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# Obama and Terrorism

## Like It or Not, the War Goes On

*Jessica Stern*

U.S. President Barack Obama came into office determined to end a seemingly endless war on terrorism. Obama pledged to make his counterterrorism policies more nimble, more transparent, and more ethical than the ones pursued by the George W. Bush administration. Obama wanted to get away from the overreliance on force that characterized the Bush era, which led to the disastrous U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. That war, in turn, compromised the U.S. campaign against al Qaeda. During the past six-plus years, Obama has overseen an approach that relies on a combination of targeted killing, security assistance to military and intelligence forces in partner and allied countries, and intensive electronic surveillance. He has also initiated, although in a tentative way, a crucial effort to identify and address the underlying causes of terrorism. Overall, these steps amount to an improvement over the Bush years. But in many important ways, the relationship between Bush's

and Obama's counterterrorism programs is marked by continuity as much as by change.

One important difference, however, is that whereas Bush's approach was sometimes marred by an overly aggressive posture, Obama has sometimes erred too far in the other direction, seeming prone to idealism and wishful thinking. This has hampered his administration's efforts to combat the terrorist threat: despite Obama's laudable attempts to calibrate Washington's response, the American people find themselves living in a world plagued with more terrorism than before Obama took office, not less. Civil war, sectarian tensions, and state failure in the Middle East and Africa ensure that Islamist terrorism will continue its spread in those regions—and most likely in the rest of the world as well. Most worrisome is the emergence in Iraq and Syria of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as ISIS), a protean Salafi jihadist organization whose brutal violence, ability to capture and hold territory, significant financial resources, and impressive strategic acumen make it a threat unlike any other the United States has faced in the contemporary era. The rise of ISIS represents not only the failure of Bush-era counterterrorism policies but also a consequence of Obama's determination to withdraw from Iraq with little regard for the potential consequences. Obama was right to see the 2003 invasion of Iraq as a distraction from the war on Salafi jihadists. But his premature political disengagement from Iraq eight years later only made things worse.

The Obama years have put in stark relief the inescapable dilemma faced by any U.S. president trying to protect the United States and its allies from terrorism.

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Military responses, although frequently necessary in the immediate term, can end up serving terrorists' agendas; blowback is all but inevitable. Obama has talked up the potential of preventive strategies, such as civic engagement with communities where extremists recruit and the promotion of inclusive and effective governance. Such approaches are less risky than the use of force, but their effects take time to manifest and are difficult to measure. They also enjoy little support in Congress or among the American public.

Meanwhile, debates about U.S. counterterrorism policy remain mired in counterproductive partisan bickering and recriminations, with different Washington factions blaming one another for what went wrong. Whoever succeeds Obama as president will have to sort out the costs and benefits of his approach in a far more nuanced way. In counterterrorism—as in foreign policy more generally—it's easier to assess the limitations of the last president's approach than to develop a more effective new one, and it's easier to talk about transformative change than to carry it out.

### PLUS ÇA CHANGE

Some of the changes Obama has made have been mostly rhetorical or have reflected a shift in emphasis rather than a truly substantive move. Ironically, the aspects of U.S. counterterrorism to which he has made the least significant changes are the very ones that he was initially most determined to alter. The Bush administration's "global war on terrorism" has been replaced by a campaign known as "countering violent extremism" to serve as the overarching U.S. strategy to combat transnational Salafi jihadist groups such as al Qaeda

and ISIS. But the new phraseology masks many similarities. The "kinetic" fight—the use of deadly force by the U.S. military and intelligence agencies—has continued unabated, mostly in the form of drone strikes, since Obama took office. According to estimates collected by *The Long War Journal*, the United States has launched approximately 450 such attacks in Pakistan and Yemen during Obama's tenure, killing some 2,800 suspected terrorists and around 200 civilians.

And although Obama explicitly outlawed Bush's "enhanced interrogation techniques"—rightly classifying them as torture—and closed the so-called black sites where the CIA carried out the abuse, those changes were not as significant as they might appear. According to Jack Goldsmith, who headed the Office of Legal Counsel from October 2003 until June 2004, the Bush administration had halted the practice of waterboarding (without specifically declaring it illegal) by 2003, and the black sites had been largely emptied by 2007. And although Obama denounced abusive interrogations and extralegal detentions, he did so presumably knowing full well that a number of Washington's Middle Eastern allies in the struggle against Salafi jihadists would nonetheless continue to engage in such activities, and therefore, if those techniques happened to produce useful intelligence, the United States could still benefit from it.

