

## **Realist or Liberal?: Theoretical Interpretations of the Obama Administration's Counterterrorism Strategy**

*Brett Campbell\**

*Abstract:* As a means to settle the Obama liberal-realist debate, this article examines his administration's counterterrorism strategy, with specific attention given to three of the primary tactics employed since 9/11 to combat terrorists: targeted killings, extraordinary rendition, and torture. In general, most assume the targeted killings program to be realist-driven, while the supposed ban of torture and mitigation of extraordinary renditions to fall within the purview of liberalism. However, upon closer analysis, the president's counterterrorism strategy has followed almost entirely the logic of realism. Each of these tactics suggests a preference to act unilaterally, flout international law, and above all, enhance national security at the expense of commonly accepted liberal international values.

*Key words:* Obama, realism, liberalism, counterterrorism.

Phrases like “deadly technologies” and “far-reaching network of violence and hatred” could startle a curious first-page reader of the White House's May 2010 *National Security Strategy*. Such terse language, coupled with the more than 2,000 civilians and enemy combatants killed in Pakistan by unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) attacks since 2009 (Long War Journal, 2013), the still-unknown fate of 166 Guantanamo Bay prisoners, and the recent NSA scandal indicating a massive government records collection program, seems to fall in contrast to the character of a President and Nobel Peace Prize recipient that once famously challenged Americans to believe in “hope” and made the banning of torture a priority of his first hundred days in Office. Of course, it is understood that campaign slogans are not intended to secure and protect a citizenry, but rather to win elections. Still, the disparity between the President's campaign rhetoric and his office's actions is evident even to a casual follower of American politics. Moreover, a review of his latest national security speech in May 2013 suggests an almost

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\* Brett Campbell is a PhD candidate at the School of International Studies, University of Trento, Italy; e-mail: campel@gwmail.gwu.edu

deliberately unwavering balance between the hierarchy of security versus the promotion of democracy and protection of civil liberties. All of this leads to the very basic question: Just who are you, Mr. President—a liberal or a realist?

In real terms, a presidency's foreign policy would likely never fit squarely into one theoretical classification alone, particularly given that the Executive is often restrained by the initiatives created under its predecessor. However, as a means to settling the Obama liberal-realist debate, one particular area of his office's foreign policy can provide superior insight; one that is entirely of his own (staff's) making, and one where the situation has not changed dramatically since the end of the previous administration: counterterrorism.

In evaluating the theoretical foundation of the Obama Administration's counterterrorism policy, this article analyzes specifically the tactics employed to combat terrorism. As such, discourse on counterterrorism will not be analyzed in depth; however, the President's speeches, press releases, and publications will be referenced as a means to demonstrate how the Administration's rhetoric either conflicts with or supports a given policy. As a means to narrow the argument further, this paper addresses the three principal counterterrorism issues: targeted killings (and the use of drone technology); extraordinary rendition and torture, the latter of which are grouped together given that they are often interconnected. Moreover, these policies ideally capture the dichotomy between realism and liberalism; more specifically, most assume targeted killings to be realist-driven, while Obama's (alleged) ban of torture and mitigation of extraordinary rendition to follow the logic of liberalism. The military dimension, i.e. the ongoing war in Afghanistan, as well as the issue of Guantanamo Bay are not included for analysis. On the latter, the authors accept that it is an inherited legal quagmire from the previous administration. Though the President has not made good on his promise to close the detention facility, there is ample evidence to suggest that this is simply beyond the Executive's power. The war in Afghanistan has been omitted largely because the focus here is on the policies driven by the White House, rather than the broader military command structure (i.e. the Department of Defense). However, the authors wish to note that extensive analyses of these issues and others—including the now unfolding NSA spying scandal—are very much worthy of further academic research.

The central claim developed below is that, despite expectations resulting from his 2008 campaign promises to combat terrorism multilaterally and in accordance with the 'rule of law,' the President's counterterrorism strategy has instead followed a decisively realist logic. More specifically, the key policies suggest a preference to act unilaterally, flout international law, and above all, enhance national security at the expense of commonly accepted liberal international values.

