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# The Power of Ideas in Politics: Social Constructivism and Obama's Foreign Policy in Iraq

Courtney Kayser

Since Operation Desert Storm in 1991, American foreign policy has, in one way or another, been involved with Iraqi affairs. This involvement only escalated after 2003, when United States armed forces invaded Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein and his Ba'athist regime. Iraq has never left the forefront of American policy construction since. When Barack Obama assumed the presidency in 2008, combat operations against the Iraqi military forces were long over, but Iraq lacked stability and insurgent forces still plagued the burgeoning state. The results of analysis on Obama's policy choices towards this region have varied. Between rebuilding a new Iraqi government and a new insurgent organization based in Syria, ISIL, a wide range of policies have been pursued to combat a wide array of threats, both new and old, in the region. Although arguable that Obama himself subscribes more so to the international relations theories of realism and liberalism, Social Constructivism best explains the policies the Obama administration has pursued with regards to Iraq.

The Middle East has a history of being an unstable region, and democratic traditions are not particularly prevalent in the area. Iraq won its independence in 1932 from the United Kingdom during a period of rapid decolonization in the years leading up to World War II. Although formally declared a republic, the country was ruled by a series of dictators, the last of which was Saddam Hussein. Under Saddam, Iraq engaged Iran in a bloody and costly war over a territorial dispute from 1980 to 1988. His propaganda machine declared the war a victorious one, but the war ended in a stalemate. In 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait, believing that the smaller state was stealing Iraqi oil.<sup>1</sup> Iraqi forces, however, were soon expelled by US-led coalition forces. However, Saddam was not removed from power.

By allowing his regime to remain in power, the US entered into another conflict with Iraq a mere twelve years later. Operation Iraqi Freedom, the military operation tasked to topple Saddam Hussein and the Ba'athist party from power, started on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2003. Baghdad fell to US-led coalition forces on April 9<sup>th</sup>, and the invasion officially ended on April 30<sup>th</sup>. American forces then began their efforts to rebuild the broken Iraqi state; this effort to turn the government

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Cooper and Ahmad Sadik. "Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait, 1990."

from a totalitarian regime into a democracy would cost more lives, time, and money than anticipated. This was in part due to the fact that the United States had been prepared for a swift victory, not a prolonged occupation, despite many indicators that this would be the case.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while the US had enough troops in the country to control Iraq, the military lacked the vast numbers it needed to secure it. This disparity contributed to the sluggish response exhibited by the United States to the ever mounting problems in the collapsed state.

At first, the Iraq War enjoyed widespread public support in the United States. Barack Obama, who was then a senator, was one of a few who publicly opposed the war. Seemingly ahead of the curve, he asserted that the actual threats in the Middle East were to be found elsewhere, like Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> Partway through the Bush administration, public opinion turned against the Iraq War and against US involvement in this quagmire of a military operation. Polls from the Pew Research Center indicate that the percentage of the public who believed that the war was the right decision steadily decreased from 2003 onwards, enjoying a 72 percent approval rating in 2003 and falling to a mere 38 percent by 2008.<sup>4</sup> Yet, when Obama was elected president in 2008, the Iraq war was still raging on, and any regime the US had managed to institute in Iraq proved to be far from stable or self-sustaining. Obama won on a platform calling for change, and prior to taking office, those promises gave many Americans hope that the foreign policy, which the US was enacting in the region, would shift, transforming into something the populous and the US military could both find more manageable.

Removing troops from Iraq and downsizing the US's presence was, by no means, an easy maneuver, and despite Obama's campaign promises that US operations in Iraq would end, the methodology behind this decision is not one he decided lightly. Combat troops were not removed from Iraq until December of 2011, demonstrating that even the most sincere calls for change can be left unanswered due to the difficulties war poses on a nation. While President Obama opposed the war from the beginning, the war destabilized Iraq to the point that if he pulled American forces out too early, Iraq would present a greater threat to US security than it did prior to the US incursion into the state.

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<sup>2</sup> George Packer, *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 146.

<sup>3</sup> Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars: The Inside Story* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 38.

<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center, "Public Attitudes Toward the War in Iraq: 2003-2008," *Pew Research Center* (2008).

By the time Obama came into office, though, the number of combat troops in Iraq was decreasing.<sup>5</sup> The more pressing issue, according to both the Obama Administration and the Bush Administration towards the end, was Afghanistan. In the first few months of Obama's time in office, according to Bob Woodward's book, centered on how to transfer troops from Iraq to Afghanistan, the proper number of troops to send to Afghanistan, and, by extension, how great the US's commitment to Afghanistan should be.<sup>6</sup> While Iraq remained pertinent to US foreign policy in this time period, it lost much of the preeminence it possessed in the mid-2000s, with other regions taking Iraq's place at the forefront.

