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Realism, Liberalism and Israel’s Disengagement from Gaza

One of the most debated topics in the study of International Relations is the Arab-Israeli conflict. Many foreign relations experts and policy makers have tried to create a solution to this conflict. Yet, it persists and will most likely continue to exist for many years to come. However, the Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict is an important one to analyze, as many International Relations theories can be used in assessing it. In this essay I will utilize Israel’s disengagement with Gaza, a key event in the Arab Israeli conflict to analyze one of the oldest political theories, Realism. Based on this analysis, I will show that Realism can still be effective in the modern world. In addition, I will show the other types of theories that can be applied to explain this event.

Alan Dowty in his book, *Israel/Palestine* describes the conflict between Palestine and Israel as one over territory (Dowty, 2). However, unlike many other territorial disputes, this conflict involves two groups fighting over the same piece of land (Dowty, 3). Both sides have a historic claim to the land and present arguments that can’t be dismissed. To understand this conflict, one must know its origins as well as a brief history of both the Israelis and the Palestinians. Thousands of years ago, there existed the ancient kingdom of Israel, inhabited by the Jewish people. Around 2000 years ago, the Romans destroyed the Jewish temple and exiled the majority of kingdom’s populace (Dowty, 25). Many of these people settled across Europe. Over the next two millennia, the Jewish people endured prosecution at the hands of Europeans. In light of this persecution, the idea of Zionism, or a Jewish state, gained prevalence among European Jewish communities during the late 19th century (Dowty, 40). The land chosen to be the Jewish state was the land where the ancient Jewish kingdom of Israel had existed. At the time, this land was called Palestine and was controlled by the faltering Ottoman Empire. In Palestine, Jews and Arabs had been living relatively peacefully for over one thousand years. With the exception of the crusades, this region had been under Arab control for a long time (Dowty, 46). Thus, when the European Zionists began moving in, they weren’t welcome by the Arabs who had been living there, as they felt threatened by foreign invasion (Dowty, 47). Following World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Jewish persecution in Europe intensified, more European Jews immigrated to Palestine, and nationalism amongst Palestinians increased. The land was now controlled by the British Empire, which promised this land to both groups. After World War II, the UN general assembly approved the creation of both an Arab state and a Jewish state in Palestine. The Jewish state accepted the proposal but the Arab state rejected this partition. In 1948, the Palestinians, along with other neighboring countries, attacked the newly formed Jewish state. After a brief war, the Jewish state won this conflict and thus the state of Israel was created (Dowty, 1). However, this Israel was much larger than was originally planned because it annexed a lot of Palestinian land. Meanwhile, Jordan and Egypt occupied the West Bank and Gaza. In 1967, after Israel was attacked again by its neighbors, it emerged victorious and with a lot more territory, including the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza. This began the Israeli occupation of Palestine and also the trend of Israel giving up territory gained in war to its original owners in exchange for peace (Dowty, 1).

The modern conflict between Palestine and Israel, outlined by Yossi Alpher in his report “The Future of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Critical Trends Affecting Israel” has several key components to it. The first is over the same land (Dowty, 2). Due to this, the most practical solution is a “two state solution” (Alpher, 12). However, even partition is tricky, as Israel has many settlements in Palestinian territories and also faces security concerns based on what territory it surrenders (Dowty, 194). The second issue is on the partition of Jerusalem, a city considered holy by both parties (Dowty, 202). The last issue is over Palestinian refugees; Palestine calls for Israel to admit all the refugees that were expelled after the 1948 war (Alpher, 9).