As such, this article is organized as follows: Section I provides a brief overview of the broader realist-liberal debate, and as well addresses some of the shortcomings found in this analysis; namely, the problem of situating complex international relations (IR) theories against the single issue of counterterrorism, rather than the President's broader foreign policy. Section II provides an overview of the targeted killings program, and argues how it overwhelmingly fits the model of realist policymaking. Section III provides a similar assessment of the use of torture and extraordinary rendition, respectively. Despite the perception that these policies ended alongside the Bush Administration, this paper argues that they continue, albeit in a more limited capacity, which again distinguishes the White House as more realist than liberal. Section V offers concluding remarks, namely that the high expectations allotted to the word 'change' should never have misrepresented the President's determination to combat terrorism aggressively and uphold national security.

## **I. Focusing the Realist-Liberal Debate**

Within IR theory, realism and liberalism (see also: idealism) are the central paradigms, having long dominated the theoretical landscape, and given foundational support to a host of "neo-" adaptations. As such, the ongoing and seemingly intransigent debate over whether the Obama Administration's counterterrorism policy leans more toward realist or liberal merits the following analysis. Prior to delving into an overview of the two theories and explaining how they may be considered in terms of counterterrorism policy, several problematic issues must be addressed.

First, simply because the following only considers realism and liberalism, the authors note that this does not preclude the notion that other theoretical schools may be applied with equal consideration. However, for the purposes of focus and brevity, this article examines only these two theories, particularly as they provide a high degree of poignancy to the post-9/11 conversation between protecting democratic values and safeguarding national security. Second, given the enormity of both theories within IR, it is imperative to note that this paper looks specifically at the theories' key tendencies, principles, and objectives, rather than assessing their more complex divisions. "Both liberalism and realism are large churches, and their labels indicate general patterns of thought rather than any single theory" (Goldman, 2013, 52). Here, some traditional assumptions of both schools are relaxed in order to fit the analysis below; the most crucial being realism's (more cautiously, neo-realism's) state-centric approach (i.e. its exclusion of non-state actors as threats to the international system). Likewise, because of the paper's narrowed focus on security, the following does not delve into the many subsets of liberalism (see: economic liberalism). Instead the paper focuses on how the theories evaluate security dilemmas, incentives, and outcomes with regard to the

tactics employed in combating terrorism. Given these considerations, the following provides a brief overview of both theories' key concepts.

Realism, the only theory specific to IR, is premised on the (pessimistic) belief in the eternality of laws in politics, namely that man has not changed throughout the centuries, and that he is only preoccupied with survival, i.e. achieving or maintaining his own security. "Human nature, in which the laws of politics have their roots, has not changed since the classical philosophies of China, India, and Greece endeavored to discover these laws" (Morgenthau, 1978, 4). As such, states—as the central building block of the international system—act in their own self-interest, dispersing any notions of morality, friendship, and/or extravagance, unless of course these qualities serve to enhance their own security. Like liberalism, realism contends that the international system is anarchic in the sense that there is no higher authority than the states themselves; however, realists do not believe conflict and the condition of anarchy may be overcome. As such, power is considered crucial, and achieved via military and economic superiority; hence realism's tendency to focus on powerful states. Conflict arises because of changes in the relative power between states, and subsequently the intensified "competition among countries for resources and markets, military power, political influence, and prestige" (Choucri & North, 1975, 28).

The above summary admittedly does not do justice to the litany of attention given to realism in academia; nor does it explain the differences between classical (structural) realism and neo-realism, nor the many scholarly distinctions within both subsets. However, as a means to answer the above-question on how to make sense of the Obama Administration's counterterrorism policy, it shall suffice, particularly as the focus is on the broader understanding of whether such policies may be characterized as realist or liberal. In general, several key points of realism relative to the paper's theme must be underlined. First, the international system has no higher governing authority than the states themselves. This is important when one considers the (arguably) unilateral direction of the United States' counterterrorism policy. Second, that every state essentially stands alone (i.e. that 'other' states can never fully be trusted) is relevant when one considers the United States' decision to carry out attacks against the consideration of their 'allies.' Third, the fact that the US is the world's sole superpower heightens its vulnerability. Among Middle East and southwest Asian states, where the bulk of counterterrorism policies are directed, competition is fierce for political influence and material resources (oil), which only magnifies this vulnerability.

