

Obama's Foreign Policy: "Smart Power," Realism and Cynicism

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Abstract This article reviews the foreign policy of the Obama administration with a special focus on the Middle East. It shows the gap between the lofty rhetoric of the President, a great orator, and the decisions taken by the Administration. This gap is the inevitable result of the normal play of forces in the decision-making process involving many actors and the interplay of domestic policies and foreign policy. The author argues that if Obama's foreign policy is analyzed in electoral and domestic terms then it is quite wrong to argue, as some have done, that it is dumb. Smart in electoral terms, however, does not necessarily mean smart on the international stage.

Keywords Obama · Foreign policy · Middle East · Cairo Speech · Geopolitics · US elections

Political leaders will not take risks if the people do not demand that they do. You must create the change that you want to see.

Barack Obama, Jerusalem, March 21, 2013

John Feffer, a foreign policy analyst, recently asked in *Foreign Policy in Focus*: "Barack Obama is a smart guy. So why has he spent the last four years executing such a dumb foreign policy?"¹ This paper will endeavor to answer this question and maybe redefine such key terms as "smart" and "dumb," which are colloquial but also conceptual when linked with the word power.

¹ John Feffer, *Foreign Policy in Focus*, September 6, 2012. http://www.fpif.org/articles/dumb_and_dumber_obamas_smart_power_foreign_policy

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The concept, or maybe notion, of "smart power" was coined by two scholars who are both claiming to have been the first to come up with this expression. Susan Nossel, who had been deputy UN delegate during the Clinton administration, published an article in *Foreign Affairs* in 2004 which bore this title: "Smart Power: Reclaiming Liberal Internationalism."² Joseph Nye, famous for coining the term "soft power," argued in 2009 that he had coined "smart power" in 2003.³

For Nossel "smart power" is progressive and finds inspiration in the ideas of Kennedy and Wilson. "Smart power means knowing that the United States' own hand is not always its best tool," she wrote. "U.S. interests are furthered by enlisting others on behalf of U.S. goals, through alliances, international institutions, careful diplomacy, and the power of ideals" (p. 138). She concluded: "The rightful heirs of Wilson should reclaim his liberal legacy and fortify it through the determined, smart use of power" (p. 142).

Yet the concept of "smart power" became central to the rhetoric of the Obama administration when Hilary Clinton used it in her Senate confirmation hearings in January 2009 and declared:

"America cannot solve the most pressing problems on our own, and the world cannot solve them without America" and: "We must use what has been called "smart power" the full range of tools at our disposal – diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal and cultural – picking the right tool or combination of tools for each situation. With

² March-April 2004, Vol 83, Number 2.

³ "Get Smart, Combining Hard and Soft Power," *Foreign Affairs*, July-August 2009. "Smart power" is a term I developed in 2003 to counter the misperception that soft power alone can produce effective foreign policy." The whole article is a rejoinder to Leslie Gelb.

smart power, diplomacy will be the vanguard of our foreign policy.”⁴

Whoever invented the concept of “smart power,” it became official. The Secretary of State even used a formulation which was almost a quotation from Nossel. Clinton then pushed for U.S. intervention in Libya, as an implementation of the so-called “smart power” she had advocated. In the aftermath of the Libyan intervention, however, one may wonder if it indeed was “smart.” Or in what way it was “smart,” or for whom it was “smart.”

I would therefore like to start by deconstructing my own title and interrogate the usual way of talking about foreign policy. It is often designated by the name of the President. This is a linguistic convention which supposedly helps to distinguish the policies from one administration to the next. It both obscures strong lines of continuity between administrations and ruptures within the presidency of a particular leader. Thus George W. Bush's foreign policy shifted significantly in 2006 when the Iraq debacle could not be denied and Donald Rumsfeld was forced out of the cabinet. He was to be replaced by Robert Gates, whom Obama kept in his post for a few years, thus underlining continuity with the second phase of his predecessor's foreign policy. Hillary Clinton popularized a concept coined by scholars but, of course, her foreign policy was the foreign policy of the Obama administration.

I will review the actors involved in the shaping of foreign policy and their impact on changes as well as factors explaining continuity or change, thus trying to determine who is in charge of the formulation of foreign policy. First I will focus on the Middle East and tackle the rhetorical journey that Obama undertook from his Cairo speech to his “kill list” of potential assassinations. Then I will focus on drone strikes and explain why resorting to them apparently defeats the ambition to be smart in the use of “hard power.” The notion of smartness will however have to be analyzed from different perspectives.

Obama the Orator vs. Obama the Decider

In June 2009 Obama went to autocratic Egypt, then ruled by Hosni Mubarak, to deliver a speech which was widely considered as an attempt to reach out to Muslims and to the Arab world in particular. He declared:

“I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world—one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not

⁴ Found on <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/> and reported by *The Guardian*, 13 January 2009.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/13/hillary-clinton-confirmation-hearing-senate>

be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles – principles of justice and progress, tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.”

Referring to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict he expressed his support of Israel and his condemnation of Holocaust deniers just before his visit to Buchenwald the next day. He added:

“The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements. This construction violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace. It is time for these settlements to stop.”

