notably it binds our hands, as we're beginning to see in the Iranian case. And I find it worrisome; I think that we do need to have a Plan B for a Middle East in which the United States is less engaged, and in which we're going to have to exercise our own independent action and thought on a more regular basis than we've been accustomed to in the course of this long period of growing dependence on the United States.

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