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Personality in Foreign Policy Decision-Making

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How Useful is Personality in Adding to our Understanding of Foreign Policy Decision-making?

In the realm of foreign policy analysis, the impact of personality on decision-making is perhaps the most contentious. The role of personality in foreign policy encompasses cognitive processes, background, personal characteristics, motives, and beliefs, and assumes that decision making is the result of individual 'human agency'; that is, that ultimately, it is individuals who make decisions, not states, which Jensen (1982:13) describes as a 'legal abstraction'. Personality can be important in adding to our understanding of foreign policy behaviour, but its relevance is dependent upon the constraints of the international system as well as domestic political structures. There are several models of foreign policy making that downplay the role of individuals in decision-making, including Allison's Bureaucratic Politics model (1971) and those that stress the phenomenon of 'groupthink' (Janis, 1972). Indeed, even proponents of the psychological model recognise that there are a number of situations in which the role of idiosyncratic variables are minimised in favour of opposing models.

This essay will contend that personality can be extremely helpful in adding to our understanding of foreign policy decision-making, provided that the environmental and systemic conditions allow for the propensity of individual ambition. Maoz and Shayer (1987:576) argue that the role of personality in foreign policy should not be underestimated, and state that there are significant events in international relations that 'can be attributed- at least partially- to the ideas and personal actions of key leaders'. This paper will aim to analyse the impact of personality and psychology upon foreign policy decision-making, with specific reference to Israeli decision makers and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Particular focus will be upon the impact of the individual personal characteristics of Ariel Sharon as Defense Minister during the 1982 Lebanon War, as well as the role that personality can be said to have played in the development of hostilities between the Israelis and the Palestinians. For the purposes of this essay, the Palestinian conflict will be analysed as part of Israeli foreign policy (as the conflict is viewed by Israel), and Yasser Arafat as a legitimate head of state (as he was viewed by a majority of nations during his leadership of the Palestinian people).

This paper is structured to analyse the situations and conditions under which personality can be said to have a significant impact, i.e. when personality can add to our understanding of foreign policy decision-making; secondly, it will analyse the reasons why personality can be useful in studying foreign policy, including how examination of cognitive processes can help form predictions of leaders' decisions; thirdly, it will analyse how far personality can be used to explain Israeli foreign policy during the 1982 Lebanon War, and how far personality can be used to add to our understanding of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The first important point to note when considering the impact of personality on foreign policy is that there are certain systemic conditions under which personality and individual idiosyncrasies are unable to make a significant impact upon decision-making. Jensen (1982) identifies a number of situations in which personality is more likely to affect decisional outputs, related both to the leader and to the systemic environment. Jensen (1982:14-15) stipulates that for personality to have optimum impact upon foreign policy decisions, the leader must display a high level of interest in foreign affairs; he must possess high decisional latitude; the situation must be non-routine; and information regarding the situation should be ambiguous. Upon examination of these conditions, it is immediately clear that the personal whims and desires of Ariel Sharon and Menachem Begin during the Israeli incursion in Lebanon would have had a significant impact upon the decisions made since the conditions of the situation provided for the considerable

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influence of personality. In terms of the environment surrounding the Israeli invasion, the situation was highly ambiguous and the plan for invasion indicated a developing crisis; but the most important factors allowing for projection of personal ambitions involved the personalities and backgrounds of Sharon and Begin themselves.

In a more general vein, with politics being heavily autocratic, monarchical and dictatorial, (in other words, unimpeded by bureaucracy), the Middle East as a region could be said to provide optimum conditions for the expression of personality in foreign policy decision-making. In such regimes, the leader tends to operate according to personal whims, unconstrained by bureaucracy or opposition forces. This condition lends itself neatly to the Middle East, and leaders such as King Fahd of Saudi Arabia or the Sultans of the Gulf States. Hermann refers to this type of leader as 'predominant' (Hermann, 2001:84). It is much more cumbersome to attempt to apply models of bureaucratic politics to regimes such as these in which one decision maker is ultimately responsible for every foreign policy decision in that state. However, one should not assume that personality is the sole influencing factor in such regimes, for phenomena such as 'groupthink' may also be particularly relevant for exactly the same reasons; for example, Schulze (1998) contends that the Lebanon War can in fact be more convincingly explained by groupthink than it can by Sharon's personal ambitions. Nevertheless, it is clear that political systems that are heavily constrained by public opinion, opposition groups and bureaucracies, and in which decisions regarding foreign policy are made by large diverse groups of decision-makers, an examination of the personality of one individual may not be particularly useful in adding to our understanding of foreign policy (Jensen, 1982). In such systems, models such as Allison's Bureaucratic Politics Model (1971) and models of rationality are considerably more appropriate.

