Realism, Military Power, and the Conflict Between Israel and Hamas

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"First, there needs to be some preconception of which facts are significant and which are not. The facts are myriad and do not speak for themselves. For anyone, academic or not, there are needs to be criteria of significance." (Halliday, 1994, p. 25) The Realist paradigm of International Relations (IR) takes power to be its conceptual focus, and one of the main determinants in explaining world politics. In this essay, I investigate whether the Realist emphasis on military power adequately explains world politics. Although there is no single tradition of Realism[1], the majority of Realists conceive of power in military-strategic terms and as some form of material resource that states accumulate out of necessity (Schmidt, 2007). I contend that the power accumulating behaviour Realists ascribe to states could be the result of an alternative and distinctly domestic logic and more fundamentally, the Realist conception of power as if it some form of resource critically misrepresents how power operates. I do this with reference to the 2008-9 conflict between Israel and Hamas[2].

Ever since its mythological[3] 'victory' over idealism in the first 'great debate', Realism has become the dominant paradigm within IR and in doing so has maintained the analysis of inter-state war as the central research project making IR intellectually distinctive. The disciplinary 'foundational myth' is a story of IR emerging as a response to the carnage of the First World War with the goal of solving the 'problem' of inter-state war, which for its Western founders was clearly the most important phenomenon of international relations (Burchill & Linklater, 2005; Smith, 2000). As Cox notes, there is an ontological presupposition inherent in the term 'International Relations', it seems to "equate nation with state and to define the field as limited to the interactions among states." (1992, p. 132) Realists maintain that IR has sharply defined borders. IR theorists study 'the international' – a fictitiously distinct constructed object of study exhibiting a unique logic and unique causal forces, insulated and independent from 'the economy' and 'the domestic' (Bell, 2002; Rosenberg, 1994).

For Realists world politics is akin to the Hobbesian war of all against all, so to explain inter-state war, using the causal forces and distinctive logic found in the exclusively inter-national 'international', *is to explain world politics*. "[O]ntology lies at the beginning of any enquiry. We cannot define a problem in global politics without presupposing a certain basic structure consisting of the significant kinds of entities involved and the form of significant relationships among them." (Cox, 1992, p. 132) The realist conceptual framework posits an 'international' populated by functionally similar sovereign authorities (nation-states) that can be modelled and analysed as if they were "unitary rational actors, carefully calculating costs of alternative courses of action" in the, "pursuit of divergent 'national interests'" in a timeless and permanent condition of anarchy (Keohane, 1986, p. 165; Rosenberg, 1994, p. 9). Unlike the division of labour facilitated by the mediating and pacifying state of the domestic polity, Realists argue that the absence of overarching world-state means that states must be functionally alike and provide for themselves fully, i.e. the 'international' is a self-help system: "The international imperative is 'take care of yourself'!" (Bell, 2002, p. 228; Waltz, 1979, p. 107)

However, anarchy is not enough; Waltz himself (1979, p. 71) recognises that "we cannot predict how [states] will react to the [structural] pressures [states are subject to] without knowledge of their internal dispositions". All Realists regard states as self-regarding egoists that accumulate power either as a means to an end or an end in itself (Schmidt, 2007; Wendt, 1999). Realists disagree as to whether the motivation driving states to accumulate power is

due to a natural will to power representative of the *animus dominandi* nature of man (classical Realists) or a structurally induced motivation in response to the unavoidable fear and uncertainty[4] of an anarchic realm (structural Realists) (Schmidt, 2007; Weber, 2005). However, it is reasonable to assume that any state has a fundamental and unchangeable interest in survival, security and maintaining sovereignty and Realists would deem power as the only guarantor of this interest (Schmidt, 2007). The different motivations that Realists ascribe to states are problematic and inconsistent[5], but my concern is not why states are believed to accumulate power, just that they do and do so for reasons that are found in the 'international'.

Realists seem to regard power as a non-contextualised material resource, conceived of in military-strategic terms, which states have in varying quantities (Schmidt, 2007). Waltz (1979, p. 99) abstracts "from every attribute of states except capabilities", with the effect that the distribution of capabilities, i.e. power, among the identical sovereign authorities becomes *the* variable in the Realist framework (Keohane, 1986). A Realist conception of power can roughly be defined as, "the capacity to cause other[s]…to act (or not…act) in ways in which they would not have acted (or would have acted) otherwise." Indeed the use or threat of violence becomes the primary instrument of power because there are few situations in which violence would not provoke others to act.(Beitz, 1999, p. 44) Hence, Realists would generally agree with Waltz that "in international politics force serves, not only the as the ultima ratio, but indeed as the first and constant one" (Waltz, 1979, p. 113). Indeed, as Waltz earlier argued:

"Force is a means of achieving the external ends of states because there exists no consistent, reliable, process of reconciling the conflicts of interest that inevitably arise among similar units in a condition of anarchy. A foreign policy based on this image of international relations is neither moral nor immoral, but embodies merely a reasoned response to the world about us." (Waltz, 1959, p. 238)

Hence, what differentiate structurally identical states from one another is their relative capabilities: "war-winning ability" is "the standard by which states are…ranked" and differentiated(Baldwin, 2002, p. 183). The distribution of capabilities, although difficult to measure[6], explains how states interact and behave internationally (Donnelly, 2005).