Throughout Israel’s history, its policy makers have mainly relied on the principles of the Realist theory when making foreign policy decisions. Realism is the oldest political theory. Although the term was coined by Hans Morgenthau at the start of the cold war, its principles can help explain the actions of many policy makers across different eras from the Peloponnesian war, to World War II. Realism operates on six basic assumptions: 1) Human nature is rotten, 2) the state is the principle actor in the world theater, 3) the world is in a constant state of international anarchy, 4) for a state to survive, it can rely on no one but itself, 5) other states have offensive capabilities and will use them if given the opportunity, and 6) all state leaders are rational (Morgenthau, 3-16). In summary, Realism argues that the most important goal of a state is survival. A state can have allies, but in the end it must be able to act on its own in order to survive (Morgenthau, 12). Until the end of the Cold War, Realism has been one of the most dominant theories in explaining world politics and in explaining why certain events occur the way they do.

The event in question is the Israeli disengagement from Gaza in 2005. Analyzing this event will help explain Realism’s relevancy in today’s world. Not long after Israel acquired Gaza, a movement for liberation gained momentum in Palestine. During the 1990s, in an effort to achieve peace, the Oslo accords recognized the Palestinian authority under Yasser Arafat as the government of Palestine. In 2000, an agreement was almost reached in Camp David. This agreement would have ended the occupation in Gaza and in 90% of the West bank in exchange for peace. However, Arafat refused and the deal fell through. Shortly after, he called for an intifada, or a wave of resistance against Israel which often turned into terror attacks (Dowty, 190). This further pushed Israel away from reaching an agreement and led to the rise of more right wing parties within the Israeli parliament. Before 2005, Ariel Sharon, was elected as Israeli prime minister. In an effort to create a “settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, involving two states living side-by-side in peace and security,” (Sharon) the Israeli Prime minister drafted a plan that would end the occupation in Gaza. This plan called for a complete Israeli withdrawal “from the Gaza Strip, including all the existing Israeli settlements.” (Sharon) Although both the United Nations and U.S. President Bush “commended [Sharon’s] efforts” (Bush) and gave Sharon support for this plan, many people from different sides of the political spectrum criticized it. The political left said it was a way to bypass peace negotiations while the right claimed that this plan was a form of appeasement. Nevertheless, after getting enough parliamentary votes, the Israeli government approved of the plan and thus withdrawal of troops began. The biggest issue was evicting the Israelis who were living in the settlements at the time (Alpher, 2). Some residents of the settlements left peacefully, while others had to be evicted by force. Israel did leave some infrastructure in Gaza, and the international community sent a lot of money and supplies in the form of humanitarian aid to Gaza. Unfortunately, shortly after the disengagement ended, the Palestinian authority was ousted from Gaza by Hamas, a rabidly anti-Israel organization. Hamas began investing money in rockets, and the opposite of peace resulted. Even though the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza succeeded, it failed to resolve the Palestinian/Israeli conflict.

So why did the Israeli disengagement from Gaza occur? While Realism provides a lot of insight into why this happened, it fails to explain everything about the event. By analyzing the Israeli disengagement from Gaza, one can conclude that Realism in the modern world doesn’t hold as much significance as it used to. Other International Relations theories such as Institutionalism, can also explain why this event occurred. However, they also can’t fully explain the Israeli disengagement from Gaza in its entirety. Thus, the best way to understand this event is through utilizing elements of multiple theories.

To understand how Realism can explain Israel’s disengagement from Gaza, we must first examine how Realism relates to Israel and its foreign policy. The nature of the state of Israel makes it a very realist state. From its inception, its existence has been physically challenged by its neighbors, and verbally challenged by other countries. When Israel was first created, its neighbors tried to wipe it out. Furthermore, its neighbors have tried to catch Israel off guard several times, especially when they launched an invasion on a Jewish high holiday. Throughout this time, no Western country gave Israel its support. Even though it is an ally of the US, Israel can’t entirely trust anyone for handling its own security given the threats it faces. In addition, many institutions have openly condemned Israel either by supporting boycott movements such as BDS or through pushing for anti-Israel resolutions in the UN. Given the open hostilities from all these countries and groups and the overall lack of support, Israel is left to fend for itself. As a democratic Jewish nation state constantly plagued by terrorism, Israel can’t afford to accept too many non-Jewish outsiders without risking losing either its status as a Jewish state or as a democracy.