According to this understanding, one would assume that Israel, as a bureaucratic democracy, would be less subject to the effects of personality on foreign policy decision-making than other states in the Middle East. However Israel should perhaps be viewed as the exception rather than the rule. In contrast to many bureaucratised democratic states, Israeli politics is highly militarised, with a significant number of high-ranking politicians and decision-makers emanating from longstanding military careers. As a result of this, and the geo-political position and history of Israel, there is an extreme and intense focus of policy on foreign affairs. Additionally, since the creation of the state of Israel, prime ministers and other decision-makers have been known to consult primarily with small groups of colleagues (for example, Golda Meir's 'kitchen cabinet') and bypass the bureaucratic system completely.

Jensen (1982) stipulates that crisis situations, and situations that are ambiguous or consist of sparse or overloaded information, are more prone to the effects of personality. This can be explained by the fact that poor or low levels of information do not allow for rational decisions to be made. Proponents of psychological models of decision-making are therefore, in essence, disregarding the theory of rationality, in that they assume decisions are based on personal perceptions of the world rather than on rational calculations of the situation. The eventual failure of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) to fulfill the political objectives of the Lebanon War can be easily explained in terms of misperception by Sharon and Begin, an irrational perception of the internal politics in Lebanon, and the misperception that military force could achieve political objectives. During crisis situations, any bureaucracy that can be said to exist within a political system is generally bypassed in favour of small, close-knit, decision-making bodies due to time constraints. In accordance with Jensen's stipulations, one can conclude that, generally, alternative models of foreign policy decision-making are more appropriate in democracies with high levels of bureaucracy and routine non-crisis situations, although there are anomalies to the rule, including Israel.

Providing that the conditions for optimum impact are met, personality can provide analysts with insightful explanations as to why certain decisions were reached, and allow predictions to be made regarding foreign policy decision-making. Margaret Hermann (1980) argues that by examining idiosyncrasies, characteristics and personality, predictions regarding foreign policy decision-making can be made because such examinations can create a clear picture of likely personal behaviour, i.e. predispositions. Predictions are usually made by way of cognitive mapping and analyses of the cognitive and psychological processes involved in decision-making; thus it is important to recognise that personality and cognition are innately linked. Rosati (1995) states that the structure of individual cognition is reliant upon background, past experiences, individual role, and inherent belief systems. Cognition is critical to perception, and the way in which a decision maker perceives the world, himself, or his enemy is vital to understanding why certain decisions are taken and others bypassed (Jervis, 1976).

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Since background, ideology and personal characteristics can heavily influence the way in which information is processed, they can therefore be said to affect decisional outputs. One explanation of this focuses on the role of cognitive consistency, in which individual decision makers will endeavour to make certain that situational developments comply with their belief system. This can lead to cognitive dissonance, in which individuals will alter or avoid information that serves to disprove their theories about the enemy or the world itself. A clear example of cognitive dissonance was the reaction of Ariel Sharon to the attempted assassination of Israeli Ambassador Shlomo Argov in 1982. Sharon's hostile perception of his enemy (the PLO) led him to falsely interpret intelligence regarding the assassination, despite the emergence of evidence that Abu Nidal (in fact a rival of Arafat) was responsible rather than the PLO. Sharon resisted the new information because it was inconsistent with his image of Arafat, as a terrorist, and was furthermore inconsistent with his desire to provide a pretext for war (Rosati, 1995). Jervis argues that it is erroneous to assume that sound explanations of crucial decisions and policies can be made 'without reference to the decision maker's beliefs about the world and their images of others' (Rosati, 1995).