"The distribution of actors' material capabilities" is not directly predictive of events in international politics, but rather, "affects the possibility and likelihood of certain outcomes" (Wendt, 1999, p. 110). Realists identify world politics as a trans-historical and trans-geographical struggle for power, and that in this context Thucydides' dictum that, "the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept" (where strength and weakness are calculated by military capabilities) is *the* stark and universal truth (Schmidt, 2007; Thucydides, 1972, p. 402). Realists do not preclude, "Balinese marching into Dutch machine guns or the Polish cavalry charging German tanks" but rather determines that type of action to be misguided in the least. Indeed, the 'international' that Realists have constructed and defined, is only a permissive cause of wars. Any given conflict has to be activated by some form of human purpose (Weber, 2005; Wendt, 1999, p. 113). The 'international' therefore is not the only source of explanation in world politics, and I contend that the 'domestic' may explain a great deal of world politics. Indeed, the military accumulating behaviour observable in states may occur for altogether different and distinctly domestic based reasons. The military power accumulating behaviour of Israel and Hamas is but one example.

Ben Gurion surmises the essential problem in Israel/Palestine: "we and they want the same thing: We both want Palestine. And that is the fundamental conflict." (Shlaim, 2001, p. 18) For both Israelis and Palestinians it is nationalist conflict, there is a clear telos in the action of both parties, a territorially secure state. Yet, both Israel and Hamas seem to accept that negotiation is the eventual end through which to meet their nationalist ends (Hroub, 2006; Shlaim, 2001). However, until negotiation occurs both parties see a military capacity accumulation as an imperative to ensure favourable terms. Thus, importantly and ideological belief that military power translates into negotiating power in addition to security[7], has driven accumulation. Hence, since Israel's creation, the dominant rationale in Israeli politics has been the logic of 'The Iron Wall' as first expressed by Ze'ev Jabotinsky:

"Every indigenous people will resist alien settlers are long as they see any hope of ridding themselves of the danger of foreign settlement. This is how the Arabs will behave and go on behaving so long as they possess a gleam of hope that they can prevent 'Palestine' from becoming the Land of Israel…Settlement can thus [only] develop under the

protection of a force that is not dependent on the local population, behind an iron wall which they will be powerless to break down." (Jabotinsky, in Shlaim, 2001, p. 13)

Equally, a founder of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, sees the necessity in accumulating military power for negotiation: "What you get from anyone, or on a negotiating table should match your strength on the ground" (Cited in Hroub, 2006, p. 49). Hence, since their inceptions Israel and Hamas have continued to accumulate the instruments of violence, for reasons found outside of the 'international'. Yet, there is a more fundamental problem, a problem with the very conception of power as a material resource.[8]

States (and their militaries) can only act in as much as they are empowered to do so, that is to say, "it is people's support that lends power to the institutions of a country" (Arendt, 1970, p. 41). Conceiving of power as a material military-strategic resource has little explanatory value for it is intuitively true that, "the mightiest army in the world will not protect you if it is not loyal to you" (Castoriadis, 1991, p. 156; Rosenberg, 1994). To focus on the war-fighting ability of states, as a material resource represented by the size of armies and the number of missiles is to give the impression that, "in foreign relations…violence [is] the prerequisite of power and power nothing but a façade, the velvet glove which either conceals the iron hand or will turn out to belong to a paper tiger". Arendt determines that this conception is implausible, because power and the capacity to commit violence are not equivalent. "Power", she writes, "corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group…When we say of somebody that he is "in power" we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name." (Arendt, 1970, pp. 47, 44) There is a distinction between a state amassing military strength, which could perhaps be conceived as a resource, and a state having the power to use that military strength to meet its ends.[9] States do not have power per se; they are *empowered*. To act internationally, the state needs to be empowered by other states, that is to say other states respect the legitimacy of that action[10], but most importantly, as Arendt suggests, states need to be empowered by 'the domestic'. Any explanation of world politics that focuses on power needs to explain how it is possible for actors to accumulate military strength and how states are empowered to use it. A brief look at Israel and Hamas (and Gaza) demonstrates how conceiving of power as empowerment can enrich an explanation of world politics.

