

Dissecting Obama's Speech at the UN: The Truth Behind "Core Interests" and "American Exceptionalism"

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On September 24, President Barack Obama gave a major address at the United Nations General Assembly at its annual meeting.

This speech came at a time of fluid change in the world and especially in the Middle East. Masses have risen up in their millions, seeking a way out. Different forces with different programs—including extremely reactionary ones—have been contending. Within all this, different imperialists—especially the U.S., the West European powers, and Russia—have tried to assert their interests and their will. This has taken outright military form, as well as intense political maneuvering. So this speech by Obama has unusual importance.

Obama said many things in his speech, but two main themes stuck out. First, he laid out certain U.S. "core interests" in the Middle East and claimed the right to use military force to defend those interests. Second, he asserted that the U.S. is an "exceptional" country which therefore has exceptional rights.

These are extraordinary claims, which, if made by any other power, would provoke howls of outrage from the media and people like Obama himself. But spoken by Obama, they caused very little comment and not even a murmur of protest in the mainstream U.S. media show, unless it was to call for even more blatant assertions of U.S. power. This itself shows how much attention is paid to getting people in the U.S. to "think like Americans" and just how deeply ingrained that it is; and for this reason alone—though there are more—it is important to dissect this speech.

Well-Meaning Friend of Peaceful Movements Seeking Change?

Early in his speech to the UN, Obama revealed some of the problems facing the U.S. in the Middle East:

"[T]he convulsions in the Middle East and North Africa have laid bare deep divisions within societies, as an old order is upended and people grapple with what comes next. Peaceful movements have too often been answered by violence—from those resisting change and from extremists trying to hijack change. Sectarian conflict has reemerged. And the potential spread of weapons of mass destruction continues to cast a shadow over the pursuit of peace."

Obama speaks of attempts to repress or hijack mass upheavals against the region's "old order," as if the U.S. has had nothing to do with either. In reality, the U.S. has done both.

To name but a few examples: In Egypt, the U.S. was deeply involved in the military's ouster of former President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, then in efforts to influence and contain the political forces who'd risen up against Mubarak, and recently in supporting the violent coup and crackdown by the Egyptian military against the Muslim Brotherhood.

In Bahrain, the U.S. supported Saudi Arabia's military intervention in neighboring Bahrain to crush peaceful protests against that oppressive pro-U.S. regime.

In Palestine, the U.S. supports Israel's imposition of an ongoing, everyday state of brutal violent repression, which is the continuation of decades of violent ethnic cleansing on which that state is built.

As for "hijacking" mass upheaval, the U.S. seized on protests in Libya to join with a cabal of imperialist powers to literally bomb a new regime into power.

And the U.S. played a key role in transforming protests against the brutal rule of Syria's Bashar al-Assad into a gruesomely horrific civil war. Fighting between a range of contending reactionary forces sponsored by the U.S., Russia, Iran, and others has driven over a million people into hellish refugee camps.

The suffering of these refugees is not what's driving the actions and maneuvers of U.S. or its rivals. Syria is a very strategic ally of both Iran and Russia, and the U.S.' apparent policy of seriously weakening that regime by fanning a draining civil war is seen as a major threat by those countries. And at the same time, the Syria situation is fraught with peril for U.S. interests as well. It has provided an opening of Islamic Jihadists. Situated in the heart of the region, turmoil in Syria has spilled over into and could destabilize neighboring countries, including U.S. allies like Jordan and Turkey. And it threatens to unravel the whole situation in the Middle East in a way that could further undermine U.S. domination.

So Obama is not coming at this as a well-meaning friend of "peaceful movements" fighting for "change" against the "old order." He's speaking—and acting—as the commander in chief of a principal architect and the main beneficiary of the "old order," a global power which has been—and still is—up to its neck in the blood of the masses of people throughout the region.

Not an Empire?

A Challenge

In his UN address President Obama stated, "Now, the notion of American empire may be useful propaganda, but it isn't borne out by America's current policy or by public opinion. "

According to Bob Avakian, "The essence of what exists in the U.S. is not democracy but capitalism-imperialism and political structures to enforce that capitalism-imperialism."