Liberalism, the more complex of the two theories given its wider-ranging applicability, portrays a decidedly more optimistic view of the international system, focusing on three primary assumptions: "the fundamental actors in world politics are individuals and private-constituted groups with autonomous preferences; governments repre-

sent some subset of domestic social actors; and interstate behavior is shaped primarily by the pattern of state preferences, not state power” (Moravcsik, 1992, 2). Moreover, the liberalist view is shaped by the perception that states are not only interdependent, but that cooperation vis-à-vis trade relations, international treaties, and shared goals may bring about absolute (i.e. multi-sum) gains, and the possibility for world peace (Goldman, 2013, 52). In this sense, liberals uphold that conflict can be avoided—and that if it is merely avoided in one instance, then the school of realism is negated.

Again, this overly simplistic explanation warrants far more description and distinction; however, in terms of how it may elaborate on the Obama Administration’s counterterrorism strategy, a few points are worth noting. First, liberals consider the role of multiple sets of actors (i.e. non-state actors), which perhaps makes it the easier theory to apply to the theme of counterterrorism. Second, there is the understanding that multilateralism (rather than unilateralism) benefits a state’s security. Here, the liberal claim that international institutions mitigate the so-called security dilemma—diminishing uncertainty and raising the level of incentives for cooperation—is considered when assessing levels of cooperation with allies. Finally, it is important to consider the liberal belief in international treaties and international law, whereby US compliance helps to foster trust among allies, and hence enhance security. This is particularly relevant to the discussion of whether the counterterrorism tactics described below violate international law.

In order to contextualize current counterterrorism strategies, it is necessary to outline exactly how the two theories view the threat of terrorism. In general terms, many scholars have cautioned that IR has been slow to adapt to the emerging threat of non-state actors (Williams, 1998). Here, one could easily fall back on the idea that “realists can invoke the domestic–international divide to argue that terrorism does not materially affect the international system” (Waltz, 2002). However, this logic would bring the following argument to an abrupt end. Once again, for the purposes of this paper, it is necessary to relax some of these core theoretical assumptions. Further, there is some flexibility on the policy-side of the realist camp, namely the logic that, “There is no international terrorism without the support of sovereign states” (Netanyahu, 2001). More broadly, “both [liberalism and realism] assume that large segments of the international community will find terrorism to be intolerable” (Buros, 2011, 2). Once again, realists are rather split on how to combat most effectively the threat of terrorism. Some argue for restraint and “that military might is unlikely to bring victory in a war against terror” (Mearsheimer, 2002, 14). Others suggest that the military is best equipped to dispose of the existential threat and that the unbridled power of the US will engender the rest of the world to cooperate (Buros, 2011, 2). In the end, this divergence is not critical for this particular article. One could argue that targeted killings represent both restraint (i.e. a transition away from large, expensive

ground campaigns) and military might (i.e. the unbridled technological superiority of UAVs), and as such fit the spirit of realist policymaking.

Liberals, by contrast, view terrorism as an ideological challenge (Dunne, 2009, 7). However, a number of problems emerge for liberals in constructing an appropriate counterterrorism strategy given that the current brand of fundamentalist terrorist organizations (historically) do not fit their assumption that man is a social animal, and will seek to cooperate if it means that both sides gain. In short, terrorists, particularly those of the suicidal bomber type, do not appear to seek cooperation. Here again, there is a disparity within the theoretical framework for how best to combat terrorism; this is most commonly noted in the distinctions between “offensive” and “defensive” liberalism. The latter argues for a more multilateral response; and more importantly, that “law enforcement and criminal justice are the only sensible ways of dealing with dangerous fanatical groups of this kind” (Wilkinson, 2011, 83). More extreme variations of offensive liberalism support the need for regime change and “imposed democratization” vis-à-vis “major investment in the political, military and economic spheres” (Miller, 2010, 563) of foreign states. Of course, much of the literature on offensive liberalism focuses on the previous administration’s policy toward Iraq. Again, as will be demonstrated, major disputes within the literature will not serve to undermine the end theoretical categorization of the primary counterterrorism policies discussed below.