Perhaps the most surprising continuity between Bush's and Obama's counterterrorism records is the fact that the U.S. detention center in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, remains open. One of Obama's first acts as president was to sign an executive order requiring that the

Pentagon shut down the facility within a year. But in March 2011, after facing years of intense bipartisan congressional opposition to that plan, Obama ordered the resumption of military commissions at Guantánamo and officially sanctioned the indefinite detention of suspected terrorists held there without charge—two of the policies he had vowed to change. In this case, the president's idealistic goals became hard to sustain once the duty to protect American lives became his primary responsibility.

Another irony is that the most successful reversal of Bush's counterterrorism agenda that Obama managed to achieve is arguably the one that has brought him the most grief: the end of the U.S. war in Iraq. The Bush administration made many different arguments—often based on flawed or misleading intelligence—for why the United States had to invade Iraq. But all of them were rooted in an increased feeling of vulnerability produced by the 9/11 attacks; in that sense, although many factors contributed to the invasion, it must be considered a centerpiece of Bush's "war on terror"—and it was the element of Bush's counterterrorism policy to which Obama most strongly objected.

Obama was elected with a mandate to end the war in Iraq and bring the troops home. During his campaign for the White House in 2008, Obama described Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's request for a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from his country as "an enormous opportunity" that would enhance the prospects for "long-term success in Iraq and the security interests of the United States." In 2010, when he announced the end of U.S. combat operations in

Iraq, Obama declared that "ending this war is not only in Iraq's interest—it's in our own."

But four years later, as Iraqi cities fell to ISIS, the administration and its defenders argued that the removal of U.S. troops had not really been Obama's decision to make. Maliki, they insisted, had refused to provide immunity for any U.S. troops who stayed in Iraq after the expiration of the status-of-forces agreement that Bush and Maliki had agreed to years earlier. There was some truth to that claim, but it was also true that Obama hadn't pressed Maliki very hard on the issue. And most damaging of all, Obama had abruptly reduced the level of diplomatic engagement between Iraq and the United States, leaving Sunnis feeling isolated and vulnerable to Maliki's overtly anti-Sunni sectarian regime.

### **DRONES, LOANS, AND PHONES**

Although many of Obama's counterterrorism choices were framed as corrective responses to Bush's missteps, the administration also had its own vision of how to combat the threat, and it's worth considering the three main tools it has relied on.

First and foremost among these are armed drones. Unmanned aerial vehicles, as they are technically known, are significantly more discriminating than any other weapon fired from afar. That accuracy is one reason Obama has come to rely so heavily on them. But they are still imperfect. Their targeting is entirely dependent on the quality of the intelligence available to the pilots, and it is not possible to completely avoid civilian casualties. Still, according to figures collected from open sources



*Capture the flag: Shiite fighters with an Islamic State banner in Iraq, November 2014*

and published by the think tank New America, among others, the accuracy of U.S. drones has improved over time; the amount of collateral damage they cause has decreased.

One legitimate concern raised by critics is that news coverage of drone attacks might help terrorists find new recruits. The use of drones to target suspected al Qaeda operatives in Yemen has been correlated with a rapid growth in membership in the group's Yemen-based affiliate. Some have argued that the drone attacks themselves have caused this rise; others, such as the political scientist Christopher Swift, suggest that the group has attracted "idle teenagers" not by stoking anger over drones but by offering relatively generous salaries, as well as cars, khat, and rifles.

It is certainly possible that drone strikes could inspire terrorist strikes on

U.S. soil. Faisal Shahzad, who tried and failed to detonate a bomb in New York City's Times Square in 2010, reportedly claimed he acted to avenge a 2009 drone strike that killed Baitullah Mehsud, the leader of the Pakistani Taliban. But I have interviewed terrorists for some 15 years, and I've found that rather than a single source of motivation, there are invariably a combination of factors—emotional, social, financial, ideological—that push people to engage in terrorist violence.

