

A GRAND STRATEGY ESSAY

Moral Hazard and the Obama Doctrine

by James Fearon

Working Group on Foreign Policy and Grand Strategy

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Although his administration is commonly criticized for being reactive and lacking vision for US foreign policy, Barack Obama's speeches and interviews show a remarkable level of engagement with and thoughtfulness about the central problems of today's US grand strategy. Whereas one may fault the administration in some areas for lack of clarity and success in translating vision into effective action and implementation, Obama's speeches contain more careful analysis and worked-out high-level strategy than has been typical of our recent presidents.

Obama's West Point speech of May 28, 2014, clearly identified terrorism as "the most direct threat to America at home and abroad." This is a major doctrinal claim, contested or ignored by many but, I believe, fundamentally on target (see my other memos for this project). He proceeded to argue that ground invasions of countries' harboring terrorists who intend us ill are likely to be costly and unproductive—potentially generating more terrorists than they eliminate—and that an effective counterterrorism strategy must be based on partnerships and coalitions. America can and should play the central role in organizing and leading these coalitions, he suggested.

On September 10, Obama gave a speech from the White House addressed to the American public. His purpose was to explain and justify the air campaign against ISIL that has expanded to ISIL bases in Iraq and Syria, after beginning in early August with a more limited mission to protect Yazidis from slaughter and Kurds from losing Erbil. The speech describes an approach that is plausibly interpreted as implementing the general doctrine laid out in the West Point speech. The objective is "to degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained

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counterterrorism strategy.” This will involve airstrikes to take away their safe havens and enable Iraqi forces to go on the offensive; local forces instead of US ground troops; and coordination with friendly states in the region to address humanitarian and refugee problems, to cut off ISIL financing avenues, and to “stem the flow of foreign fighters into and out of the Middle East.” In his September 24 address to the United Nations, Obama articulated this same strategy more forcefully, emphasizing international collaboration and a common effort against terrorism carried out in the name of Islam.

In between these speeches, on August 7, Obama sat down for an extended interview with Thomas Friedman of the New York Times. The interview contains material on a different theme, one that does not appear as prominently in the West Point speech, in the September 10 speech, or at all in the UN speech. This is a theme about moral hazard: the concern that more the United States does to address international problems such as terrorism and state failure, the less our allies, partners, clients, and others who are more immediately affected will do. Speaking about the Iraqi government, he said,

We cannot do for them what they are unwilling to do for themselves. . . . Our military is so capable, that if we put everything we have into it, we can keep a lid on a problem for a time. But for a society to function long term, the people themselves have to make decisions about how they are going to live together, how they are going to accommodate each other’s interests, how they are going to compromise. When it comes to things like corruption, the people and their leaders have to hold themselves accountable for changing those cultures. . . . We can help them and partner with them every step of the way. But we can’t do it for them.

This point is dead on and is radically neglected in our current public discussion and debate about how to respond to ISIL and how to conduct US foreign policy more generally.

In fact, Obama and his administration have neglected it by escalating a new air war against a band of thugs who have shown marginally more organizational capability than previous versions but who nonetheless have baited the United States in a successful effort to draw us in because they think this will help them. Hysterics such as John McCain and Lindsay Graham lead their usual charge, engaging in absurd threat inflation. They are abetted by a news media and a foreign policy

establishment, including many liberal interventionists, who are a happy to play along. Everyone cheers when Obama escalates against some very bad people.

Neglected is that, the more we do, the less those do we are trying to help. That is, the more we lead the military charge and push the deal making, the less strong the Iraqi army gets and the less political reconciliation and genuinely effective deal making takes place. The more we lead the charge, the less regional actors such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran get their acts together and the more we end up asking Iran for help with something that is much more a problem for them than for us. Iran should be asking us for help securing and improving matters in Iraq. Further, we neglect that the more we do, the more we help ISIL make the case that it is the legitimate representative of the struggle for dignity and self-respect in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

ISIL poses little short-run direct threat to US interests, and the administration's reaction so far has basically been increasing the long-run threat rather than diminishing it. The long-run threat will subside only when young Muslims decide that a blood-drenched, snuff-film producing Wahabi or Salafist caliphate is a bad one. For this to occur, an "Islamic state" may have to gain control of territory that it can attempt to govern and fail. As long as we provide the air strikes and other military support that prevents them from governing, we increase their recruits, manpower, and nationalist credibility in the Arab world. We misunderstand the nature of the enemy if we see ISIS as nothing more than an absolutely vicious collection of terrorists, which it is. The deeper problem is that it is also the bleeding edge of a social movement that inspires a remarkable degree engagement and interest from young Sunni males. Communism was not defeated by dropping bombs on its exponents but rather by containing it and letting it fail. The same will be true of violent jihadists.

ISIL has to be defeated by (a) local states who get their military and domestic political acts together enough to do so; (b) themselves, by governing and failing, probably because they anger local populations by their theft, thuggery, and violence; or (c) governing and succeeding, which will occur only if ISIL significantly moderates and acquires various assets that its leadership would not want to lose.

A more measured response—one in which we may intervene to prevent major massacres, genocidal acts, or strategically consequential routs, as in August with

respect to the Yazidis and the Kurds, but not otherwise—has some downsides. First, the president takes a lot of flak from the threat-inflation chorus. Second, there are risks that a more successful “Islamic state” would produce and send terrorists to carry out minor attacks in the United States and Europe. But they are not, and will not become, capable of carrying out truly damaging attacks with mass casualty weapons. Certainly, if they were to develop to the point where they could create or get hold of such weapons, there would be much more for us to attack and much more for them to lose, which means focusing on the possibilities for nuclear and biological terrorism and on nonproliferation in the region in general. Thus the bigger issues concern how to keep Iran from becoming a nuclear-capable state.

Obama has articulated a foreign policy doctrine centered on counterterrorism. It envisions the United States as a leader and former of coalitions in which it supplies air power and drone attacks and funds and exhorts locals to pursue various political and military projects to undermine the terrorists. The core tension in the strategy is moral hazard: the more we do, the less our partners do or the less solid and capable are the states that we are trying to build or reinforce. Effective state building is the only long-run answer to this problem and will be effective only if it is carried out by locals in what is often, unfortunately, a slow, violent process. The Obama administration has stepped back from the far more costly and catastrophic “boots on the ground” approach to state building pursued by the Bush administration. But the new war against ISIL risks helping the enemy in the long run by lessening locals’ incentives to develop their own military and state capabilities and surely helps with the enemy’s recruitment and public relations.

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First printing 2014

19 18 17 16 15 14 13 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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The certainties of the Cold War, such as they were, have disappeared. The United States now confronts several historically unique challenges, including the rise of a potential peer competitor, a rate of technological change unseen since the nineteenth century, the proliferation of nuclear and biological capabilities, and the possible joining of these capabilities with transnational terrorist movements. There has been no consensus on a grand strategy or even a set of principles to address specific problems. Reactive and ad hoc measures are not adequate.

The Hoover Institution's Working Group on Foreign Policy and Grand Strategy will explore an array of foreign policy topics over a two-year period. Our goal is to develop orienting principles about the most important policy challenges to better serve America's interests.

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