## **II. Counterterrorism Tactics: Drones and Targeted Killings**

There is an inherent difficulty in distilling a two-term president’s foreign policy down to a single issue (albeit a broadly inclusive issue) for the purposes of theoretical characterization. Moreover, within counterterrorism, there arises the problem of identifying which policies actually fit into the criteria of counterterrorism, and likewise, which do not. Of course, drone strikes on known Al-Qaeda leaders shall be included. However, does reaching out to students at the American University of Cairo, as Obama did in 2009, constitute as counterterrorism? Given the enormity of the topic, this paper narrows the discussion down to the actions employed on the most critically debated issues: targeted killings, torture and extraordinary rendition.

Among all of the counterterrorism instruments used, perhaps none have characterized the Obama administration more than the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (“drones”) to kill high ranking members of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In 2011 alone, the Executive used UAVs to conduct combat operations against suspected terrorists inside the borders of six sovereign states: Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. Three factors account for why drones have become the favored tool in the United States’ ongoing war on terror, and as well provide the current Executive Branch

a justifiable basis for their increased deployment: (i) their risk-averse nature; (ii) their cost-effectiveness; and (iii) their technologically advanced precision. On risk, UAVs armed with Hellfire missiles typically engage targets from 10,000 feet (3,048m), while its pilot operates from a safe “battlefield” distance thousands of miles away. In short, risk has been effectively eradicated as a combat deterrent. On cost, UAVs are far cheaper than manned systems. The total cost of the popular Reaper drone is \$54 million; by comparison, the cost of a B2 bomber is upwards of \$1.2 billion (United States Air Force, Factsheets, 2013). Consequently, “[t]here is not a single new manned combat aircraft under research and development at any major Western aerospace company” (Singer, 2012). On precision, the drone is considered both technologically and methodologically superior to manned fighter jets. Several factors account for this, including the slow flight-speed of drones, their instantaneous and quality video feed, and their ability to circle the same target for as many as forty hours without refueling. These three factors, combined with public disapproval of soldier-led battles in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the militarily untenable nature of counterinsurgency wars, suggest that the CIA’s drone program will only grow in the coming years.

Given the mitigations of risk and cost, one could easily argue that drone strikes are entirely more *realistic* in combating terrorism than conventional military weapons. What’s more, in terms of the theme of this paper, it is clear that the overall strategy behind the Predator Drone program fits appropriately into the realist camp. The following section first critiques how drone strikes oppose several key liberal principles, before highlighting some of the strategy’s decidedly realist tendencies.

Drone strikes on Al-Qaeda leaders oppose three general liberal security preferences. First, targeted killings are carried out unilaterally by the United States Executive and intelligence services; and as typical for such covert actions—the attacks are shrouded in secrecy. This is not to suggest that realism supports states acting unilaterally (except to say that its “focus on relative power does explain why the United States have the opportunity to act unilaterally” (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2005 510)), but rather that most branches of liberalism underline the necessity of some form of plurality, and to a lesser extent, transparency. “The most distinctly liberal argument for differentiated, bounded political units rests on the classic liberal fear of concentrated political power and its potential to breed tyranny” (Whelen, 1959; in Abizadeh, 59). While the authors strongly oppose labeling such counterterrorism measures as a form of tyranny, there is little doubt that the program is highly concentrated among a few (domestic) actors. Moreover, the United Nations—the closest attempt to satisfy liberalism’s preference for international plurality—has condemned the drone program (Woods, Serle, 2013), even citing its potential illegality (discussed below) (Bowcott, 2012). Moreover, opinion polls in a number of traditional American allies (e.g. Turkey, Spain, Greece, etc.) (Zenko,

2012) reveal overwhelming disapproval of the program. As none of these governments have publicly condemned the program, an argument could be made that this violates liberalism's contention that foreign policy is shaped by domestic state preferences.