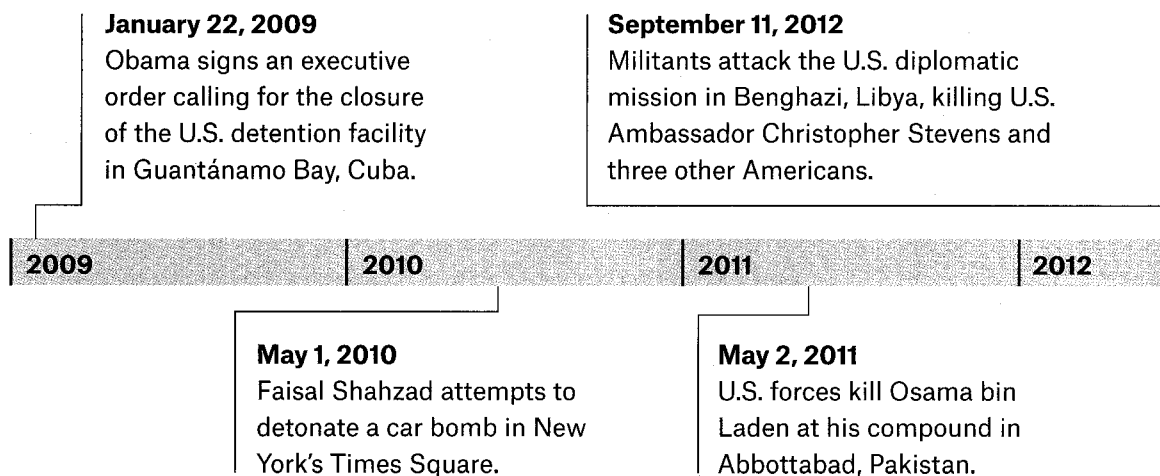
Drones are a terrifying instrument of war. They sometimes cause the deaths of innocents. There is something that feels not quite right about a weapon whose use entails no direct physical risk to the user. And although most Americans approve of the use of drones in counterterrorism operations, if drones were to someday target U.S. government officials or American citizens themselves,

such opinions would quickly shift. But for now, drones are the least bad of a number of bad options for targeting high-level terrorists.

Obama has also relied extensively on other governments to supply ground forces to fight terrorist groups abroad; this represents a second major pillar in his strategy. The policy has obvious appeal: if the United States cares more about the threat than local authorities do, U.S. interventions are unlikely to succeed in the long run. But this policy, too, is fraught with risk and can lead to significant blowback. Critics argue that it is hard to identify potential enemies among the forces Washington trains: consider the many “green on blue” attacks that have taken place in Afghanistan in the past dozen years, in which Afghan soldiers or police officers have killed members of the coalition forces tasked with training them. In Syria, where the Obama administration is not partnering with the government in Damascus but instead hopes to train rebel forces to fight ISIS, U.S. officials have identified only 60 volunteers who have the “right

mindset and ideology,” according to U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter. Similar efforts in Iraq have also been slowed by a lack of acceptable recruits. Whatever the virtues of this policy, it will not work if Washington cannot identify suitable candidates.

The third and final main element of Obama’s counterterrorism approach is a reliance on intensive electronic surveillance. Digital communication is far more widespread, and far more vulnerable to exploitation, than it was when Obama was elected, and government surveillance of communications has expanded dramatically under his watch, as the former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden revealed in 2013 by leaking enormous amounts of classified information about the NSA’s operations. Opposition to these activities—especially the NSA’s collection of metadata on all Americans’ phone calls—from the public, major Silicon Valley firms, and U.S. allies has resulted in the curtailment of some of the NSA’s most aggressive techniques. But surveillance is an essential counterterrorism tool. It is less likely to result in the



loss of innocent lives than most other counterterrorism tactics; indeed, it limits collateral damage by improving intelligence. And because it doesn't target Muslims in particular, it doesn't play into the jihadist narrative that the United States is engaged in a war against Islam. Looking forward, cyberterrorism and cyberwar will likely pose a more serious threat to Americans' well-being than conventional terrorist violence, and government surveillance is and will remain an essential weapon against cyberattacks.

### THE CONTAINMENT STORE

The Obama administration's combination of drone strikes, security assistance to U.S. partners and allies, and aggressive surveillance has undoubtedly helped protect Americans. The core al Qaeda organization has been greatly degraded, and there have been no major attacks on U.S. soil. Obama also deserves credit for launching the risky 2011 raid in Pakistan that eliminated Osama bin Laden. But there is also no question that on Obama's watch, the global

threat of jihadist terrorism has grown more acute, owing mostly to the rise of ISIS, a hybrid organization that combines elements of a proto-state, a millenarian cult, an organized crime ring, and an insurgent army led by highly skilled former Baathist military and intelligence personnel.