And while he clearly opposed the Iranian development of a nuclear bomb, he affirmed his desire to work through diplomatic channels:

It will be hard to overcome decades of mistrust, but we will proceed with courage, rectitude and resolve. There will be many issues to discuss between our two countries, and we are willing to move forward without preconditions on the basis of mutual respect. But it is clear to all concerned that when it comes to nuclear weapons, we have reached a decisive point. This is not simply about America's interests. It is about preventing a nuclear arms race in the Middle East that could lead this region and the world down a hugely dangerous path.⁵

This speech was considered to be an olive branch to the Muslim world. Obama announced his intentions and presented a philosophy and *Weltanschauung* which corresponded to his pre-Presidential statements. So it is legitimate to view it as a yardstick with which to measure his achievements or the results of U.S. foreign policy in the wider Middle East. In 2011 in his speech to the UN Obama repeated his belief in a two-state solution yet blocked the Palestinian initiative to become a full member of the UN. His opposition to the building of new settlements had been successfully countered by the Israeli Prime Minister and his allies in the U.S. In 2012 Palestine figured only in one paragraph and disappeared from the main preoccupations of the Administration.⁶ Iran had taken center-stage in both his and Netanyahu's speeches. During the presidential debate between Obama and Romney devoted to foreign policy Iran was the most often cited country (45 times) just before Israel (34). Palestine was not mentioned at all.⁷ This is by no means a novel situation. As Walter Russell Meade argues:

⁵ The full text can be found at: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

⁶ Found at:

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/26/world/obamas-speech-to-the-united-nations-general-assembly-text.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

⁷ See: Pierre Guerlain, “The United States and the World,” *Huffington Post*, November 2, 2012 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/pierre-guerlain/the-united-states-and-the_b_2066736.html

A Gallup poll in June 1948 showed that almost three times as many Americans “sympathized with the Jews” as “sympathized with the Arabs.” That support was no flash in the pan. Widespread gentile support for Israel is one of the most potent political forces in U.S. foreign policy, and in the last 60 years, there has never been a Gallup poll showing more Americans sympathizing with the Arabs or the Palestinians than with the Israelis.⁸

In his book entitled *The Crisis of Zionism*, Peter Beinart relates how Obama came to abandon his insistence on the end of settlements and how, in May 2011, Obama and Netanyahu got involved in what the Israeli leader called a “diplomatic war” over Obama’s reference to the 1967 borders by Obama. These internationally recognized borders were mentioned in a speech delivered at AIPAC. Beinart concludes:

The May 2011 clash over the 1967 lines proved to be the last time President Obama publicly articulated the liberal Zionism that he had learned in Chicago. After that, he effectively adopted Benjamin Netanyahu’s monist Zionism as his own.⁹

Five years after Obama’s Cairo speech, anti-American sentiment in the Muslim and Arab world is strong, stronger according to some accounts (Pew polls¹⁰) than when George W. Bush was in power. Attacks on the American consulate in Benghazi in September 2012, which led to the assassination of the American ambassador, underline this hostility. The Obama administration is caught between its desire to “have Israel’s back,” as Obama several times expressed it, and a determination not to intervene overtly in a war against Iran. So in his 2012 UN speech he both threatened Iran and reassured Israel:

“Make no mistake: a nuclear-armed Iran is not a challenge that can be contained. It would threaten the elimination of Israel, the security of Gulf nations, and the stability of the global economy.”

⁸ “The New Israel and the Old,” *Foreign Affairs*, July–August 2008, p. 28–46. Meade adds: “In the United States, a pro-Israel foreign policy does not represent the triumph of a small lobby over the public will. It represents the power of public opinion to shape foreign policy in the face of concerns by foreign policy professionals.” This is an important aspect which however begs the question of how public opinion is shaped. Further down the writer adds: “THE UNITED STATES’ sense of its own identity and mission in the world has been shaped by readings of Hebrew history and thought. The writer Herman Melville expressed this view: ‘We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world.’”

American support for Israel is confirmed in a Pew Research Center poll: <http://www.people-press.org/2012/03/15/little-support-for-u-s-intervention-in-syrian-conflict/?src=prc-headline>

see also: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/161387/americans-sympathies-israel-match-time-high.aspx>

⁹ Peter Beinart, *The Crisis of Zionism*, New York, Henry Holt, 2012, p. 154.

¹⁰ <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/06/13/global-opinion-of-obama-slips-international-policies-faulted/>

“Among Israelis and Palestinians, the future must not belong to those who turn their backs on a prospect of peace. Let us leave behind those who thrive on conflict, those who reject the right of Israel to exist. The road is hard, but the destination is clear – a secure, Jewish state of Israel and an independent, prosperous Palestine. Understanding that such a peace must come through a just agreement between the parties, America will walk alongside all who are prepared to make that journey.”

Yet even Israeli security officials doubt that Iran poses a real threat, and most serious analysts know that Iran could not even dream of using a nuclear bomb against Israel without being vaporized by Israeli and American responses.¹¹ Using the expression “Jewish state” to refer to Israel is an echo of a new Israeli demand that the Palestinians recognize not just Israel (which the PLO did in 1988) but the Jewish character of the nation when no other state is recognized for its ethnic or religious character. The stalemate and the respective positions of the actors in this region of the world have not changed under John Kerry’s stewardship of U.S. foreign policy.¹² In April 2014 the two sides are even refusing to pretend to be negotiating, prompting Kerry to use unusual rhetoric to criticize Israel without endorsing the Palestinian side either.¹³

On May 29, 2012 the *New York Times* revealed that Obama personally approved the killing of targeted terrorists or alleged terrorists, a group which may include American citizens making their execution illegal.¹⁴ So this journey from 2009 in Cairo to AIPAC in 2011 just two years later seems to indicate a change in Obama’s attitude or beliefs which requires explanations. The kill list is at odds with the image of Obama as a liberal law professor, and so is his frequent resort to drones.

Two types of explanations are provided to explain these fluctuations. One blames Obama for being a weak president who caves in whenever he faces determined opposition, whether from Republicans in Congress or the Israeli Prime Minister. This type of blame became frequent after Obama refused to bomb

¹¹ Trita Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama’s Diplomacy with Iran*, 2012, New Haven, Yale University Press.