One could argue that intelligence-sharing (used to track terrorist leaders) among various foreign agencies lends itself to some form of multilateral behavior; however, given that the decision/criteria to execute a target is wholly restricted by a classified (internal to the United States) memo system (Finn, 2011), it is unlikely that any foreign intelligence service would have the ability to override a decision to kill an enemy target made by the Obama Administration.

Augmenting the argument above is the fact that liberals also cite the need for decision-making plurality among *domestic* actors in the creation of foreign policy. "Republican liberal theories stress the role of domestic representative institutions, elites and leadership dynamics, and executive-legislative relations" (Moravcsik, 1993). Yet, Obama is regularly criticized by Congressional leaders for the fact that the program directive remains highly classified. The CIA "declines to provide any information to the public about where it operates, how it selects targets, who is in charge, or how many people have been killed" (Mayer, 2009).

A second argument against liberalism centers on the mounting criticism that such targeted killings violate a number of international laws. "[Liberals have] insisted that the rule of law and questions of justice and rights were absolutely central to international relations" (Steans et al., 2010, 44). Due to the limits of this article, the entire legal argument(s) cannot possibly be detailed in their entirety; however, the following lists a brief summary of the alleged violations: (i) terrorism is considered a law enforcement issue, rather than an act of war; (ii) drone attacks violate the sovereignty of states "not involved in 'armed conflict' with the United States"; (iii) targeted killings do not fulfill the criteria of self-defense stipulated in the UN Charter (and reinforced by customary law and *jus cogens*); (iv) they violate the principles of necessity and proportionality found within the criteria of *jus ad bellum*; and (v) the conflict between the US and Al-Qaeda does not meet the levels necessary for an "armed conflict" (Orr, 2011, 731). Of course, the Administration has defended, albeit somewhat indifferently, the legality of the drone program; and only to the extent that the Justice Department has circulated internally a confidential memo highlighting that the covert killings are protected by "self-defense" principles. In addition, the memo establishes that capturing a suspect must first be considered "infeasible", and the strikes must be conducted according to "law of war principles" (Justice Department Memo; in Isikoff, 2013). Even if the actions are at some point deemed legal by an international court, one could argue that they are not in accordance with established liberal norms of international governance, "understood as the formal and informal bundles of rules, roles and relationships that define



and regulate the social practices of state and non-state actors in international affairs” (Slaughter, Tullumello, Wood, 1998, 371).

Finally, it is important to reiterate the so-called “grand strategies” of both offensive and defensive liberalism. According to Miller, “offensive liberalism relies on the assumed pacifying tendencies of democratization, displaying a regular willingness to consider the use of force towards that objective” (Miller, 566, 2010); whereas defensive liberalism pushes for a multilateral mix of hard and soft power to bring about a peaceful resolution to conflict (ibid). Neither of these subtenants of liberalism can be applied to the Predator Drone program. In fact, many would argue that targeted killings have made it possible for the United States to reign in its democratization efforts in both Afghanistan and Iraq; as well, targeted killings show no intent to coordinate multilateral law enforcement campaign.

Having established that targeted killings violate a number of liberalism’s core principles, three additional arguments suggest that it fits most appropriately in the realist camp. First, balance of power is central to the realist paradigm; more specifically, “whether and under what conditions the competitive behavior of states leads to some sort of equilibrium” (Wohlforth et al., 2007, 156). Contrasting the current approach, i.e. a vast increase in drone killings between 2009 and 2011, against the primary counter-terrorism policy advanced by the previous administration (regime change; democratization), it is arguable that “a series of persistent, targeted efforts to dismantle specific networks of violent extremists” (Obama, 2013) is much more favorable to maintaining the current power *status quo*. After the removal of Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist regime, many have speculated that this shifted the regional balance of power in the Middle East to Iran (Nasr & Takehy, 2007), a potential nuclear power. Moreover, prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, stalwart American allies France and Germany condemned the operation, and attempted to revitalize the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). Though far from the type of balancing that was common in Europe several centuries ago, there is no question that the pre- and post-Iraq rebalancing of the international system was a result of the US’s overreach of power. Besides muted criticisms over the morality and legality of drone strikes, the international community has largely remained silent as to their use. Therefore, it is almost inconceivable that they have shifted any power away from the United States; consequently, as a policy choice, the use of targeted killings follows sound realist logic.

