



## **The Obama Doctrine from a Middle East Perspective: Orientalism, Inaction, Contradiction, and Lack of Accountability**

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In a lengthy narrative collection of conversations and interviews with President Obama and others, journalist Jeffrey Goldberg's tedious tale of "[The Obama Doctrine](#)," recently published in *The Atlantic*, gives unique insights into President Barak Obama's principles and how they guided his decision-making throughout his presidential career.

### **The Obama Doctrine: In 200 words**

In general, Obama's political philosophy, now known as The Obama Doctrine, is marked by realism. "I suppose you could call me a realist in believing we can't, at any given moment, relieve all the world's misery," Obama said, "we have to choose where we can make a real impact." According to Goldberg, President Obama also considers himself an internationalist dedicated to international cooperation and norms, and an idealist in his beliefs in promoting the values of democracy and human rights. Obama is also a self-professed anti-"free riders," insisting that European and Arab states must share the agenda with the US.

Obama believes that foreign policy achievements can be made through diplomacy, taking pride in breaking with the "Washington playbook" which tends to prescribe military responses to most international challenges. His diplomatic accomplishments range from the Iran nuclear deal to the opening to Cuba, the climate-change accords in Paris, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement. According to Obama, "real power means you can get what you want without having to exert violence." Obama's policy of 'retrenchment' is in fact an expected natural response to failed militarism in the Middle East. However, Obama insists, when there is a direct threat to US national security, he is the first to wage wars against terrorists.

### **The Obama Doctrine Part I: Orientalism**

Obama's positions towards the Middle East started out optimistic and tolerant. In his famous Cairo speech in 2009, which was intended to rebuild American relations with the Muslim world, Obama said, "I consider it part of my responsibility as President of the United States to fight against negative stereotypes of Islam wherever they appear." Obama also expressed sympathy for the Palestinian people and confessed America's negative influence in the region. However, as it turns out in Goldberg's account, this was a classic arrogant performance by Obama to "persuade Muslims to more closely examine the roots of their unhappiness" and to "trigger a discussion... for Muslims to address the real problems they are confronting."

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President Obama said, “I would communicate that the US is not standing in the way of this progress, that we would help... to advance the goals of a practical, successful Arab agenda that provided a better life for ordinary people.” Then he went on to support dictators and oppressive governments across the region, from Egypt’s Mubarak and Sisi to Israel. President Obama seems to miss one of the most basic principles; ‘actions speak louder than words.’

While Obama’s public statements regarding the Middle East remained carefully calculated, a more nuanced understanding of his true positions and confessions, revealed through *The Atlantic*’s article, sheds light on his real Middle East doctrine. Although in recent public statements, Obama reiterates his famous avoidance of creating anti-Muslim xenophobia and his opposition to viewing the Middle East through the “Clash of Civilizations” prism, in private conversations Obama’s true feelings become clear.

Reading between the lines exposes the true orientalist views that Obama possesses or seems to have acquired throughout his presidency. His ‘realist’ political philosophy towards the Middle East is in fact an expected natural response to failed US interventions in the region, but his xenophobia is shocking. First, Obama explicitly expressed his views that people of the Middle East are inferior to others around the world. In discussing the Middle East, Obama says “Contrast that with Southeast Asia, which still has huge problems—enormous poverty, corruption—but is filled with striving, ambitious, energetic people who are every single day scratching and clawing to build businesses and get education and find jobs and build infrastructure. The contrast is pretty stark... They are not thinking about how to kill Americans.”

For someone who often makes the effort to distinguish between Islamic extremists and ordinary Muslims, and regularly publicly asserts that “radical interpretation of Islam [is adopted] by a tiny faction within the Muslim community,” such false generalizations about what he perceives as the homogenous group of ‘people of the Middle East’ are problematic, at best.

But make no mistake, Obama’s positive public statements about Islam and Muslims are not for mere show, but are part of a calculated Hobbesian-style game play. Based on Goldberg’s article, President Obama’s public defense of Muslims and even downplaying the threat of ISIS are designed to prevent panic and anti-Muslim xenophobia in the US, so as to break the Hobbesian cycle of fear that might invoke attacks against American targets.