Delving into everything that Obama covered (and refuting all his lies, distortions, half-truths, and omissions) is far beyond the scope of this article. But a key focus of the speech was Obama's effort to address an acute contradiction the U.S. faces between its words and its deeds.

America's rulers claim to be friends of the people and critics of the "old order," *not* leaders of an empire just out for itself, but rather advancing the "interests of all," as Obama put it. "The notion of American empire may be useful propaganda," Obama said at the UN, "but it

isn't borne out by America's current policy or by public opinion."

However, when Obama outlined "what has been U.S. policy toward the Middle East and North Africa and what will be my policy during the remainder of my presidency" he spelled out the needs and demands of an empire:

"The United States of America is prepared to use all elements of our power, including military force, to secure our core interests in the region.

"We will confront external aggression against our allies and partners, as we did in the Gulf War.

"We will ensure the free flow of energy from the region to the world. Although America is steadily reducing our own dependence on imported oil, the world still depends on the region's energy supply and a severe disruption could destabilize the entire global economy.

"We will dismantle terrorist networks that threaten our people. Wherever possible, we will build the capacity of our partners, respect the sovereignty of nations, and work to address the root causes of terror. But when it's necessary to defend the United States against terrorist attack, we will take direct action.

"And finally, we will not tolerate the development or use of weapons of mass destruction. Just as we consider the use of chemical weapons in Syria to be a threat to our own national security, we reject the development of nuclear weapons that could trigger a nuclear arms race in the region and undermine the global nonproliferation regime."

Think about what is being said here. First, Obama is saying that the U.S. has the right to use military force, including waging war and possibly murdering thousands upon thousands as it has in the past, in order to "secure our core interests in the region."

This region is over 5,000 miles from U.S. shores and home to hundreds of millions of people. Imagine how the U.S. establishment and media would respond if Vladimir Putin had declared to the UN that Russia would go to great lengths, including using all the military force at its disposal, to ensure its core interests in Latin America?

There would have been an immediate uproar, with Putin denounced as a madman and aggressor violating international norms; a political crisis would have ensued between the U.S. and Russia, and Russia would almost certainly have been threatened with war if it carried out such a declaration.

More fundamentally, doesn't this point to the reality that, despite Obama's denials, the U.S. capitalist-imperialist system depends on controlling far-flung regions around the world—in other words, it *is* a modern-day empire?

The Reality of U.S. "Core Interests"

What is on Obama's list of core U.S. interests? One is confronting "external aggression against our allies and partners, as we did in the Gulf War." Who are the allies and partners he's talking about?

First, and foremost, the settler-colonial state of Israel, whose existence—as noted earlier—is

based on the ethnic cleansing and towering, ongoing crimes against the Palestinian people, and war after war against its neighbors.

Then there are those models of “democracy, human rights,” and equality for women that Obama proclaimed are core U.S. values. Perhaps here Obama is talking about the closest U.S. ally in the region, outside of Israel: Saudi Arabia, a hereditary monarchy with as few vestiges of formal democracy as any country on earth, and the last to ban women from voting. Days after Obama spoke at the UN, a website advocating the right of women to drive was shut down by the regime.

Then there’s Egypt, which has been ruled by a U.S.-funded (\$1.3 billion a year) and trained military for 30-plus years. After General Hosni Mubarak’s fall in 2011, the U.S. claimed to be supporting the people and democracy. But this past July, Obama gave the go-ahead to a military coup ousting elected President Mohammed Morsi (which the U.S. to this day refuses to call a “coup”), and to its massacre of over 1,000 anti-coup demonstrators.

At one point in his speech, Obama justified support for such tyrannies by again whitewashing their depravity: “The United States will at times work with governments that do not meet, at least in our view, the highest international expectations, but who work with us on our core interests.” As if Saudi and Egyptian torture chambers, and Israel’s ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity are merely a notch below “the highest international expectations.”