A second argument concerns the superficially accepted logic that ‘drone strikes create more terrorists than they kill’ (i.e. the high number of civilian casualties killed by targeted strikes helps with recruitment to anti-American terrorist organizations). If this were true, it would seem to upset realism’s focus on the importance of relative power, namely between the United States and Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghani-

stan and northwest Pakistan. However, a recent study conducted by the International Crisis Group argues this line of reasoning to be a myth. “The actual benefit to extremist groups, including in terms of recruitment, appears, however, minimal” (ICG, 2013, 23). Moreover, the report quotes a senior Pakistani journalist, who stated that “drones are the only thing militants fear” (ibid, 23), which once again reinforces the idea the UAVs (i.e. the use of advanced, superior military technologies against one’s enemy) follow a realist’s logic.

A final argument supporting the use of drones as realist policymaking refers to the idea of morality. As noted above, many politicians, academics, and international organizations have called into question the morality of combat drones (i.e. the lack of risk borne by the offensive party). To be clear, realism does not support immoral behavior, but rather that decisions based on morality should never inhibit a state’s survival. Further, for realists the question of morality is framed as an internal issue: the theory doubts “the efficacy of morally guided action...insisting that morality is created within and confined to the community (understood as synonymous with the state)” (Bellamy, 2005, 276). While a large number of foreign populations have denounced the practice, a recent poll suggests that a majority of Americans still favor the use of drones (56%), “despite questions raised by the program” (Pew Research Center, 2013).

### **III. Counterterrorism Tactics: Torture and “Extraordinary Rendition”**

Like drones, the practices of extraordinary rendition and torture have not only ignited a similar public debate on the hierarchy of liberal values versus security, but also come to characterize the previous administration’s most egregious counterterrorism efforts. However, whereas robotic technology is only beginning its descent from science-fiction to reality, torture and kidnapping have rather established roots in the history of conflict. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, both practices were authorized by the Bush Administration as necessary tools to combat terrorism (Sadat, 2007, 1215-1216), which led subsequently to an intense global rebuke. Currently, the general perception is that President Obama, shortly after his inauguration, banned such practices. However, as will be discussed below, such a characterization falls somewhere between ‘too favorable’ and untrue. Following an overview of torture and extraordinary rendition during the Obama Administration, this section will again argue that the current use of these practices—although tempered—falls within the framework of the realist paradigm.

Torture (or in the parlance of the Bush Administration: “enhanced interrogation techniques”) included the use of sleep deprivation, stress positions, and most famously “waterboarding” as a means to garner intelligence from suspected terrorists. Such prac-

tices are prohibited under the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT). Suspects were often “seized [by the CIA or foreign intelligence agencies] and covertly transferred to a third country detention facility for debriefing” (Murray, 2011, 16), a practice known as “extraordinary rendition”. During his first presidential campaign, then-Senator Obama stated that he would curb such practices, suggesting that they are an affront to American values: “This means ending the practices of shipping away prisoners in the dead of night to be tortured in far-off countries, of detaining thousands without charge or trial, of maintaining a network of secret prisons to jail people beyond the reach of the law” (Obama, 2007, 14). Following his inauguration, such rhetoric turned to action. He signed three Executive Orders correcting the practices of detainment and extraordinary rendition (two of which focused exclusively on Guantanamo Bay). Further, “the use of tortuous techniques by the CIA was banned. Permissible techniques for all US interrogations were now limited to those found in [US] Army Field Manual 2–22.3” (Blakeley, 2013, 615). Moreover, Obama reaffirmed a commitment to Common Article 3 of the Geneva Convention, which established minimum criteria by which detainees are to be treated (ibid).