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This dismissive xenophobic rhetoric about -and towards- the Middle East is very dangerous. In Goldberg’s account, Obama goes on to call for connecting with young Asians and Africans and Latin Americans, who, according to Obama, are thinking, “How do I get a better education? How do I create something of value?” instead of wasting time with Middle Easterners in “figuring out how to... control the malicious, nihilistic, violent parts of humanity.” Today, Edward Said’s Orientalism rings truer than ever. “So far as the United States seems to be concerned,” Said wrote in 1980, “it is only a slight overstatement to say that Moslems and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential



terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Moslem life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world.” Obama has finally shown his true colors; demeaning orientalist perceptions of the Middle East and arrogance towards its people.

The second issue of critical concern is Obama’s fatalistic view of the region and attribution of its problems to tribalism. According to Goldberg, Obama has come to the conclusion that there is nothing that the United States can do to change systems in the Middle East or make it a better place, primarily because of tribalism. The issue of tribalism is particularly interesting, because President Obama uses it to dismiss an entire region in the world as essentially hopeless. While tribalism can lead to negative and sometimes severe outcomes, it is one of the natural human phenomena. What Obama calls “tribalism,” or what is more scientifically known in social psychology as “social categorization” occurs on a daily basis by all people, to varying degrees, depending on the circumstances. What is true, though, is that the lack of just political and legal systems intensifies the institutionalization of this human phenomenon and its potential negative outcomes.

Social categorization and group identity phenomena are no excuse for orientalism. There are countless examples of some form of ‘tribalism’ practiced in the United States and by the United States. With regard to the Middle East, however, Obama must know that political transitions and reforms (especially through revolutions) are lengthy difficult processes that historically go through long periods of chaos and disorder before reaching democratic resolutions and stability. Moreover, in his dismissal of and disregard for the region, Obama seems to have forgotten the history and the present of heavy US and western interferences in the Middle East, as well as the nature of global geopolitics and political economy, all of which hold strong direct responsibilities for the region’s pathologies.

### **The Obama Doctrine Part II: Theory without Action**

Clearly, Obama is good with words, but not so much with actions. One of the prominent examples of Obama’s inaction is the famous “red line” incident with regard to Syria. The situation in Syria dominates large portions of Goldberg’s article, particularly when President Obama warned the Syrian regime in the summer of 2012 that chemical weapons constitute a red line and their use warrants US military response. The following summer, in August 2013, Assad used chemical weapons against civilians in Ghouta in Syria, but President Obama backtracked on his decision. While “The Obama Doctrine” article details the rationale and discussions taking place around Obama’s decision to strike the Assad regime and the last-minute judgment to reverse that decision, the critics are not satisfied.

As described by Goldberg, Obama’s reasoning for the reversal of his decision to strike the Assad regime includes the fact that the US could not change “the equation on the ground” against a regime sponsored and armed by the two large states, Iran and Russia, without the commitment of US military forces. President Obama also pointed out some flaws in the proposed strike such as Assad’s use of civilians as human shields, the presence of UN inspectors on the ground, the possibility of the strike to leave the chemical weapons in the hands of ISIS, the fact that strikes cannot target the chemical weapons per se, and the risk of Assad’s survival and claim to defeating the US. Obama was also reluctant to initiate an attack that is unsanctioned by international law and a UN mandate, by US allies (the British Parliament



voted no and David Cameron was out, Angela Merkel said Germany would not participate), by US intelligence (James Clapper director of National Intelligence was cautious to overpromise), or by the American people (Congress later showed no interest in authorizing the use of force in Syria).

The critics of Obama's reversal decision, on the other hand, discuss the loss of credibility for the US and its leverage in Syria as well as damaging the United States' standing in the world, noting that "the post-red-line world no longer fears America." However, Obama argues, "Dropping bombs on someone to prove that you're willing to drop bombs on someone is just about the worst reason to use force." Obama believes that Iran made the deal with the US because it recognizes America's power. Obama and his supporters also argue that Assad understood the power of the US when he agreed to have his chemical weapons removed in the deal negotiated between the US and Russia following the 'red line' decision reversal. Critics of Obama's about-face, however, have argued that a US strike on Assad regime targets would have weakened Assad's traditional artillery arsenal, alleviated the refugee crisis, and prevented deaths among victims of the regime.