Conceiving of power as empowerment reveals a number of things, notably that power is contextual and state violence internationally is contingent upon domestic support. Immediately, it becomes clear that despite Israel's enormous military capabilities, Hamas has more power within Gaza. That is to say, that although Israel has the capacity to invade and occupy Gaza it does not have the power to govern and subdue Gaza. To quote, Arendt (1970, p. 53), "…out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command…what never can grow out of it is power." Israel is not legitimate in Gaza, consent and support delineates the geographical extent of power, and Israel does not the consent or support of Gazans. In both Israel and Gaza, the state is empowered, by the democratic process. Voting for Hamas, for instance, an organisation that engages in violent activity in its relations with Israel is to legitimise their violent policies and to empower them to further violence. It would, however, be a mistake to reduce relations of consent to elections, especially if Hroub is correct when he speculates that half of Gazans voted for Hamas simply because they were not corrupt Fatah (Hroub, 2006). States must continually ensure their support, and power base. As such, the capacity for the state to 'frame' reality and control the language of discourse is important. This is why people like Michael B. Oren are employed to, "reinforce Israel's position in the media", to contextualise Israeli violence in a violent world, to spin Israeli actions in order to maintain or gain support (both domestically and internationally) (Oren, 2009). It is also why former Israeli ambassador Daniel Ayalon maintains that Hamas' democratic election to office in Gaza changes nothing i.e. they continue to be terrorists: a label that overshadows any legitimate Palestinian grievance and bolsters Israel's 'right to defend herself' with force (National Public Radio, 2006). These are but a few examples of how conceiving of power as empowerment can provide a more extensive understanding of the operation of power in world politics.

The Realist emphasis on military strength does not conclusively explain world politics. For a school of thought focusing on power, Realism misunderstands what it means to 'have power'. To 'have power' is to be empowered by a collectivity to act in their name. By stringently maintaining that their object of study, the 'international', is the source of all causal and important factors in world politics Realists cannot identify the manner in which the military capacity they emphasize, is only powerful in as much as it is empowered. Realists are correct to determine that military

capacity is of importance, for global hegemons have had discernible military advantages over other actors. Yet, equally, the failure of the USA to win in Vietnam and the failure of Israel to gain security demonstrates the contextual and contingent nature of power, and how military capacity is not the means to all ends. Therefore, in conclusion, I do not mean to suggest that the Realist emphasis on military capabilities does not provide any insight, merely that no study of the workings of power in world politics is complete without regard for 'the domestic' that empowers the units of world politics to act.

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[1] I admittedly, do not do justice to the richness of Realism in this essay.

[2] Seeing the conflict between Israel and Hamas through the Realist lens is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is not conclusively evident that Israel-Hamas relations belong in 'the international', after all as Kissinger remarked, "Israel has no foreign policy, only domestic politics"(Shlaim, 2001, p. xiv). Secondly, what kind of actor is Hamas? It is an organisation, but an organisation in control of the state structures in Gaza owing to the democratic process. So does a conflict with Hamas mean a conflict with Gaza? I assume that Hamas' 2006 election win gave Hamas control of the state structure in Gaza and that Gaza can be regarded as a territorially distinct actor i.e. a state (Hroub, 2006). Hence, I assume that both Israel and Hamas are subject to the same forces and *can* be placed in the Realist framework.

[3]Indicating that the truth of this 'victory' is not its important feature, but rather that it is the foundational story that Realism has constructed

[4] Structural Realists emphasise the 'security dilemma' that uncertainty creates:

"Given the irreducible uncertainty about the intentions of others, security measures taken by one actor are perceived by others as threatening; the others take steps to protect themselves; these steps are then interpreted by the first actor as confirming its initial hypothesis that the others are dangerous; and so on in a spiral of illusory fears and "unnecessary" defences". (Snyder, 1997, p. 17).

[5] For instance, Waltz claims that states, "at a minimum, seek their own preservation, at a maximum, drive for universal domination" (1979, p. 118). But, a little domination is not security, and a lot of security is not domination (Donnelly, 2005). Indeed, "States concerned with self-preservation do not seek to maximise their power when they are not in danger. On the contrary, they recognize a trade-off between aggrandizement and self-preservation; they realize that a relentless search for universal domination may jeopardize their own autonomy." (Keohane, 1986, p. 47)

[6] Realists disagree over the criteria of measuring power. But this problem and how it impacts on the depiction of states weighing up options potential in light of the capabilities of others is not my concern in this essay (Schmidt, 2007).

[7] Hamas regards Israel as colonial state and the continuing settlement of 'Palestinian land' clearly could be taken as threatening to the very existence of a territorially distinct Arab Palestine (Hroub, 2006)(Hroub).

[8] To think of power as Realists do is also to restrict analysis to observable conflict, Lukes' first face. This is patently a failing of Realist theory.

[9] Aron (1986, p. 257)also makes a similar distinction, “that of having the power (puissance) to do something and of exercising the power (pouvoir) to do so.”

[10] This raises the issue of international norms, stated or unstated, to which states adhere contrary to what Realism would suggest.

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