No Salafi jihadist organization, not even ISIS, poses an existential threat to the United States. Nor, in recent years, have Salafi jihadists posed the most direct terrorist threat to individual American citizens. Indeed, white supremacists and far-right extremists have committed nearly twice as many terrorist murders in the United States as have jihadists in the years since the 9/11 attacks. But that narrow measure of the threat fails to capture the unique danger posed by Salafi jihadism: it is the only extremist ideology able to attract large numbers of committed fighters around the world, and it motivates ISIS, the only extremist organization able to threaten the stability of states and the regional order in the Middle East. In addition to the territory the group now

**June 5, 2013**

*The Guardian* publishes the first of many revelations about the National Security Agency's surveillance.

**August 8, 2014**

Warplanes conduct the first U.S. air strikes against ISIS militants in northern Iraq.

**February 17, 2015**

The White House's Summit on Countering Violent Extremism begins.

**2013**

**2014**

**2015**

**June 29, 2014**

ISIS, having captured a number of Iraqi and Syrian cities in the preceding months, declares a caliphate.

**October 11, 2014**

The United States carries out its 400th drone strike in Pakistan, the 349th under Obama.

**December 9, 2014**

The U.S. Senate releases a summary of its investigation of the CIA's torture of detainees.

controls in Iraq and Syria, its affiliates have established “provinces” in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, among other places. Isis is threatening many U.S. allies and inspiring or directing an unknown number of followers to act beyond the territory it controls. Its ultimate goal—a pipe dream, one hopes—is to destabilize and eventually take over Saudi Arabia, which would have profound consequences not only for the region but also for the world.

Until recently, Obama consistently underestimated the strength and international appeal of Isis, which in early 2014 he infamously likened to a junior varsity basketball team in comparison to al Qaeda’s professional squad. Even after Isis had marched across Iraq and Syria and seized territory equal to the land area of the United Kingdom, Obama referred to it as “a terrorist organization, pure and simple” and promised to “degrade and ultimately destroy” the group—an impossible goal, especially given his claim that no ground forces would be required.

Given that Obama’s preferred approach failed to prevent the rise of Isis, it’s fair to ask whether the updated strategy he put in place in reaction to the group’s breathtaking advance will fare any better. Isis is a totalitarian regime, and Washington’s goal should be to contain it in much the same way the United States has other totalitarian regimes. And despite the White House’s talk of degrading, defeating, and destroying Isis, Obama’s strategy is really one of containment: air strikes, training and equipping some of Isis’ adversaries in Iraq and Syria, and bolstering efforts to stop the flow of fighters into and commodities out of the territory Isis controls.

But even this more limited anti-Isis strategy has been hard to execute. Money, goods, and personnel are still getting into and out of Isis-controlled territory. A 2015 UN Security Council report concluded that 22,000 foreign fighters have made their way to Iraq and Syria to join jihadist groups. According to U.S. intelligence officials, approximately 3,400 of them have come from Europe and the United States.

And perhaps most troubling, Isis’ ideology continues to spread, largely due to the group’s impressive use of social media. Indeed, the most direct threat Isis poses to the United States, at least for now, appears to come from people already in the United States who might become radicalized through their online contact with Isis supporters or recruiters based throughout the world. Combating the spread of extremist ideologies and preventing recruitment at home and abroad have thus emerged as the most important elements of U.S. counterterrorism.

## WINNING THE WAR OF IDEAS

Obama’s effort to do just that represents perhaps the single biggest change the president has effected in U.S. counterterrorism—although it is still more an aspirational ideal than a fully implemented policy. The Bush administration framed the promotion of electoral democracy as the best way to defeat extremism. But that policy was destined to fail in the short term: nascent democracies often drift toward majoritarian rule, disenfranchising minority groups and creating fertile ground for extremist movements. In place of Bush’s aggressive democracy promotion, the Obama administration has focused on addressing



the underlying conditions that make certain individuals and communities ripe for recruitment. In February, the president convened what he called the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism and laid out what amounted to a three-part plan: discredit terrorist ideologies, address the political and economic grievances that terrorists exploit, and improve governance in the regions where groups such as ISIS recruit. The aim, he said, was to stop merely reacting to extremism and instead try to prevent it from spreading, by creating jobs for young people who might otherwise be susceptible to recruitment, fighting the corruption that impedes development, and promoting education, especially for girls.