In addition, Israel’s is located in an environment of anarchy, the Middle East. Israel can’t trust its neighbors, even those that it’s at peace with. Given the chaos of the Middle East, even if a neighboring government is an Israeli ally, a coup can easily replace that government with a hostile one. Moreover, with many countries in the Middle East such as Iran expressing open hostilities, it makes sense for Israel to hold an extremely cynical viewpoint of other states in its region. Israel also faces security threats from Palestinians, many of whom do not want Israel to exist. Many Palestinians during the intifada staged terrorist attacks, thus making national security a top concern for the Israeli government (Dowty, 3). For a country to feel truly secure, it needs to become the strongest in its region (Morgenthau, 183). This logic can partially explain why Israel expands during wartime, keeps up an occupation in Palestinian lands, maintains a strong military, and builds many advanced weapons.

Then, why make peace? More importantly, how can Realism explain why Israel gave away part of its territory to its enemies in a supposed effort to make peace? According to David Makovsky in his book *Engagement through Disengagement: GAZA and the Potential for Renewed Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking,* making peace will benefit Israel’s security as “the end of Israeli occupation should diminish Palestinian motivations for violence in Gaza.” (Makovsky, 31) In general, there are many reasons why it is advantageous to give away territory in exchange for peace. Peace means that Israel has less threats to deal with and less resources to commit to occupying territory. With Jordan and Egypt, it was advantageous to give back the territory gained from the 1967 war in a traditional balance of power sense. Similar to how Otto von Bismarck didn’t take territory from Austria because he knew that Austria might later become a valuable ally, Israel gave territory back to its neighbors to end hostilities. With Palestine, Israel has been willing to negotiate because it is in its favor to end an occupation that costs them a lot of recourses. For these reasons, in 2005 Israel gave Gaza to the Palestinians as peace would have increased the security of Israel. Especially given the wave of terrorism brought about by the second intifada, Israel had greater motivation to come up with a solution the national security concern. Moreover, this event in particular happened because as some might argue, the government in Israel saw giving Gaza as a gift to Palestine as a way to try to reconcile hostilities.

Realism also can account for why the event occurred at the time it did. The Israeli disengagement with Gaza took place following the death of the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, and Mahmoud Abbas’ assentation to the position of the president of the PLO (Makovsky, 37). Under Arafat, Palestine, didn’t operate under the principles of Realism. Arafat abandoned a deal that would have given Palestine almost all the land that it was demanding (the West Bank and Gaza) and would have resulted in tremendous gains for the Palestinians. Moreover, the calling for the second intifada wasn’t a rational action, which contradicts one of the six key principles of Realism. Unlike Arafat, Abbas is a much more rational statesman (Makovsky, 37). Given this change of leadership, Israel saw an opportunity to disengage from Gaza as this might have brought about negotiations between the two parties.

Although Realism can explain a lot for why Israel generally acts the way it does, it can’t fully explain why the Israeli disengagement from Gaza occurred the way it did. Realism falls short when one wants to know why Israel saw no alternatives to its disengagement plan. The idea that unconditionally ending an occupation of Gaza would lead to peace with all of Palestine seems idealistic. This idea inherently makes several other assumptions that seem to contradict the nature of Realism. One of which is that, Palestinians would see this withdrawal as an act of good faith and that there would be peace with Gaza. This assumption is that people aren’t rotten and is a contradiction to a key tenant of Realism. Moreover, the Israeli disengagement from Gaza had a lot of foreign involvement from it, as millions in humanitarian aid were sent to Gaza in hopes of connecting the new state to the independent world.