So again, how does propping up these obsolete, reactionary regime at the heart of the “old order in the region,” which have inflicted so much suffering, make the U.S. a friend of the people and an agent of positive change?

What Is Ensuring “the Free Flow of Energy...to the World” Actually About?

Then Obama says the U.S. is committed to ensuring “the free flow of energy from the region to the world. Although America is steadily reducing our own dependence on imported oil, the world still depends on the region’s energy supply, and a severe disruption could destabilize the entire global economy.”

This is posed as if the U.S. is doing the world a favor by ensuring that oil continues to flow. But in reality, the issue for the U.S. has never been simply accessing Middle East oil for its own consumption. U.S. control of the flow of oil from the Middle East—home to 60 percent of the world’s known energy reserves—has been a key element of U.S. global domination because it’s not only a source of massive profits for U.S. capital, it’s also given the U.S. a whip hand over the global economy and all countries that depend on importing (or exporting) oil. (The Middle East is also an economic and military-strategic crossroads and choke point.) The leverage of this globally strategic resource has been exercised in large part via the U.S. client state Saudi Arabia—the world’s largest oil producer. The Gulf War of 1991—which Obama upholds—was fought, among other things, to protect Saudi Arabia and ensure that Iraq under Saddam Hussein had no serious leverage over the Gulf States, world oil markets, or in the Middle East more broadly.

The extraction of Middle East oil for the benefit of a handful of wealthy, imperialist powers including the U.S., Europe, and Japan, while people in the Middle East and other oppressed, or Third World, countries live lives of torment, uncertainty, and destitution, is a glaring example of empire, or imperialism. Since the turn of the 20th century, Western oil

conglomerates have amassed billions in profits from the region's petroleum, beginning in 1901 with the establishment of the British oil giant which is today BP in Iran; to the post-World War 2 period when, between 1948 and 1960, Western capital made an estimated \$12.8 billion in profits, to today when Exxon-Mobil, the world's largest energy company and most profitable corporation (\$44.9 billion in 2012) obtains 25 percent of its oil and natural gas from the Asia-Pacific region and the Middle East. This is one reason why the 340 million people living in the less developed countries in the Middle East-North Africa region make on average \$3,400 a year (with millions living in deep, deep poverty), while those in the 34 wealthiest countries in the world average over ten times more income.

Fighting Terror? Or Terrorizing the People?

Obama said the U.S. was fighting "terrorist networks that threaten our people," and asserted the U.S. had right to "take direct action" to "defend the United States against terrorist attack."

Some of the attacks the U.S. carries out in the Middle East and beyond are directed at reactionary forces which, on a much, much smaller scale than the U.S., have an oppressive agenda and advance their aims with attacks on innocent civilians. But even when the U.S. launches attacks on these forces, the concern is not saving lives, in any essential way, but striking at these forces to the extent they impede the functioning of imperialism.

Beyond that, and overwhelmingly, the U.S. is killing thousands who have had nothing to do with any attacks on the U.S. in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia and perhaps other countries. Take but one dimension of the U.S. "war on terror": drone strikes. It is difficult to obtain precise statistics on the numbers killed, but one Stanford University study, "Living Under Drones," found that "from June 2004 through mid-September 2012, available data indicate that drone strikes killed 2,562-3,325 people in Pakistan, of whom 474-881 were civilians, including 176 children." Another study found that U.S. government figures listed 1,160 U.S. drone strikes in Afghanistan since January 2009. In Yemen, the U.S. has murdered an estimated 400 civilians with drones.

These attacks violate international law and the UN principles Obama claims to uphold.

Preventing the Spread of Nuclear Weapons? Or Monopolizing Nuclear Blackmail?

Another core U.S. interest is preventing the spread of WMD: the U.S. "will not tolerate the development or use of weapons of mass destruction," Obama says. "We reject the development of nuclear weapons that could trigger a nuclear arms race in the region and undermine the global nonproliferation regime."