Having examined the situations in which personality can be useful in explaining foreign policy decision-making, and the ways in which it can help analysts to make predictions and provide explanations, it is now important to investigate the ways in which different personality traits can result in different foreign policy orientations. In order to come to any conclusion about the nature of an individual's personality or character, indirect measures are commonly used: for example, responses to questions in press conferences, statements, comments regarding other leaders, speeches (although this poses questions of validity as speeches are often written by others), past political or military positions, and records of childhood and youth (Hermann, 1980).

As previously discussed, there are a variety of ways in which personality can affect foreign policy. Assuming that Jensen's conditions are met, the important question is therefore how specific personality traits and personal predispositions actually impact foreign policy decision-making. Different political analysts make different distinctions, although the most common is the categorisation of political leaders and foreign policy decision-makers as either aggressive or conciliatory leaders (Hermann, 1980). Other categories into which decision makers can be placed include pragmatists or crusaders, and ideologues or opportunists (Hermann, 2001:86). Decision makers can be grouped into either category by analysis of their personal characteristics, including beliefs, motives, decisional style, and interpersonal style.

According to Hermann (1980), an aggressive leader can be characterised by certain attributes, including a Machiavellian tendency to manipulate others, coupled with a high need for power, a tendency towards suspiciousness and paranoia, high levels of nationalism, and a significant willingness to initiate action on behalf of their state. Hermann describes conciliatory leaders as possessing completely contrasting characteristics. Unlike their aggressive counterparts, conciliatory leaders are likely to display a desire for affiliation and friendly relations with other nations, are generally trusting of others, show lower levels of interest in nationalism, and display an ability to explore different policy options. The distinction between aggressive and conciliatory leaders is particularly relevant in the study of politics in Israel, with prime ministers and other political figures commonly being coined as either 'hawks' or 'doves', depending on their leadership style and foreign policy. An examination of the policies and personality of a consistently hawkish leader such as Ariel Sharon would clearly diagnose him as an aggressive leader, in line with Hermann's definition.

By analysing the foreign policies of Sharon and Arafat, and making a comparison to their personality type, it is clear that both leaders' policies heavily reflect their backgrounds, ideologies, and characteristics. Although as previously discussed, it would be erroneous to assume that personality was the single determining factor involved in decision-making, both Arafat and Sharon (as Defense Minister) commanded significant power and choice over policy in their respective governments. Arafat in particular remained unchallenged as the head of the PLO for almost four decades, and it was he who decided 'its mode of operation in foreign affairs' (Nofal, 2006:23). Such retention of power, and a high level of centralisation are integral to the projection of personal ambitions onto foreign policy decision-making, as there are no checks from bureaucracies. Nevertheless, these conditions still allow for the occurrence of groupthink, and Schulze argues that the decision-making elite involved in the 1982 Lebanon War, including Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir and Rafael Eitan, were victims of pressure for group cohesiveness, as well as cognitive dissonance (Schulze, 1998:217).

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Many observers (Nofal, 2006; Bukay, 2005) contend that the most compelling reason that Arafat should be placed into the category of 'aggressive leader' was his chronic paranoia, which they argue critically affected his foreign policy decision-making, both in terms of the process and the outcome. Arafat was so suspicious of the motives of others that he often made no attempt to consult with experts or peers: what Bukay (2005:54) describes as acting through 'crisis management', which is typical of patrimonial leadership. It is argued that the politics of paranoia, the symptoms of which include fear of loss of autonomy, suspiciousness and centrality, would have significantly increased the propensity for personal ambition to influence foreign policy by way of cognitive dissonance as well as groupthink. However, although both Arafat and Sharon have been described as having a 'warfare personality' (Bukay, 2005:54), certain traits of Arafat relate more strongly to the description of a conciliatory leader: for example, his excessive need for affiliation, displayed in his extensive visits with foreign leaders. It has also been suggested that Arafat was particularly able to alter his policies and beliefs relative to the situation, appearing to correspond with a more cognitively open and complex personality (Nofal, 2006; Kelman, 1982:125). However, such openness to new ideas and flexibility may well have been superficial, as it is clear that Arafat placed great importance upon the need to be accepted as a credible head of state, and it can be argued that his fundamental beliefs regarding the Israelis never changed.

