Barry Rubin: An appreciation

By JONATHAN SPYER

Barry Rubin was one of the leading Middle East scholars and analysts of his generation. He was also a patriot of two countries - Israel and the United States - a dissector, and a moral and intellectual beacon for thousands of people in many lands. Barry brought to his work a tremendous, searing energy, which made him famously prolific. This energy stayed with him throughout the illness which has now prematurely ended his life. He was still composing articles in the very last days, when his hands could no longer work the keyboard. He stayed with his chosen mission to the end.

What was the source of this extraordinary energy and commitment? It is vital to note that Barry's work was characterized not only by its analytical depth, but also by a profound sense of moral urgency. This set him apart from the scholarly and academic mainstream. There was always a sense behind his words of some urgent wrong to be righted, or some piece of information which must be revealed and understood, with no time to waste.

There are many examples from his work which demonstrate his presence, clarity and moral commitment. And since he believed in backing up claims with empirical evidence, here are a few of these:

In *Tragedy of the Middle East*, Barry expressed a cogent and extremely prescient critique of the prevailing political culture in the Arab world. Many of the points he raised in this seminal work form the basis of the claims that were raised by liberal Arab oppositionists in the first days of the "Arab Spring."
The closed nature of regional political systems and economies, the cynical misuse of anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric, the vast disparities in access to wealth and power - all are noted here. Barry championed in a practical way the cause of Arab reform and liberalism in the region when it still went largely unnoticed by most analysts.

At the same time, he had no illusions about the balance of political power in the Middle East and was also among the first to predict the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood and the acute dangers inherent therein.

Barry was similarly among the first to detect the anti-Western and anti-democratic tendencies of the Erdogan government and the AKP in Turkey. I remember him issuing a passionate, uncompromising warning in this regard on many platforms, as other scholars sought to outline what they imagined to be more "nuanced" or "measured" positions. Of course, Barry's assessment of Erdogan and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's closest advisor, Barry was both discreet and modest about these connections, but he was also aware of their importance.

But he is a mark of Barry's nature that his network of connections went far beyond the senior reaches of Israel's establishment.

So on the same day that he might be corresponding with members of the Israeli Cabinet, he would be meeting with visiting Turkish friends to discuss their fears regarding the direction of their country, or having coffee with a member of the Kurdish underground who was passing through Tel Aviv, or speaking with a brilliant young officer of IDF Military Intelligence, or advising an unusually talented young Iraqi Arab scholar concerning the direction of his research.

These are all real examples whose outlines will be impossible to convey to those who knew Barry well. None of these people knew each other. They might not have agreed about very much if they had met. But he could pull them together in a way that illuminated the way forward.

Barry's work was a 24-hour-a-day project for him. He was always switched on, reading, speaking, learning, writing, contributing.

He was a fascinating, multi-dimensional man, with many levels to his personality and to his interests. In his youth, he had been a radical, in the ferment of the US campuses of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the second part of his life, Israel and the Jewish People were his center of passion. Throughout, he was fascinated by the history of the land of his birth, the USA, and by its traditions of liberty and possibility. As Walt Whitman described America itself, so Barry too "contained multitudes."

Because of all this, there will be thousands of people, in Israel, in the broader Middle East, in the US and in Europe who will be feeling themselves diminished by his passing.

Barry would have allowed scarce time for lamenting, however. He would have stressed the urgency of the hour, and the need to get organized and back to work.

We will learn from his example.

And despite the grievous loss, it is accurate to say that in a number of ways, he is still with us. Barry liked to split issues up into three components, so here are three of the ways in which his presence will linger and continue to serve as a beacon illuminating the way forward.

First, in his books and his writings, which are readily available and which together form a monument and a testimony to a life spent learning, studying and analyzing the Middle East and public policy.

Second is the example he set of how to live, in his generosity, staunch integrity, and passion above all for his family, but also for his friends, and for the causes to which he was committed.

And finally, for those of us who were privileged to work closely with him, in the memory of the very dear and wonderful personality that lay behind all of this scholarship and industry, and which will continue to remain beloved in our hearts for as long as we live.

Teacher and mentor, husband and father, scholar and friend and traveling companion, Barry Rubin is gone too soon - far too soon. It remains for those of us who learned from him to continue to walk along the lines he set and thus to honor his memory.

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