¹² See : Josh Ruebner, *Shattered Hopes: Obama’s Failure to Broker Israeli-Palestinian Peace*, 2013, London, Verso.

¹³ “If there’s no two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict soon, Israel risks becoming “an apartheid state” The Daily Beast, April 4, 2014 available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/04/27/exclusive-kerry-warns-israel-could-become-an-apartheid-state.html> This was in a closed-door meeting. Kerry used a term former President Carter had used in relation to the occupied territories but that Obama has always rejected.

¹⁴ “Secret ‘Kill List’ Proves a Test of Obama’s Principles and Will”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html?pagewanted=all>

“Mr. Obama is the liberal law professor who campaigned against the Iraq war and torture, and then insisted on approving every new name on an expanding ‘kill list,’ poring over terrorist suspects’ biographies on what one official calls the macabre ‘baseball cards’ of an unconventional war. When a rare opportunity for a drone strike at a top terrorist arises — but his family is with him — it is the president who has reserved to himself the final moral calculation.”

Syria in 2013 and clearly stated his rejection of military force against Russia in the Ukraine crisis whose latest stage started in February 2014. The other explanation is that Obama is the prisoner of institutional constraints. The power of the president is dependent upon various actors, factors and interactions, so the power of any individual president is limited. I intend to review some of these actors and factors and brush aside the purely psychological approach. Obama proved decisive when he chose to launch the assassination of Ben Laden. He has proved indecisive in his dealings with Congress or Netanyahu, but this apparent weakness has institutional determinants.

Who Formulates U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East?

Though Congress is very unpopular among Americans (only 11% approve of it),¹⁵ it does play a key role in the formulation of some aspects of foreign policy. Congress may be rather indifferent or apathetic when it comes to intervening in Libya, as in 2011; but when it comes to Israel, Congress is a major player. Walt and Mearsheimer's account may have some flaws, but it does describe very well how Congress always fights presidents who deviate from a pro-Israeli line, whether Bush 1 or Obama.¹⁶ The pro-Israel lobby, which includes not only AIPAC but also Christian fundamentalists and large segments of the military-industrial complex, lobbies Congress effectively. The lobby funds the campaigns of pro-Israel candidates or focuses on the critics of Israel to destroy their candidacies. Many legislators are financially dependent on this lobby. J Street the other lobby which represents parts of the Jewish community is more liberal but much less influential whereas Jewish Voice for Peace has very little clout in Congress. U.S. public opinion is also very ignorant of the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and tends to feel closer to Israel, a Western nation, than to the Palestinians. Congress often abdicates its power and bows to the imperial presidency, as it did when it let the Bush administration launch its wars or its illegal surveillance programs. After 9/11 it was unthinkable for Congress to stop the march to war with Iraq which started in 2003 under false pretenses, as is well documented now. So the question is: why is Congress such a major actor when it comes to the Middle East? Here a systemic analysis is required.

Congress cannot be apprehended in isolation, or even with the power of AIPAC or Israel in mind. The military-industrial complex also plays a major role in the funding of campaigns and in the determination of U.S. foreign policy. If all sources of power are aligned, then U.S. policy, which is presented as the policy of the president, is forceful and clear. When there are

conflicts within elite circles and powerful institutions the policy is the result of a fight between various actors and institutions. The Pentagon and the CIA are often at odds, with the Pentagon winning most of the time when Rumsfeld was Defense Secretary. Colin Powell was hoodwinked and constantly defeated in bureaucratic infighting. It is thus quite erroneous to present clashes between the U.S. and Israel, rare though they are, at least in public, as clashes between a strong wily alpha male, Netanyahu, and a weak-willed "Mr. Softy" Obama. The personality traits play a part but a minor one. The influence of Netanyahu does not come from his personality.¹⁷ Even the fact that he is the leader of the U.S.'s closest client state does not fully explain his influence. His close relationship to Republicans and the close relationship that other Israeli leaders enjoy with Democrats are better explanations of his influence, without forgetting, of course, large segments of American public opinion.¹⁸

There are, according to Ilan Pappé, four pillars in the pro-Israel lobby: big oil, the military-industrial complex, AIPAC and Christian Zionists.¹⁹ Big oil might not always be aligned with the other three, though. When the military-industrial complex is divided, then the power of Israel or the pro-Israel lobby is diminished. The tension over Iran illustrates this clearly. The U.S. military does not want a war with Iran nor even to be complicit in one.²⁰ The defense sector might not agree with military leaders but clearly strong military opposition strengthens Obama's hand. Hence his balancing act at the UN in 2012: symbolic support for Israel but refusal to be sucked into a war. This is quite independent of personalities. George W. Bush, who was very close to Israeli leaders, also refused to go along with an attack on Iran in May 2008. The Israeli Prime Minister then was Ehud Olmert, supposedly a more dovish leader, while Bush was supposedly more hawkish than Obama.²¹ Recent developments when some sanctions on Iran were lifted had an impact on the relationship between the U.S. and Israel but also upon the relationship of the Obama administration and Saudi Arabia.²²

¹⁷ <http://www.france24.com/fr/20111108-sarkozy-netanyahou-menteur-off-discussion-obama-israel-g20-cannes-journaliste-arret-sur-images>

¹⁸ Trita Parsi (op cit p. 167) quotes an article by Barak Ravid in the Israeli paper *Haaretz* March 10, 2010 reporting the words of Netanyahu's brother-in-law about Obama: "When there is an anti-Semitic president in the United States, it is a test for us and we have to say: we will not concede." He added: "We are a nation dating back 4 000 years, and you in a year or two will be long forgotten. Who will remember you? But Jerusalem will dwell on forever."