However, because Realism assumes that the state is the primary actor in international politics, (Morgenthau, 12) Realism’s greatest flaw is that it fails to explain the importance and involvement of non-state actors. During Israel’s disengagement from Gaza, Hamas, a radically anti-Israel terror group, posed a major security threat to both the Palestinian authority and to Israel (Makovsky, 39). Hamas believed that the state of Israel shouldn’t exist and that they will keep launching violent attacks on Israeli civilians until their goal is achieved. In Gaza, Hamas was gaining momentum, which threatened the influence of the Palestinian authority in that area. Realism doesn’t provide a detailed enough explanation on how to counter a non-state, threatening organization. However, cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian authority to thwart Hamas would have been best for both parties’ interests (Makovsky, 31). Nevertheless, the threat of Hamas was underestimated, as the terror group ended up taking over Gaza shortly after the withdrawal.

Two Liberal, or non-realist theories can help explain how and why the events of the Israeli disengagement with Gaza occurred the way they did. The first of which is Institutionalism. According to Robert O. Keohane and Lisa Martin in their article “The Promise of Institutionalist Theory,” this idea stresses the importance of institutions such as NATO and the United Nations as key actors in global politics (Keohane and Martin, 45). Unlike Realism, Institutionalism states that we do not live in a world of international anarchy and that problems between states can be resolved and arbitrated through institutions (Keohane and Martin, 45). Thus cooperation, and relying on others is what world leaders should do. Another part of Liberal theory is Globalization. According to Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye in their article “Globalization, What’s New? What’s Not?” this theory stresses the importance of economics in world politics (Keohane and Nye, 109). According to this belief, we live a world where everything is intertwined. Countries that are involved in this globalized world thrive from trade with each other. And, countries immersed in this globalized world are less likely to be violent since going to war will ruin its economy, therefore crippling it (Keohane and Nye, 106). Institutionalism can explain why Israel listened to the pressure from institutions such as the UN when it disengaged from Gaza as about one decade ago, Israel supported “the American's efforts [of] working with the International Community, to promote the reform process, build institutions and improve the economy of the Palestinian Authority.” (Bush) Furthermore, Globalization explains why Gaza received humanitarian aid for outside institutions because, according to some, “security and economic prosperity go hand in hand; one cannot endure without the other.” (Makovsky, 55) The world hoped that providing money to Gaza would help kick start their economy, immersing them in a globalized world and thus creating peace in that region.

Another aspect of Liberalism is the importance of spreading democracy. According to this theory, the more democracies there are in the world, the fewer wars there will be. Thus, liberal theory can explain why the US was so concerned with making peace in that region. According to Elliot Abrams in his book, *Arafat, Disengagement, Sharon." Tested by Zion: The Bush Administration and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* the United States under George Bush favored the spread of peaceful, liberal democracies across the world (Abrams, 142). As Bush stated in his letter to Sharon, “Palestinians must undertake a comprehensive and fundamental political reform that includes a strong parliamentary democracy and an empowered prime minister.” (Bush). This is a key part of liberal theory. Therefore, the United States believed that it would need to arbitrate a solution between both parties in order to bring about peace and to that region of the Middle East.

Although both these theories fill in the gaps unexplained by Realism, they do have their drawbacks in explaining the Israeli disengagement from Gaza. Thus, these theories also can’t stand on their own in explaining this event. However, the greatest failure of Liberalism is in explaining why the Israeli disengagement from Gaza failed to produce peace. If it is critical that institutions as well as other counties get involved in making peace between Israel and Palestine, and that Gaza needed a stronger economy to become peaceful, then the event shouldn’t have failed. Given this, liberalism can’t be fully applied when explaining the Palestinian/Israeli conflict.

By analyzing the actions of the key players: Palestine, Israel, as well as the actions of outside institutions and the United States around the time of Israel’s disengagement with Gaza, one can see that Realism is still very relevant in the post-cold war era. However, Realism does have its shortcomings as it doesn’t fully make this event understandable. Where realism fails, the liberal theories, Institutionalism and Globalization explain why the Israeli disengagement from Gaza occurred the way it did. Despite those arguments, the International Relations theory of Realism still holds up. Overall, Realism helps explain the security motivations of Israel, and the motivations of Palestine to achieve state soveignty. Therefore, it is still very much a relevant theory in International Relations.

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