More recently, however, the terrorist group, ISIL, has once again brought Iraq into mainstream policy discussions. Originating in Syria, the group's initial goal was to overthrow the Assad regime. This goal has since evolved into a quest for an Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, an area including Syria, portions of Jordan, and much of the Middle Eastern coastline of the Mediterranean. In his recent speeches, Obama has been careful to specify that ISIL is neither a proper representation of Islam, nor does it qualify as an actual state.<sup>7</sup> He accuses them of utilizing a power vacuum to take over large swaths of land without the consent of the people who live there. Obama has specified that the response to their actions cannot be unilateral in nature.<sup>8</sup> This is probably the primary lesson from Iraq: the US cannot act alone against terrorism. Some argue, though, that "To many, terrorism represents an existential threat to the United States and Western culture in general, demanding a response."<sup>9</sup> However, to destroy ISIL, or any other group that threatens the fragile stability in these regions of the Middle East, there needs to be a united front presented by the world. In a later speech at the UN, Obama seconds this belief, going on to say that the US and other states can no longer play by old rules of the international system, as those rules do not often have the answer to violent, religious extremism.<sup>10</sup>

When looking at Obama's statements alone, his positions seemingly translate along the lines of the political theories of realism and liberalism. His appeals to "degrade and destroy" ISIL<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Woodward, *Obama's Wars: The Inside Story*, 251-2.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Barack Obama, "Weekly Address: The World is United in the Fight Against ISIL," (Speech, Washington, DC, Sept. 20, 2014, Office of the Press Secretary.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Trevor McCrisken, "Ten years on: Obama's war on terrorism in rhetoric and practice," 786.

<sup>10</sup> Barack Obama, "Weekly Address: The World is United in the Fight Against ISIL," (Speech, Washington, DC, Sept. 20, 2014, Office of the Press Secretary.

<sup>11</sup> Obama, "Weekly Address: The World is United in the Fight Against ISIL."

and his pragmatism towards Iraq demonstrate an adherence to realism, whereas Obama's stress on multilateral operations and his faith in international organizations hint that he might subscribe to liberalism. Throughout his two terms as president, opinions have varied on which theory he actually subscribes to, or if he even subscribes to either. Since Obama himself does not base his policy solely on the beliefs of either liberalism or realism, often borrowing from both, neither are entirely accurate in their description of his policy. At times, he clearly espouses rhetoric seemingly in support of one or the other, but since there can be reasonable speculation that Obama is both a liberal and a realist, it is a distinct possibility that he is neither. Thus, liberalism and realism would both be imperfect and flawed when they are utilized exclusively to analyze Obama's foreign policy. Furthermore, if Obama's policy can be said to be "in keeping with the assumptions and priorities of the last ten years,"<sup>12</sup> assumptions and priorities set down by a neo-conservative administration, then none of the three major influential theories in Washington can truly explain US foreign policy at this point.

Rather than relying on one of the major theories, from which many politicians choose various traits to adhere to, more recently developed theories that attempt to describe the world at large tend to be better at explaining the international system. One such theory is Social Constructivism, which states that ideas are the founding blocks of all things. The material world cannot solely explain how the world operates, as ideational and abstract forces hold sway over behavior, identities, and interests as well.<sup>13</sup> As ideas are malleable and adaptable, this theory is one of few that is capable of evolving with the world; it allows interests to change, but it also notes that certain ideas have longevity and lasting appeal. According to some, Social Constructivism draws heavily upon studies from the field of sociology, and the theory advocates that norms have routinely emerged to guide foreign policy.<sup>14</sup> It also claims that theories, like realism and liberalism, place too much importance on materialistic or individual factors, often discounting the power of these social norms.<sup>15</sup> While they are discounted at times, ideas always matter, because power and interest cannot exist outside of the collective knowledge that constructs them.<sup>16</sup> By looking at ideas

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<sup>12</sup> McCrisken, "Ten years on: Obama's war on terrorism in rhetoric and practice," 781.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," 71.

<sup>14</sup> George Lawson and Robbie Shilliam, "Sociology and International Relations: Legacies and Prospects," 75, 82.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*.

<sup>16</sup> Roy D'Andrade and Claudia Strauss, eds. *Human Motives and Cultural Models* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

and their power to shape the international system, Social Constructivism goes beyond political parties and ideological barriers to better analyze and explain reality.