¹⁹ Pappé makes this point in "Clusters of history: US involvement in the Palestine question", *Race & Class*, January 2007 48: 1-28

²⁰ *The Guardian*, "Israeli attack on Iran 'would not stop nuclear programme'", August 31, 2012 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/aug/30/israeli-attack-iran-not-stop-nuclear?newsfeed=true>

²¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/sep/25/iran.israelandthepalestinians1>

²² <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/24/iran-nuclear-deal-west-sanctions-relief>

¹⁵ Lawrence Lessig, *Lost: How Money Corrupts Congress—and a Plan to Stop It*, New York, Hachette Books, 2011.

¹⁶ Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007

Thus the official U.S. policy towards Iran cannot be said to be either the Israeli policy or the one chosen by Congress or even Obama or his advisers. It is the result of several forces and that may explain why it is not very consistent. In spite of the former Iranian leader's often inflammatory speeches, there is reason to doubt that Iran would try to "wipe Israel off the map". But both Israel and the U.S. have launched cyber-warfare attacks on Iran (the stuxnex virus), and the U.S. and Israel cooperate with MEK, an Iranian group that until recently was considered to be a terrorist organization. The areas of agreement and disagreement between the U.S. and Israel are thus intertwined: disagreement about intervention, or rather disagreement about public declarations advocating war (for it is not even certain that Netanyahu is really considering war) but broad agreement about containing and weakening Iran, creating a *de facto* coalition between Saudi Arabia and Israel, therefore agreement about shifting the focus in the Middle East from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to Iran and its nuclear program. The election of Rohani in Iran made a deal with the U.S. easier though it made the friendship between Israel and the U.S. a bit tense. One actor changed and the game became slightly different for reasons that have nothing to do with psychology.

The various factors leading to a policy are in constant interplay. Thus over Libya in 2011 Obama had the pressure of two allies—France and Britain—and the advice of three officials in his administration (Hillary Clinton, Susan Rice, Anne-Marie Slaughter) pointing in the same direction. Instead his defense secretary (Robert Gates) famously declared that anyone wanting an intervention ought to "have his head examined."²³ No one's head seems to have been examined, for Obama came down on the side of intervention although deciding to "lead from behind". Israel presumably was not a factor. Advisers often represent a key institution or powerful interest. Three years after the Libyan intervention one can wonder whether it was a smart decision, on the part of the U.S. but also France and Britain.

Peter Beinart details the factional fights over the Israeli-Palestinian; and the Department of State and the Department of Defense are at odds, mobilizing resources and allies to get their message across in cabinet battles. Each of the four pillars may itself be torn between factions so that, instead of one man deciding in isolation, as Obama is said to do when it comes to choosing a targeted assassination, a whole cast of people are involved in each process. Obama's preferences, which we can infer from his past and statements before he reached the White House, do not necessarily prevail.

Public opinion which, of course, should be paramount in a democracy, does have an impact, though it is often minimal. After the *Citizens United* and *McCutcheon* Supreme Court

²³ "In my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should 'have his head examined,' as General MacArthur so delicately put it," *The New York Times*, "Warning Against Wars Like Iraq and Afghanistan", Feb 25, 2011

rulings it is legitimate to wonder if the U.S. is not more of an oligarchy than a democracy but public opinion still matters a little in foreign policy. The war in Afghanistan was very popular in 2001 because it was seen as an act of revenge for the 9/11 attacks; the war is now unpopular among war weary Americans who are aware of the lies leading to the war in Iraq. Thirteen years later, with the U.S. in a quagmire and a quandary, public opinion has shifted. On Iraq public opinion followed the lies of the Bush administration, then turned against the war. It is easy to "manufacture consent" on matters of foreign policy,²⁴ and changes happen with reversals of fortune on the ground. There is no strong anti-war movement in the U.S., a movement that Obama could turn to and say, "Make me do it," as FDR said in another context. The Iraq war ended with the U.S. declaring victory after thousands of deaths and millions of wounded or displaced people. Iraq is now a pro-Iranian country with no genuine democracy which supports the Syrian regime, an enemy of the U.S.

Afghanistan is already in a state of chaos. There American-trained Afghan troops kill American soldiers. The American public is tired of these wars and therefore accepts Obama's shift to the use of drones to fight the so-called war on terror with different means. The policy has changed—drones instead of armed intervention and troops on the ground—and is presented as a zero-death solution for Americans. This new policy thus takes into account the situation on the ground but does not deviate from a general framework of global dominance. It was not shaped by public opinion. It fosters as much anti-Americanism as the old one and reaffirms the perception of U.S. dishonesty or hypocrisy when Obama's speeches are correlated with his actions. Once again "his" actions mean what the foreign policy establishment collectively comes up with. The public does not loudly object to a policy that does not cause American deaths and is said to be economical. Yet in geopolitical terms this policy is detrimental as far as the image of the U.S. and the fight against terrorism are concerned. In an October 16, 2003 memo Rumsfeld asked: "Today, we lack metrics to know if we are winning or losing the global war on terror. Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us?"²⁵ Quite a relevant question which, of course, could apply to the use of drones. Drones might be creating more terrorists than are killed, surely not a sign of smartness.

Last but not least among the actors shaping U.S. foreign policy are foreign powers and geopolitical shifts among the nations of the world. The U.S., with France and Britain, easily

²⁴ The phrase "the manufacture of consent" was coined by Walter Lippmann in his 1922 book *Public Opinion* but became widely used after the book by Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman's *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1988.