Obama’s initial rhetoric and actions strongly suggested a more liberal counterterrorism strategy (i.e. upholding justice, western values, and the rule of law). However, critics have rightly argued that a number of these changes in policy are superficial. Concerning the use of enhanced interrogation techniques, as has been stated above, the Obama Administration now follows procedures detailed in the Army Field Manual. However, according to former military interrogator-turned-author Matthew Alexander, these procedures contain a number of ‘torture loopholes’, which unequivocally still permit the abuse of prisoners, including the use of solitary confinement and sleep deprivation (Hentoff, 2010). Moreover, despite shuttering the so-called CIA ‘Black Sites’ used to house and interrogate terrorist suspects, the practice of extraordinary renditions has continued under Obama, albeit with greater oversight. “Because of the secrecy involved, it is not known how many renditions have taken place during Obama’s first term. But his administration has not disavowed the practice” (Whitlock, 2013). It is worth noting here that the European Court of Human Rights recently ruled that extraordinary renditions “amounted to torture” (Frankel, 2013).

In terms of the realism-liberalism debate, the only argument in favor of the latter is the public *perception* that the Obama Administration seeks to comply with international laws and institutions; such perception is augmented by the President’s rhetoric on the importance of meeting internationally recognized standards: “From Europe to the Pacific, we have been a nation that has shut down torture chambers and replaced tyranny with the rule of law. That is who we are” (Obama, 2009). However, as has been

seen throughout this article, the President's rhetoric often eschews the actual nature of his administration's counterterrorism policy. Given the clearer assessment on the levels of acceptability for torture and extraordinary rendition, three arguments follow that these counterterrorism tactics demonstrate a realist vision of the international arena.

First, given that interrogation techniques are limited to what is codified in the US Army Field Manual, rather than what is recognized under CAT, which the United States ratified in 1994, an argument can be made that such counterterrorism tools not only continue to follow a unilateralist approach, but also cross the boundaries of international law. As noted above, the Field Manual allows for so-called "torture loopholes". For example, on the issue of sleep deprivation—a banned practice by both CAT and the most recent version of the Field Manual—interrogators must allow a prisoner four hours of sleep in a twenty-four hour period. Thus, it is allowable "to give a detainee four hours of sleep — and then conduct a 20-hour interrogation, after which they can 'reset' the clock and begin another 20-hour interrogation followed by four hours of sleep" (Alexander, in Hentoff, 2010); thus, allowing for forty continuous hours of interrogation. Moreover, solitary confinement is still allowed via an Appendix to the Army Field Manual (Hentoff, 2010) despite international calls for the banning of the practice. Yet another loophole follows the logic that "[a]s long as the detainee cannot be said to be 'under effective control' of the US, or in a US-operated facility, CIA and Department of Defense agents have not been expressly forbidden by the president from aiding the secret detention and torture conducted by others" (Blakeley, 2013, 616). Because of state secrecy, it is not known whether the Administration has taken advantage of such loopholes; however, the Administration's silence on the topic gives a strong indication that the US remains unfavorable to multilaterally imposed restraints on the treatment of detainees. Where the Administration has been outspoken is in its public admission that it has no plans to prosecute military or CIA personnel suspected of committing torture (at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, Baghram Air Force Base, etc.). Despite CAT's requirements that a state has the duties to investigate and prosecute torture offenders, Obama declared, "nothing will be gained by spending our time and energy laying blame for the past" (The White House, 2009).

Second, even if one contends that the Obama Administration remains vigilantly opposed to the practice of torture, there is ample evidence to suggest that this is a means of raising national security, rather than cooperating with international standards. In nearly every speech on the topic, the President has referenced an argument that falls precisely in line with realism's fixation on state security: 'torture makes us less safe'. One of the main concerns is that torture provides a valuable recruiting tool for Al-Qaeda. While it is impossible to ascertain the number of "new" terrorists created as a result of the Abu Ghraib scandal, the argument can be best expressed in the number of foreign

fighters who took up arms against the US in Iraq. According to a study conducted by the Saudi National Security Assessment Project, and Nawaf Obaid, there were more than 3,000 foreign fighters (Cordesman, 5, 2005) in Iraq. Among those interviewed, “the catalyst most often cited was Abu Ghraib, though images from Guantanamo Bay were mentioned” (ibid). Moreover, since the beginning of the Obama Administration, there has been a generally expressed opinion among leading policy experts that information gleaned from enhanced interrogation techniques is dubious at best. Former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta argued that “much of the intelligence gathered in this way was deeply suspect due to the prisoners fabricating information while under duress” (McCrisken, 2011, 792-793).