How does this statement square with the fact that the U.S. *helps sponsor* Israel's possession of 200-400 nuclear warheads, an arsenal it helped Israel develop. Yet the open secret of Israel's nuclear force is rarely mentioned and never criticized in the U.S. media nor by U.S. politicians when the question of "nuclear weapons in the Middle East" comes up.

Nor is the U.S. foreswearing its own use of nuclear weapons. It has issued nuclear threats numerous times in the region, including in 1958 as a warning to Iraq's new nationalist regime, in 1973 to prevent the Soviet Union from intervening in the Arab-Israeli war, and in 1980 to head off any Soviet move into Iran. And the *Los Angeles Times* reported that two months before the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Pentagon was "quietly preparing for the

possible use of nuclear weapons.” (Larry Everest, *Oil, Power & Empire: Iraq and the U.S. Global Agenda*, pp. 66, 75, 90-91, 22-23)

Obama threatened possible military action against Syria over its alleged use of chemical weapons, and against Iran for having a nuclear enrichment program, even while saying he wanted to pursue diplomacy first. In other words, the U.S. is threatening to violently protect the U.S.-Israeli nuclear monopoly to enforce its stranglehold over the region.

Also unmentioned in Obama’s speech (or given any prominence in the media) is U.S. support for Saddam Hussein’s murderous chemical weapons attacks during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war. Last month *Foreign Policy* magazine reported:

“In 1988, during the waning days of Iraq’s war with Iran, the United States learned through satellite imagery that Iran was about to gain a major strategic advantage by exploiting a hole in Iraqi defenses. U.S. intelligence officials conveyed the location of the Iranian troops to Iraq, fully aware that Hussein’s military would attack with chemical weapons, including sarin, a lethal nerve agent...

“The nerve agent causes dizziness, respiratory distress, and muscle convulsions, and can lead to death. CIA analysts could not precisely determine the Iranian casualty figures because they lacked access to Iranian officials and documents. But the agency gauged the number of dead as somewhere between ‘hundreds’ and ‘thousands’ in each of the four cases where chemical weapons were used prior to a military offensive.”

Installing and propping up brutal tyrants, launching or provoking wars that have brought region-wide misery, and orchestrating the use of sarin nerve gas, to maintain the profits and geopolitical position of an empire: How has enforcing of the “core interests” laid out by Obama been in the “interests of all”?

“During this section of the speech my jaw sort of hit the floor,” Jeremy Scahill told Amy Goodman on *Democracy Now!* (September 25). “He basically came out and said the United States is an imperialist nation and we are going to do whatever we need to conquer areas to take resources from around the world. I mean, it was a really naked sort of declaration of imperialism, and I don’t use that word lightly, but it really is? How is Scahill’s assessment in any way inaccurate?”

“America is Exceptional” at What?

A week before Obama’s speech, Russian President Vladimir Putin had published an extraordinary September 11 opinion piece in the *New York Times*. Putin was representing the interests of Russian imperialism, for whom the Assad regime in Syria is a key ally. But Putin directly challenged Obama’s claims in his September 10 speech that the U.S. had the right to launch a military attack on Syria without UN approval because it’s “exceptional.”

Putin countered, “I would rather disagree with a case he made on American exceptionalism, stating that the United States’ policy is ‘what makes America different. It’s what makes us exceptional.’ It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation.”, (“A Plea for Caution from Russia”)

Obama felt compelled to respond.

By saying that no, the U.S. played by the same rules as everyone else?

Hardly! He declared:

“The danger for the world is not an America that is too eager to immerse itself in the affairs of other countries, or to take on every problem in the region as its own. The danger for the world is that the United States, after a decade of war—rightly concerned about issues back home, aware of the hostility that our engagement in the region has engendered throughout the Muslim world—may disengage, creating a vacuum of leadership that no other nation is ready to fill.

“I believe such disengagement would be a mistake. I believe America must remain engaged for our own security. But I also believe the world is better for it. Some may disagree, but I believe America is exceptional—in part because we have shown a willingness through the sacrifice of blood and treasure to stand up not only for our own narrow self-interests, but for the interests of all.