²⁵ <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/washington/executive/rumsfeld-memo.htm>

convinced the UN Security Council that a resolution to protect populations in Libya was ethically and politically acceptable. Then, of course, the resolution was immediately violated and became a free pass for regime change in Libya. One year later Russia and China refused to go along with the West regarding Syria and Russia's opposition to the West has only been confirmed since, over both Syria and Ukraine. Thus the U.S. is forced to take into account the opposition of its main geopolitical rivals. It still provides weapons to the Syrian opposition, even if it includes members of Al Qaeda, one of the organizations the U.S. is fighting in the war on terror and in Afghanistan (which probably is responsible for the murder of its ambassador in Libya). It also has to take into account the power of the dictator in Syria, much greater than his counterpart's in Libya, so it adapts its policy to the power relationship at the UN and on the ground, which is true of any nation. From this point of view there is no American exceptionalism. No war with Russia or China is even thinkable and Obama seems more aware of this than some of his right-wing critics like McCain.²⁶ With Turkey the U.S. had a major disagreement over the Gaza flotilla when Israel killed nine activists on a Turkish boat. Yet the U.S. is closely working with Turkey over Syria. Allies and rivals are, as Rumsfeld argued, mostly determined by the mission or the issue.

Trita Parsi gives a very convincing description of the complexity of the decision-making process in his analysis of U.S.-Iran relations. Thus he writes:

“Faced with overwhelming resistance from Israel, Congress, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab allies, skeptics within his own administration and, most importantly, the actions of the Iranian government itself, the president's vision and political space were continually compromised. In the end, the diplomacy Obama pursued was only a shadow of the engagement he had envisioned.”²⁷

Obama's personality and preferences are not the main factor at all. On top of all the factors already mentioned, the U.S. has to take the power of China into account. The Chinese have not made the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a major issue so the U.S. does not have to worry about strong Chinese support for the Palestinians. On the contrary the Chinese buy weapons from Israel, sometimes against the advice of the U.S. Yet on Iran, Russian and Chinese opposition is a factor in the policy the U.S. pursues: no direct intervention but sanctions and sabotage planned in the U.S. and implemented by MEK (Mujahideen-e-Khalq).²⁸ The U.S. forms a duopoly with China; the two countries are both rivals and partners (ChinAmerica). The rising power of China coupled with the relative economic decline of

the U.S. will have consequences for its foreign policy in every region of the world.

So each specific policy is determined by various actors, both domestic and global, and is likely to change if situations change, as was the case with Iran under a new president and with a related problem in Syria. Thus the U.S. supported all dictatorships in the Arab world until the Arab spring. Then the U.S. swung and claimed its support for this democratic uprising, though for a while the U.S. was closer to Egypt's army than to the protesters. Then the U.S. worked with Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood leader whose democratic credentials were shaky at best and then with the army that toppled Morsi and prepared a violent return to the Mubarak era. The changes or swings must be understood, however, as different interpretations of the same score. The U.S. desire for global hegemony has not disappeared but the means to try to achieve it keep changing. Drones replace boots on the ground, sabotage and support for opposition groups replace air bombardments; speeches and rhetoric change but still encounter realities on the ground.²⁹

It is easy to understand why there is a perception of Israel being the tail that wags the dog when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian problem: the U.S. demands an end to new settlements, Israel refuses, insults Vice-President Joe Biden,³⁰ and as a reward gets new weapons and credits. The same cycle of humiliation and rewards has continued with Kerry asking for the end of settlements and Netanyahu starting new housing units.³¹ In July 2014 the same story was repeated: Obama asked for an unconditional cease-fire which Israel refused but was given new munitions. So the media talk about Netanyahu defeating Obama as if it were a boxing match and the leader of the small country were a David defeating a Goliath. Yet when all the factors are taken into account—and even if Obama were more forceful or more heedful of law, things become more complex. If the U.S. military opposes the Israeli leader, then his hand is much weaker. Obama could not induce Israel to stop its settlement policy and Netanyahu could not wrench an agreement to hit Iran. If China and Russia more or less support Iran, then the U.S. has to choose different ways to destabilize it.

The lack of real involvement of the U.S. in the effective peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, even with the efforts of Kerry, can also be explained by the relative lack of interest of much of the world for this issue. Even Saudi Arabia, which produced a fair and balanced peace proposal in 2002,³² which Israel and the U.S. proceeded to ignore, is currently more interested in containing Iranian and Shiite power than in helping to

²⁶ See : http://www.huffingtonpost.com/pierre-guerlain/the-obama-drama_b_5155536.html

²⁷ *op cit.* p. 211-212

²⁸ See Seymour Hersh, “Our Men In Iran”, *The New Yorker*, April 6, 2012. Hersh writes: “The M.E.K. had its beginnings as a Marxist-Islamist student-led group and, in the nineteen-seventies, it was linked to the assassination of six American citizens.”

²⁹ The political site *Pro-publica* has a special section devoted to drones. <http://www.propublica.org/series/drones>

³⁰ “When Israelis degrade Israel by humiliating Joe Biden”, *Haaretz*, March 10, 2010 <http://www.haaretz.com/news/when-israelis-degrade-israel-by-humiliating-joe-biden-1.264406>

³¹ <http://www.timesofisrael.com/with-kerry-in-town-minister-to-expand-jordan-valley-settlement/>

³² <http://www.al-bab.com/arab/docs/league/peace02.htm>

solve the conflict in Palestine. Saudi Arabia is thus a close ally of the U.S. in spite of its status as a theocratic dictatorship. Israel is a valuable client state of the U.S. with a lot of support among sectors of the American population. Obama as the willing prisoner of the oligarchy in the U.S. follows the main lines of force in U.S. foreign policy, with a small margin for personal input. Obama's foreign policy, like his domestic policies, thus reflects his gauging of the power of various elements in “the Power Elite”. As C. Wright Mills argued in the 1950s, “Power is not of a man.”³³ In his own way Obama confirmed this view in a speech delivered in Israel on March 21, 2013. There he declared: “Politically, given the strong bipartisan support for Israel in America, the easiest thing for me to do would be to put this issue aside and express unconditional support for whatever Israel decides to do.” If the conditional is changed to the present tense, then Obama's formula becomes an admission. Later in the speech he explained his “smart” immobilism: “Speaking as a politician, I can promise you this: political leaders will not take risks if the people do not demand that they do.”³⁴