In sum, if one considers that IR theories best provide an explanation for why states behave the way they do, the ongoing acceptance of torture ‘loopholes’, and the continued practice of extraordinary renditions follow Waltz’s argument that “countries that wield overwhelming power will be tempted to misuse it”. Though the Obama Administration has removed the flagrancy of power misuse common under the Bush Administration, the dichotomy between being perceived as followers of international law, while still maintaining the capacity to inflict a more limited form of torture on prisoners, suggests the White House’s understanding that material power and security have precedence over international cooperation and rule of law. More eloquently stated, “While structural realists would recognize that states might sign and ratify an agreement for the sake of appearance, they would predict that states will not follow the provisions of the agreement when they perceive them to be inconvenient” (Kreps & Arend, 2006, 337).

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The above argument is far from the first attempt to classify the current presidency’s IR tendencies. A hasty Goggle search would reveal him to be everything from a “progressive pragmatist” (Indyk, Lieberthal, O’Hanlon, 29, 2012), to a liberal internationalist (Keller, 107, 2009), to a “neo-fascist/socialist” (Fox News). What this article has attempted to do is to examine a core element of his foreign policy, which the authors concede to reveal a most accurate picture given that the number of actors involved in decision-making processes is limited to his staff alone. More generally, it is his policy within the broader ‘American foreign policy’. Further, the topics above were selected precisely because they fall within the lively twenty-first century debate on the hierarchy of western values versus national security. At first glance, they seem to balance the realist-liberal argument, with targeted killings seeming to be the act of a hardened realist, and the banning of torture following the logic of a liberal internationalist.

Of course, many could point to a number of singular issues or on-the-record statements by the President and make a quality argument that such policies run counter to realist principles. Moreover, given the many distinctions within and between the two 'churches' of IR theory, further research is encouraged as a means to narrow the description further. However, the purpose of this paper has merely been to reframe the debate as to whether the Obama Administration tends toward realism or liberalism. Within the field of counterterrorism, it is clear that the former is the obvious choice given the White House's propensity to act unilaterally, evaluate conflict as means to strengthen American power and security, and avoid the constraints imposed by international law.

The question remaining is whether Obama has always been a realist, or whether the pressures of the Office have turned him 'pessimistic'. A common misconception seems to lie in the President's speeches, particularly those occurring prior to his inauguration in January, 2009. Yet it is worth considering that the Obama Administration never intended to mislead the public. While most of the President's speeches since taking office have made reference to the need for international cooperation and the value of international law, one sentiment is raised in every speech on the topic of terrorism and national security: "In the midst of all these challenges...my single most important responsibility as President is to keep the American people safe" (Obama, 2009). A realist would agree, Mr. President.

## V. References

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### *Sažetak*

U cilju razumijevanja Obamine liberalno-realistične rasprave, ovaj članak preispituje antiterorističku strategiju njegove administracije s posebnim naglaskom na tri primarne taktike korištene nakon 11. rujna u borbi protiv terorista: ciljane ubojstva, izručivanje drugim zemljama zbog ispitivanja i torture. Općenito, smatra se da iza programa ciljanih ubojstava stoje realistični motivi, dok pretpostavljena zabrana torture i ograničavanje izručivanja u druge zemlje pripada u domenu liberalizma. Međutim, pobliza analiza govori da je predsjednikova borba protiv terorizma gotovo u cijelosti slijedila strategiju logike realizma. Svaka od ovih taktika sugerira sklonost da se djeluje jednostrano, ismijava međunarodno pravo i iznad svega, povećava nacionalna sigurnost, na štetu opće prihvaćenih liberalnih međunarodnih vrijednosti.

**Ključne riječi:** Obama, realizam, liberalizam, antiterorizam