The U.S. is indeed exceptional—it’s exceptional in the death and destruction it’s wreaked on the planet—including the Middle East. No other power even comes close to the U.S. in the number of countries bombed, bullied, invaded or occupied and the millions murdered—from the 150,000-250,000 incinerated in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan; to the two to three million killed in Vietnam and Southeast Asia during the 1960s and 1970s; to the hundreds of thousands massacred by U.S.-backed death squads in Guatemala and El Salvador in the 1980s. Many books have been written detailing these crimes and their staggering toll.

But most people in this country are unaware of (or in some cases refuse to fully confront) this history. Even more enlightened people may think the U.S. may have “made mistakes,” but basically agree with Obama that on balance “the world is better” because of U.S. actions, and that it isn’t acting “only for our own narrow self-interests, but for the interests of all.” Or at least they wish it were so, and believe it is possible.

This is why it is so important to bring out what motivates U.S. actions (as we’ll dig into below), the means the U.S. employs, and the horrific impacts of its actions—all realities that Obama skirts, lies about, and obscures.

“America is Exceptional”: The Invasion of Iraq

Take one example: Iraq.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq was a war of aggression based on the deliberate lie that Saddam Hussein had WMD. And it was sold as a good thing for the people of Iraq and beyond. But it was not about advancing the “interests of all,” it was launched as part of a strategy to create an unchallenged and unchallengeable U.S. empire as Bush regime thinkers spelled out explicitly in policy papers.

Neither Iraq nor the world was “better” for what the U.S. did. At least 121,754 Iraqis were killed between March 2003 and December 31, 2011 (when U.S. military forces withdrew); between 655,000 and 1 million Iraqis died from the direct and indirect impacts of the war and occupation (including to water and power systems, healthcare, and food production); it’s estimated that over 4 million Iraqis were injured, and 4.5 million driven from their homes.)

Yet during his review of U.S. military actions, Obama never says a word about this

staggering Iraqi toll. He makes a glancing reference to the ongoing civil war (“In Iraq, killings and car bombs continue to be a terrible part of life”). But he implies that the U.S. made a noble attempt to bring democracy to Iraq, but was thwarted by problems within Iraqi society (“Iraq shows us that democracy cannot simply be imposed by force”) and the re-emergence of “sectarian conflict.”

This is a lie and a cover-up: the U.S. invasion and occupation (which was never about self-determination for Iraq) fueled Islamic fundamentalism and sectarian and religious conflict in many ways, including backing reactionary religious fundamentalist violence of all kinds to impose its rule through “divide and conquer.”

One can look at the history of any country in the region and come to the same conclusion: that the Middle East is NOT a better place for what the U.S. has done. And more U.S. intervention, attacks, and wars won't be any better.

Their Interests are NOT Our Interests

Many people reading this article, this far, will agree that what the U.S. has brought to the world has not been good. But there is an intellectual and yes, moral responsibility to take that further: to confront the fact that the U.S. *cannot* bring anything good to the world. It is an *imperialist* power.

Obama's rhetoric about democracy, human rights, women's rights, and peace are nonsensical and a cover for exploitation, oppression, and war and the devastation of whole societies when that serves the U.S. empire.

The “core interests” that Obama proclaimed in his speech are *diametrically opposed* to the interests of humanity. And that is true despite the fact that he can point to smaller-scale exploiters and oppressors and call out their crimes (while ignoring the crimes of the U.S. which are vastly greater in scale).

The interests of humanity, the world over, lie in getting rid of empires, getting rid of the oppressive institutions on which they rest, and getting rid of the choking webs of exploitation that under-gird it all. And the interests of humanity demand, now, the exposure of not only the lies but *the ways we are trained to think* which justify and excuse all this... and the struggle, right now, against every move to defend, reinforce and expand those empires.

That is why it is not just a “nice idea,” but represents the actual interests of the people of the world to insist: **Stop thinking like Americans, and start thinking about humanity!**

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