Of Drones, Dumb Policies and Ethical Debates

The so-called “kill list” was leaked to the *New York Times*, apparently with the approval of the President and his team. The leak took place six months before the 2012 presidential election and was considered to be a political bonus for Obama, who wished to appear tough on foreign policy. So this list of suggested targeted assassinations and the assassination of bin Laden a year earlier were actually good selling points for a president who did not want to be accused of weakness or irresolution by his Republican opponent. He still was but Romney's accusations could be countered more easily. Domestic policies and foreign policy are so closely intertwined that many scholars argue that there is no foreign policy, but only domestic policy. However, what plays well electorally may not be smart power projection abroad.³⁵ An American

³³ Pierre Guerlain, “La politique étrangère de l'administration Obama: continuités et contraintes”, *Recherches Internationales*, N° 91, Juillet-Septembre 2011, pp. 121-150

³⁴ Reported by the *New York Times*, “Obama Lays Out Case for Israel to Revive Peace Talks”, March 21, 2013. Obama repeated his support for a Palestinian state. He also repeated some of the points he had made in Cairo four years earlier though he was not proposing peace negotiations. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/22/world/middleeast/obama-lays-out-case-for-israel-to-revive-peace-talks.html?hp&_r=0

³⁵ In an article critical of Obama but full of praise for Richard Holbrooke, his boss, and Hillary Clinton the former Secretary of State, Vali Nasr writes about the President: “His actions from start to finish were guided by politics, and they played well at home.” Nasr's views differ significantly from those expressed here but he highlights the key bifurcation in the evaluation of foreign policy. “The Inside Story of How the White House Let Diplomacy Fail in Afghanistan”, *Foreign Policy*, March-April 2013. http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/03/04/the_inside_story_of_how_the_white_house_let_diplomacy_fail_in_afghanistan?page=full

president cannot both please Tea Party types and Arab public opinion. Ethics and the law may also be at variance, and both may conflict with political decisions.

The Obama administration has organized the end of the Iraq war and withdrawn troops from the country that the Bush administration decided to attack under false pretenses and, after an initial surge of troops in Afghanistan, also decided to withdraw most troops from the country attacked after the 9/11 terrorist destruction of the Twin Towers and the killing of 3000 innocents. This would seem to be an implementation of smart power and a progressive policy of choosing peace while getting U.S. soldiers out of harm's way. It also follows the curve of Americans' interest in these wars. Yet Obama chose to resort to the use of drones in order to extend the war on terror, whose name was changed but which has remained in place. In his second inaugural address, he declared that “a decade of war [was] now ending.” On the same day drones killed three people in Yemen, allegedly al-Qaeda suspects. Iraq is now a torn country which will pose different threats to the U.S. for various Iraqi groups fight on both sides of the Syrian civil war. Iraq itself might disappear and become three different countries.

Drones are known officially as unmanned aerial vehicles (or UAV). They are used for surveillance and targeted attacks which can also be called targeted assassinations. Terrorists or terrorist suspects, as defined by the U.S. secret services and the Obama administration, are killed in faraway places—mostly Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia. The UAV names are quite revealing: Predator and Reaper. They are supposed to carry out surgical strikes and their “pilots” are miles away from the areas where the attacks take place, in the U.S. or on U.S. bases behind a computer screen. The “grim reaper” operates in even more remote conditions than aircraft pilots flying miles over the heads of the people they bomb. They are presented as a smart way of fighting terrorism and their advantages over boots on the ground are obvious: no American casualties, no major expenditures coming from the occupation of a hostile country, swift and precise intervention. This so-called smart solution has, of course, no connection with “soft” power. Drones are a form of hard power, with no culture or cultural diplomacy involved. Indeed this form of hard power destroys the soft power efforts of the administrations that employ it. As a technological solution to a political problem drone strikes seem to be perfect. Yet they are fraught with problems: legal, ethical and even efficacy.

The legal problem is quite thorny. On February 4, 2013 another supposedly secret document was revealed to the media. Entitled “Lawfulness of a Lethal Operation Directed Against a U.S. Citizen who is a Senior Operational Leader of Al Qa'ida or An Associated Force,” it came from the Department of Justice and argued that the Obama administration had established the legality of drone strikes. The language

leaves no room for doubt: “Targeting a member of an enemy force who poses an imminent threat of violent attack to the United States is not unlawful. It is a lawful act of self-defense.”³⁶ This prompted a series of comments by jurists and political commentators. The discussion often focused on whether killing Americans without due process can ever be legal, in reference to the case of Anwar al-Awlaki and his son, two U.S. citizens killed in Yemen in two different attacks in 2011. The killing of non-Americans did not receive the same kind of attention in the U.S., though a Nobel Peace Prize winner, former archbishop of South Africa Desmond Tutu, asked:

“Do the United States and its people really want to tell those of us who live in the rest of the world that our lives are not of the same value as yours? That President Obama can sign off on a decision to kill us with less worry about judicial scrutiny than if the target is an American? Would your Supreme Court really want to tell humankind that we, like the slave Dred Scott in the 19th century, are not as human as you are? I cannot believe it.”³⁷

The timing of the leak was, once again, significant. It came just before the confirmation hearings for John Brennan, Obama’s nominee to head the CIA. Brennan is known in some quarters as the “assassination czar,”³⁸ and at first sight this could have been seen as an impediment to his confirmation. Yet in the political climate that prevails in Washington, the reverse occurred. Brennan’s toughness was considered an asset, and the memo was supposed to show that the Obama administration cared about the legality of its actions. In order to counter right wing attacks Obama often resorts to bravado and toughness meant to defuse these attacks—though they do not stop for the right wants 100% submission. It is difficult though to see how this memo differs from the so-called torture memos written by John Yoo to justify torture. David Cole wrote this on his *New York Review of Books* blog:

“In opposing a Freedom of Information Act suit filed by the ACLU, the administration is fighting tooth and nail to keep everything about the drone program secret, but this paper suggests that much more could be disclosed—for example, the procedures and standards employed for placing someone on the “kill list,” and the general bases for and results of actual strikes—without the sky falling. If this administration is truly

³⁶ The whole document can be downloaded at: http://openchannel.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/02/04/16843014-justice-department-memo-reveals-legal-case-for-drone-strikes-on-americans?lite&preview=true

³⁷ “Drones, Kill Lists and Machiavelli”, February 12, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/13/opinion/drones-kill-lists-and-machiavelli.html>

Glenn Greenwald’s columns in *The Guardian* deal with the link between foreign policy and the violation of civil liberties in the US. For instance: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/mar/10/paul-filibuster-drones-progressives>

³⁸ See Pierre Guerlain, “Kerry, Drones and Cultural Diplomacy”, *Huffington Post*, January 30, 2013 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/pierre-guerlain/us-drone-strikes_b_2576829.html

committed to transparency, memos like this should not have to be obtained by the media through back channels.”³⁹

The law that supposedly makes drone strikes legal is the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF), which stipulated:

“That the President is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons.”⁴⁰

No geographical boundaries are mentioned in this text, which would give a U.S. law global validity. This is a legal impossibility but is an imperial reality. The legality of drone strikes is very much in contest, and the definition of “imminent threat” for people who are not armed and not even adults is particularly difficult. Yet U.S. public opinion fully supports the use of drones, so Obama’s foreign policy is not endangered by unpopularity. The Pew Research Center study mentioned above and published in June 2012 shows that 62% of Americans approved the use of drones, while almost all the rest of the world disapproved.⁴¹ Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have become unpopular, but the new anti-terrorist approach which appears to be danger-free for Americans gets massive approval. Foreign protests or signs of disapproval count for next to nothing when they clash with domestic perceptions. Meanwhile an independent UN researcher is launching an investigation into the effects of drone strikes.⁴² The deceptions or fabrications about the effects of drone attacks are being deconstructed yet this will not lead to a change in policy.⁴³

The ethical issue cannot be divorced from the legal and political one. From a purely ethical standpoint, killing innocent people as collateral damage is difficult to justify, especially when there is no imminent danger. However in a culture that worships violence, from guns in most places to video

³⁹ “How We Made Killing Easy”, February 6, 2013, <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2013/feb/06/drones-killing-made-easy/>

David Cole edited *The Torture Memos: Rationalizing the Unthinkable*, Oxford, Oneworld, 2009.

⁴⁰ <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RS22357.pdf>

⁴¹ <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/06/13/global-opinion-of-obama-slips-international-policies-faulted/>

⁴² http://turtlebay.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/01/24/un_launches_drone_investigation?wp_login_redirect=0

⁴³ See: “An Inconvenient Truth, Finally proof that the United States has lied in the drone wars”, *Foreign Policy*, April 10, 2013

http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/04/10/an_inconvenient_truth_drones

And the report which prompted this article:

Jonathan Landay “Obama’s drone war kills ‘others,’ not just al Qaida leaders”,

<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2013/04/09/188062/obamas-drone-war-kills-others.html>

games, and is not shocked any longer by reports of torture, which even applauds movies like *Zero Dark Thirty* or TV series like *24*, which glamorize torture or condone it, there is no price to pay for the killing of innocents faraway who are said to be connected to terrorism. The fact that things are, of course, no better in Russia or China is irrelevant here. The Obama Administration therefore has apparently chosen the electorally smart way of fighting terrorism.

A group of U.S. scholars published a report entitled “Living Under Drones: Death, Injury and Trauma to Civilians from U.S. Drone Practices in Pakistan,”⁴⁴ in which the claims of the Obama administration are challenged, and the violence of drone strikes and their impact on the populations living in the areas where drones roam the sky is presented. Yet the victims, direct or so-called collateral, do not vote in U.S. elections, and so do not shape U.S. foreign policy. Ethics is often bracketed when it comes to “regarding the pain of others,” as Susan Sontag phrased it.⁴⁵ However even in foreign policy terms, drones are not only ethically problematic but may be inefficient in the fight against terrorism.

Drones are said to combat terrorism but, as many scholars have pointed out, they actually foster terrorism, as even Rumsfeld was dimly aware of. In Yemen drone strikes are the best recruiting agent for al Qaeda. The same is true of Pakistan, a large nuclear power that is unstable and is involved in a strange hate-filled alliance with the U.S. Drones kill terrorist suspects but foster radicalization, which often leads to new terrorist attacks. Fear and resentment are a good breeding ground for activists.⁴⁶ Guantanamo used to be the best recruiting agent but drones, because they terrorize and kill people who have nothing to do with terrorism, have replaced the infamous and quite illegal prison. Drones certainly do not improve the image of the U.S. abroad.⁴⁷

Drones do not figure prominently in mainstream accounts of foreign policy. It often appears as though civil liberties organizations like the ACLU or legal scholars like David Cole or Marjorie Cohn are crying in the wilderness. “By letting American officials, lawyers and interrogators get away with torture—and indeed, murder—the United States sacrifices any right to scold or punish other countries for their human rights violations,”⁴⁸ Cohn writes.

⁴⁴ <http://livingunderdrones.org/report/>

⁴⁵ New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

⁴⁶ This is the topic of the book by the renowned French international relations scholar, Bertrand Badie, *Le Temps des humiliés ; Pathologie des relations internationales*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2014.

