



The “Dos and Don’ts” of Defeating ISIS: Obama’s wasted 13-minutes

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Giving his first Oval Office speech during his second term, President Obama addressed the nation on December 6, 2015 following the San Bernardino attack to reassure nervous Americans that the United States will continue its fight against ISIS and that the current policy is working both abroad and at home.

President Barak Obama’s address was also a PR management effort to regain support for the administration. Following intelligence failures regarding ISIS threats in the US and the San Bernardino ISIS-inspired massacre, Obama received additional criticisms for his response to terrorism threats. In fact, a new CNN/ORC poll shows that 60% of Americans disapprove of Obama’s handling of terrorism and 64% of his handling of ISIS.

President Obama’s 13-minute speech came from the Oval Office hoping to showcase the administration’s seriousness in dealing with the threat of terrorism and Obama’s firm hand in dealing with ISIS. The President tried to appear forceful by standing, rather than being seated behind his desk. However, the lack of specifics and restating the already known facts made Obama’s address obsolete, if not having the opposite effect. The reaction to his speech has been lukewarm – at best.

The Oval Office address offered no new policies or strategies for dealing with ISIS. The president used the speech to defend his approach of relying mostly on US and coalition airstrikes while also assisting local forces and targeting the group’s finances. “Our military will continue to hunt down terrorist plotters in any country where it is necessary,” he said.

Defeating ISIS

The San Bernardino event has very important implications for US policy. First, the threat of ISIS has in fact reached the United States. Second, combating ISIS is not achieved through geographically-tied air strikes. Third, intelligence failed. Fourth, the threat can come from anywhere and anyone; all it takes is one depressed individual, some ideological justification or narrative, and a weapon. And finally, it is not possible to detect and deter every single danger.

In this regard, Obama’s “dos and don’ts” failed to address the real threat. Air strikes, while also killing innocent victims of ISIS, are likely to increase the threat by individuals in the US who are sympathetic to some of the “Islamic State’s” reasoning. Train and equip programs

have proven unsuccessful as military resources end up in the hands of ISIS members. Intelligence sharing is unlikely to detect all possible threats. Disrupting ISIS operations and financing, sealing borders, and a political resolution are all important but unlikely to achieve short term changes or stop individual attacks in the US.

The don'ts

President Obama's "don'ts" seem to be more important than his "dos". Although 53% of Americans want to send new ground troops to fight ISIS (CNN/ORC poll), Obama continues to reject the idea of boots on the ground. For his critics, he confirms the impression that he will step up the mission against ISIS, nor did he make his position clear on the several legislative proposals in Congress on dealing with terrorism. Republican presidential candidates have consistently slammed the President for underestimating the threat from ISIS, by referring to ISIS as the "JV" team, and for his weak approach to terrorism. Ironically, while Americans disapprove of Obama's performance on terrorism, few Republicans or Democrats have proposed anything substantively different from what the President is offering.

The more important "don't" coming from the President's speech provides refreshing rhetoric for Muslims at home and abroad. While many, especially among the republicans, want to declare a war on Islam, Obama warned against demonizing Muslims.

Obama's affirmation to Muslims is a significant element in the strategy to defeat ISIS and should not be underestimated. A war on Islam is the key ingredient for ISIS recruitment and for inspiring lone attacks in the United States. For American Muslims and Muslims overseas, the perception and rhetoric of inclusion is important in preventing and disrupting radicalization.

Fighting ISIS at home

Following the San Bernardino attack, President Obama echoed the calls to review the visa waiver program. However, it had become known that Pakistani Tashfeen Malik entered the United States on a different visa program – the fiancé visa, while her husband and partner in the attack Sayed Farook was an American of Pakistani descent.

The President also used this opportunity to focus on gun control discussions, renewing his call to tighten the nation's gun laws to make it more difficult for ISIS-influenced individuals to legally purchase firearms, including renewing the ban on assault weapons. However, it is unlikely for the President to win this argument. One week earlier, the US Congress voted down a measure that would have enacted stricter guns laws and is not inclined to revisit the issue. Incendiary statements like the one issued by Rev. Jerry Falwell, Jr. calling on students at Liberty University to arms themselves against Muslims, unfortunately resonates with many

Americans and the all-powerful National Rifle Association, who vigorously defend the Second Amendment.

The President also called on Congress to vote on a measure he requested last February that would specifically declare war on ISIS, providing political and legal cover for the airstrikes and actions by the Special Forces. Several members of Congress have supported a new Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) to defeat ISIS, but congressional support has been weak and legislation introduced by Senator Tim Kaine (D-Virginia) has gone nowhere.

Congressional reactions

Congressional reaction to the speech was mixed. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky) called on the President to describe how the Coalition would put together a ground force able to oust ISIS from Raqqa, its *de facto* base of operations. Senate Armed Services Chairman Senator John McCain (R-Arizona), said the President's address failed to obscure what has become increasingly clear to the American people: that the US is not winning the war against ISIS. Presidential candidate Senator Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina) said Obama is overselling the successes that existing coalition forces have had against ISIS. Graham believes the US and its allies should contribute ground forces claiming the President's strategy will not destroy ISIS. Republicans have said Obama's strategy has not been working, and mocked the President for declining to use the words "radical Islamic terrorism."

House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wisconsin) called the speech a disappointment with no new plan. Rather, it was a half-hearted attempt to defend and distract from a failing policy. Other congressional Republicans voiced similar comments, saying that Obama's strategy — air strikes against ISIS positions in Iraq and Syria, and training local ground forces — is inadequate to the threat. They also criticized Obama for again proposing gun control measures.

Conclusion

Obama's political performance to win back popularity through emotional appeal, theatrics, and demonstration of strength at the expense of policy substance achieved no more than reaffirming the perceived weakness of the administration's action in responding to ISIS.

Obama's tip toe policy of "war but not war" is a clear example of the clash between politics and policy; the politics of gaining public and political support, vis-à-vis the implementation of a practical rational policy that can achieve long-term goals.

However, Americans still don't want another war in the Middle East, and Obama is right in that another ground operation in Iraq and Syria and a war on Islam are what ISIS wants, and would most likely increase ISIS recruits.

The threat of ISIS-inspired attacks in the US is real and complex, and the response must be calculated, multidimensional, and cautious. While the administration's response and President Obama's dating-style "dos and don'ts" probably constitute the most rational strategy to respond to this type of threat, it probably fell on deaf ears. The American public's fear is also real, and the people expect clear firm and tangible actions. The need to play politics and the responsibility to propose calculated policy strategies rarely meet. If President Obama wants to achieve a victory before leaving the Oval Office, he should focus on only one of them.