Sharon's attitude towards the Palestinians could be described as innately hostile, and probably has its roots in an early and consistent participation in paramilitary Zionist movements. Rosati (1995:55) attributes this image of the Palestinians to 'an inherent bad faith model' based on mirror images, in which Sharon would have held a 'negative and malevolent image of the enemy, whilst holding a positive and benevolent image of himself' and his actions. Involvement in the military from a young age undoubtedly heavily influenced Sharon's personality, and it has been said that he displayed a remarkable will to fight and take risks in his military career (Rubenberg, 2010:1363). Perhaps the most important underpinning of his military career that became evident in his political career was his propensity to defy orders from his superiors: on two occasions, in the Yom Kippur War and the 1956 Suez War, after flouting commands, Sharon's troops were successful in their mission, somewhat vindicating his actions. This sort of blatant disregard for the opinion of others displays in Sharon's personality the belief in an ability to control events, which is evident in 'aggressive leaders' (Hermann, 1980).

A further important aspect of personality, which can provide valuable insights into foreign policy decision-making, is the ability of leaders to experience attitudinal and policy orientation changes. Such capacity to change from being an 'aggressive leader' to a leader who displays more conciliatory behaviour, appears to be relevant to Israeli politicians including Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin, who both began their political careers with hawkish foreign policies, and ended them as doves; Rabin was responsible for the signing of peace accords with the Palestinians in 1993 at Oslo, and Peres has consistently sought out domestic and international allies in the later part of his career (Ziv, 2007). This capacity to change can be attributed to the psychological conditions of cognitive openness and cognitive complexity.

Cognitive complexity, coupled with cognitive openness, supposes that the individual will be more adaptive to new ideas, have a less rigid belief structure and operational code, and therefore be more prone to changing their beliefs. On the other hand, an individual who is cognitively simple and closed is less adept to fluctuating from previously held opinions and ideologies. Maoz (1987) found that amongst Israeli politicians, Begin and Golda Meir were the most cognitively simple, and that Levi Eshkol was the most cognitively complex, which corresponds with his indecisiveness and proclivity to deviate from expected foreign policy decisions (Maoz, 1987:597). Cognitive processes and the propensity for attitudinal change could therefore be said to have had a significant impact upon the development of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as periods of relative peace and conciliation tend to have been overseen by more cognitively open, complex and conciliatory leaders, whilst the opposite is true for aggressive leaders.

In relation to the more specific foreign policy relating to the 1982 Lebanon War, the primary and most common explanation lends itself to the politics of personality. As Defense Minister, Ariel Sharon deceived the Knesset as to his true intentions, and Schiff and Ya'ari (1986:301) claim that the incursion into Lebanon was 'born of the ambition of one wilful, reckless man'. Begin was not faultless however, and his rigid operational code, based on his history and experience of the Holocaust, shaped his views concerning the PLO whom he saw as little more than Nazis (Schulze, 1998:223). They also contend that Sharon and Begin experienced no significant resistance or opposition from the

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decision-making group, suggesting groupthink was also at play; similarities within the groups' backgrounds and ideologies would have significantly contributed to the failure to explore alternative options to military action (Begin, Sharon, Shamir and Eitan could all easily be described as ideologically Zionist hawks, with the majority having a military background).

Cognitive dissonance was also substantially evident, not only in the ignoring of intelligence as previously discussed, but in the way in which Sharon appears to have ignored or side-lined evidence to suggest that the internal political system in Lebanon would not allow for the swift dismantling of the PLO from southern Lebanon. Schulze (1998:219) contends that Sharon and Eitan 'engineered the environment to fit the plan'. Poor intelligence from Mossad also contributed to feelings of invincibility and misconceptions of ability to achieve the political objectives of the invasion; indeed the information that was fed to Sharon by Mossad agents fit neatly into their operational code and cognitive structures.

Provided that systemic conditions allow for the projection of personality onto decision outputs, examination and analysis of individual psychological variables can be extremely important in understanding foreign policy decision-making. It is indeed clear that personality and an analysis of idiosyncratic variables are particularly useful to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and to the development of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Nevertheless, alternative models of decision-making including bureaucratic politics and groupthink also invariably play a role. The extent to which personality influences foreign policy depends significantly upon the individual, his decision style, environmental constraints and the prevalence of information and intelligence.

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