Poverty and lack of education, in and of themselves, do not cause terrorism. But terrorist groups exploit failed governance in places where governments routinely violate human rights; when people don't feel safe, they sometimes conclude that a terrorist group is more likely to protect them than their government. "We can't keep on thinking about counterterrorism and security as entirely separate from diplomacy, development, education, all these things that are considered soft but in fact are vital to our national security—and we do not fund those," the president said in March.

The point is valid. But it's worth noting that, months later, it is still not clear how these preventive strategies will be funded or implemented. Nor is it clear just how such a program would break the vicious cycle in which autocratic rule encourages extremist violence, which in turn produces harsh government crackdowns, which leads to more

extremism. An even deeper problem, the political scientist and terrorism expert Daniel Byman has pointed out, is that there is no single pathway to violent extremism. "It varies by country, by historical period and by person," Byman has written.

Obama administration officials are hardly unaware of these complexities and challenges and have engaged in a tug of war familiar from many previous administrations. On one side are those who say that the threat from extremists dictates that military cooperation with partners and allies take precedence over other policy options, such as promoting better governance. On the other side stand those who want U.S. policy to focus more squarely on addressing what they believe are the underlying causes of extremism's spread. As Tamara Cofman Wittes, who served as deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs from 2009 until 2012, put it to me: "Our policy rhetoric regularly acknowledges that extremists thrive on grievances and disorder driven by failures of governance, but our policy practice avoids addressing governance for fear of disrupting short-term security goals." And indeed, arguments in favor of more military action and aid tend to carry the day in the Obama White House. Wittes also pointed out that ever since the deadly jihadist assault on U.S. facilities in Benghazi, Libya, in 2012—which led the administration to prioritize the protection of diplomatic personnel—it has become even more difficult for diplomats to engage with local officials, politicians, and activists who are working to foster improved governance and the protection of minority rights.

In trying to erode the appeal of extremist ideology, the administration has sought to amplify the voices of people who can credibly counter jihadist ideas, including Islamic scholars and Muslim clerics from all over the world and “formers”—individuals who have abandoned jihadist organizations and can provide a more accurate picture of the jihadist way of life, which rarely lives up to the romantic image of heroic resistance that groups such as ISIS peddle. But governments—especially the U.S. government—are inherently limited in what they can achieve in this regard; they are hardly the most credible brokers for messages of this kind. And although leaders in Muslim communities have more standing to push back against extremism, boring speeches by learned and respected Islamic scholars are unlikely to change the minds of the young people attracted by ISIS and similar groups. What is needed is more involvement from the private sector: entertainment, Internet, and media companies know how to appeal to younger audiences and could play a much larger role in crafting counter-narratives to fight ISIS, bringing to bear their considerable expertise in market research and messaging.

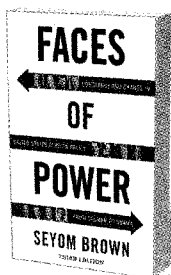
### THE LIMITS OF CHANGE

Overall, Obama’s approach to counter-terrorism has been a step in the right direction. The next U.S. president would do well to view the combination of targeted killing, security assistance, and intensive surveillance as a relatively effective, low-risk tool kit, and he or she should also continue to experiment with preventive policies, which potentially represent the best way to combat

jihadism in the long term. Violent Islamist extremism cannot be defeated through force, but neither can it be addressed by soft power alone. The threat is constantly evolving, and it requires a constantly evolving response. If nothing else, one lesson the next president should learn from the Obama years is to resist the temptation to change counterterrorism policy solely for the sake of change, or to help differentiate him- or herself from the previous occupant in the White House. In the fight against terrorism, as Obama discovered, Washington’s room to maneuver is constrained by the dynamics of terrorist violence, the persistent appeal of extremist ideas, and the limits of state power in confronting the complex social and political movements such ideas foster. 🌐



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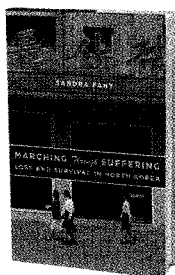
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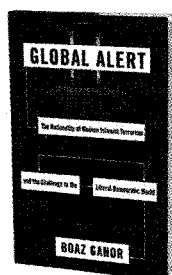
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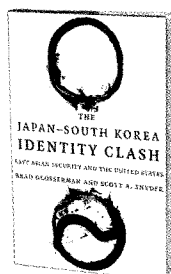
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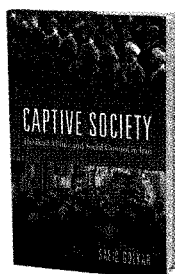
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