The 'red line' incident reveals a well-known conundrum in international policy, the choice between addressing human rights abuses and avoiding war. Obama's decision not to strike the Assad regime was heavily influenced by the failures of US intervention in Iraq and Libya. "A president does not make decisions in a vacuum," he said. However, Obama's determination and rush to withdraw from Iraq without any alternative plan in place (civil, military, political or otherwise) and without addressing the sectarian damages incurred by Maliki's policies and alienation of Sunnis, was probably a bigger factor in this failure than the invasion of Iraq itself. Similarly in Libya, although the intervention may have prevented Qaddafi from slaughtering civilians in Benghazi, "Libya is a mess" or -as Obama more colloquially calls it- a "shit show." Again, the "mess" in Libya is as much due to the intervention as it is due to the inaction of the US and allies after the attacks. In Obama's own words, he apparently "had more faith in the Europeans, given Libya's proximity, being invested in the follow-up," in a matter that clearly cannot be left up to faith.

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Clearly, the examples from Iraq and Libya demonstrate the failure of US and western military interventions and the ensuing human rights disasters. While the reasons for and against striking the Assad regime are myriad and the decision can be argued either way, the more important questions should be about the post-attack plans. The real shortcoming in Iraq and Libya was the lack of a strategic plan for peaceful diplomatic and democratic transitions, enforcing order, and the protection of civilians. The most significant issue that the Obama Doctrine fails to address is whether Obama had a plan for transition and state building following a possible attack against the Assad regime. After all, policies are judged by their consequences not their theoretical intentions.



### **The Obama Doctrine Part III: Contradiction**

Obama has repeatedly affirmed that his commitment to avoiding military interventions and ending America's wars abroad applies only as far as no "direct threat to US national security" exists. "We have to be very clear about what our core interests are and what we are willing to go to war for" he said. Becoming known as the "terrorist hunter," Obama regularly boasts about killing Osama Bin Laden. However, Obama's lethal drone warfare, which he insists on funding and promoting, is far from ethical or even from targeting direct threats to US national security. Obama's drone program has been found to kill innocent people 90% of the time. Moreover, it has not been made clear what exactly counts for President Obama as a direct national security threat that warrants military actions.

After the red-line incident and Obama's about-face, the president made it clear that he would rather defend Israel than Syrian civilians, and fight al-Qaeda and Iran than fight the Syrian regime. For Obama, "the price of direct US action would be higher than the price of inaction," in Syria. This is in clear contradiction with Obama's Nobel Peace Prize speech in 2009, when he said, "Inaction tears at our conscience and can lead to more costly intervention later." What would compel US action in Syria, according to Goldberg, is a San Bernardino-style direct ISIS attack on US soil. Obama's priority in his last few months in office to kill Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-appointed "Caliph of the Islamic State," is manifested in his new war (and almost exclusive focus) on ISIS, even though, some argue, the Assad regime was one of the primary factors aiding the spread and growth of ISIS.

### **The Obama Doctrine Part IV: Lack of Accountability**

In his confessions, Obama also took pride in not adhering to the demands of US allies in the Middle East that exploit American "muscle" for their own interests and sectarian goals. While President Obama expressed harsh criticisms of the United States' traditional allies, Sunni Arab states and gulf nations, as "free-riders," there was no discussion of American exploitation of the region to strengthen the United States' political, military, and economic plans in the Middle East and advance its agendas around the world.

President Barak Obama's abandonment of the Middle East and the notion that Sunni Arab states need to "share" the Middle East with Iran are overly simplistic and ignore the larger dynamics of geopolitical economy and the significant western influence (and interest) in the region.

While Obama's criticism of Saudi Arabia's funding and promotion of extremist Wahhabi interpretations of Islam across the world and the country's gross violations of human rights are valid, the United States continued to support and enable the monarchy and other repressive regimes in the region for decades despite these facts. Obama's sudden turn to isolationism when it comes to the Middle East lacks accountability for America's role in the "shit show" currently taking place in the region, from supporting the deep police state and autocratic regimes in Egypt that gave rise to radical political Islam to invasions of Arab countries and committing war crimes, enabling Arab autocracies and monarchies in return for serving US military and economic interests, to the continuous and full biased support of Israel's oppression of the Palestinians.



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Obama's revelation that the Middle East is no longer a major issue of US interests is largely misguided. America's history in the Middle East and current involvements ensure direct effects of Middle East events on the US and the world. For one, the United States' blind support for Israel and serving its interests in the region are sure to continue, and with them heavy involvement in the region leading to increased animosity towards the US among Arab and Muslim publics. The most basic lesson that Obama seems to have missed is that America's disregard for the lives and the humanity of people in the region will continue (as they have in the past) to endanger American lives.