⁴⁷ On the rise of opposition to the US caused by US policies see: Mark Danner, « Cheney : ‘The More Ruthless the Better’ », *New York Review of Books*, May 8, 2014.

⁴⁸ “No Accountability for Torturers”, *The Huffington Post*, 9/4/ 2012 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marjorie-cohn/no-accountability-for-tor_b_1851826.html

Marjorie Cohn edited the book *The United States and Torture: Interrogation, Incarceration and Abuse*, New York, NY University Press, 2011.

This is precisely what the U.S. does, has always done and will probably go on doing: scold and punish other countries for their human rights violations. Other countries have a worse human rights record but do not resort to a values-based or human rights rhetoric in their foreign policy or public diplomacy. Many foreign policy issues, like the rivalry with China or the looming economic crisis in Europe, do not on the face of it have much to do with drones. That is why international relations scholars do not dwell on drones and focus on the big topics.⁴⁹ Drone strikes cause a lot of diplomatic friction between the U.S. and Pakistan or Afghanistan, where populations “under drones” are hostile to the U.S. This reinforces terror groups but, in the same way as terrorism is but a pinprick compared to mass attacks, anti-terrorism does not loom large in foreign policy—except as a vote-getting domestic issue.

The assassination of bin Laden, a criminal who was politically inactive when he was killed, highlights the ambiguous nature of anti-terrorism. From a legal point of view, this assassination is problematic. He posed no imminent danger and could have been arrested and tried. Yet politically killing him in a raid was a big plus, since a huge majority of Americans approved. The Machiavellian realist approach, which does not focus on ethics or the law, was therefore easy to adopt. It was indeed a case of killing made easy: easy from a military point of view and with minimal risks of direct backlash, plus a huge vote-getter. From this angle it was a smart thing to do, even if it was illegal and violated the nation’s core principles. In terms of fighting against terrorism, it might not have been so smart and for the rule of law in the U.S. itself it was a major setback. This is what Desmond Tutu also argued in the *New York Times*:

“I used to say of apartheid that it dehumanized its perpetrators as much as, if not more than, its victims. Your response as a society to Osama bin Laden and his followers threatens to undermine your moral standards and your humanity.”

Desmond Tutu is not a U.S. citizen, nor is his ethical critique dependent upon the electoral context of America. For Obama killing bin Laden brought many benefits and a few isolated critiques, mostly from outside the U.S. Resorting to drone strikes is probably illegal, whatever the lawyers employed by the White House say, and undoubtedly counter-productive in terms of efficiency against terrorism and the image of the U.S. abroad. Yet it is very productive in the U.S. and does not hamper the exercise of power in many

⁴⁹ Typical of this approach two books written by French specialists of US foreign policy:

Justin Vaïsse, *Barack Obama et sa politique étrangère*, Paris Odile Jacob, 2012.

Zaïki Laïdi, *Le Monde selon Obama : la politique étrangère des Etats-Unis*, Paris, Flammarion, 2012.

An American book that focuses on hard power on Robert Lieber, *Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the US is not Destined to Decline*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

spheres of foreign policy. The Chinese and the Russians may use criticisms of the drone strikes in their propaganda, yet these two powers will not base their policies on them. They will, of course, produce drones of their own and most likely use them in the same illegal way.

Obama appears therefore not so much as a dumb politician who does not realize that drones cannot solve political problems. His foreign policy in the Middle East is shaped by various institutions and agents, and so is his preference for kill lists and killing by drones. The issue therefore is not so much whether he is smart or dumb. Clearly he is a smart person—but so was Henry A. Kissinger, another Machiavellian. The issue is only partially whether Obama's foreign policy is smart, for the answer to the question asked by John Feffer depends on the political perspective you choose. Feffer himself mentions the “imperial overstretch at self-destructive expense,” but this overstretch is not the result of drones only, though it is obviously connected with military spending.

If a smart policy is the one that enables you to be popular and win elections, then Obama's foreign policy whether formulated by him, by his Secretary of State or by a whole team of advisers, has indeed been smart. But “smart” does not mean ethical or even legal. As Hannah Arendt wrote in 1971, “Truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings.”⁵⁰ This is a reminder of the basically Machiavellian nature of politics. Resorting to force and cunning like the lion and the fox has always been consubstantial with politics. There remains the question of decline and imperial overstretch for, as Machiavelli argued, the Prince must do everything to stay in power. Obama the Prince, constrained by the oligarchs, is a good Machiavellian who has indeed achieved this aim by being both fox and lion. However his principality, the U.S., may be slipping in the world as a result of long standing preferences for military solutions and the rise of other powers. Here one encounters the inevitable clash of

interests and perspectives between a President who can serve for eight years at most and the long-term interests of a nation. One may legitimately wonder whether Israel's military action do not foster America's decline in the world.

For many Americans the illegality of Guantánamo or targeted assassinations is of no consequence. Obama the liberal law professor is not Obama the President of the United States who operates in a different field of forces. Kissinger, the smart Harvard professor, supported the illegal coup against Allende, the democratically elected president of Chile, which contributed to America's bad international image but was a victory for the United States or rather the Nixon-led ruling elite. This foreign policy choice is not what brought Nixon down. Obama weighed the options and came down in favor of some illegal and unethical decisions. One may call this cynicism. But such policies are certainly neither progressive nor even liberal in a philosophical sense. Considering his position as President of the U.S., that is to say, a willing prisoner of the oligarchy running the country, it is not dumb.

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⁵⁰ Arendt, Hannah. “Lying in Politics: Reflections on The Pentagon Papers”, *New York Review of Books*, 18 November 1971.