The power of this theory is best shown by the policies pursued by President Obama, who, while advocating for positions very different from those of former President Bush, is still restrained by the same ideas that have bound the US government since 9/11. Unlike his predecessor, Obama did not immediately craft a doctrine to outline the actions he would take towards the Middle East. Obama did not lay out an 'axis of evil' or create a mantra of either absolute loyalty or betrayal. Countries did not have to be either with Obama's administration or against it. This allowed for the ambiguity integral to the type of foreign policy that Bush had attempted, yet failed. Tierney, a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, attributes the wariness Obama has demonstrated towards crafting such doctrines to the restricting and even potentially harmful nature they have towards a state's interests.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, at least in Tierney's eyes, Obama's insistence on "no more Iraqs" may very well become a doctrine of the Obama administration in of itself.<sup>18</sup>

While the decision to break away from ultimatums certainly separates Obama's ideology from that of Bush's, it is questionable to many as to exactly how much Obama has managed to change the US's foreign policy. McCrisken, for instance, accuses Obama of simply changing the window dressing on Bush's policies; he has changed the rhetoric, claiming more morally acceptable and outwardly more effective goals, but the actual substance of the policies has remained the same.<sup>19</sup> McCrisken goes on to argue that the War on Terror has almost become institutionalized in the American psyche. This war has become common sense to the American populous, making it exceptionally difficult for any politician or policy-maker to "seriously change the underlying assumptions" of the war and to move the policy in another direction.<sup>20</sup> The institution of an idea so deep into the minds of American citizens does not align with the teachings of realism or liberalism, but with those of Social Constructivism.

Social Constructivism holds that certain fundamental structures are social rather than material, and those structures shape interests, not just behavior.<sup>21</sup> While primarily a sociological theory, Social Constructivism is equally applicable to the sphere of world politics. Social

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<sup>17</sup> Dominic Tierney, "The Obama Doctrine and the Lessons of Iraq," 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> McCrisken, "Ten years on: Obama's war on terrorism in rhetoric and practice," 782-4.

<sup>20</sup> McCrisken, "Ten years on: Obama's war on terrorism in rhetoric and practice," 786.

<sup>21</sup> Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," 71.

Constructivism places tremendous importance on concepts and ideas, and the ‘War on Terror,’ while perhaps not particularly successful in practice, has been successful in garnering support from the public. This idea has been the leading motivator behind policy creation for much of the past decade, confirming the power behind the War on Terror. Terror is an emotion, an abstract, immaterial construction that the United States has declared war upon. This idea has taken root and festered to the point that even the President of the United States, who is the single most influential voice in American foreign policy, cannot fully disengage from the concept. It is hard to deny that the War on Terror has shaped a generation of Americans, and this concept, a constructed idea, continues to hold a formidable amount of power over American politics.

Moreover, Obama’s actual goals in the War on Terror, and in the Middle East in general, have not changed much from those of the Bush administration. The methodology behind those decisions, however, has. Woodward discusses this in his book, as he defends Obama from media complaints that he is indecisive, especially in comparison to Bush. He states that Obama simply wanted to know all of the information prior to making a decision.<sup>22</sup> While certainly more deliberative and arguably more involved with the decision-making process than his predecessor, the decisions he arrives at often have the same results as those made during the Bush administration. Both the US populous and its politicians have grown accustomed to this war and with how the US typically engages the Middle East. Presently, it is proving very difficult to separate these habits from what should be done, lending credence to Social Constructivist theory and the power of norms on international politics.

Other arguments about the US policies towards Iraq concern themselves with the disadvantaged position the US is in compared to its position prior to the Iraq War. Steele, for instance, posits in the article “Defeat in Iraq” that Bush’s actions in Iraq degraded US power abroad and have decreased the US’s ability to influence both the Iraqi people and world politics.<sup>23</sup> The position Steele holds is inherently realist, since he is treating the international system as a zero-sum game; the US has lost power and influence to other states and regions by appearing weak, and the US can only regain this by taking back lost power from other nations. US actions in the Middle East exposed weaknesses on the part of the United States, and Steele’s prefers power of threats over actual military involvements. Although he believes that Obama may be able to recover this

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<sup>22</sup> Woodward, *Obama’s Wars: The Inside Story*, 175.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Steele, "Defeat in Iraq: The Challenges for Obama and the Region," 28.

lost prestige, he is not overly optimistic, noting that US policies tend to be disharmonious with the desires of the people of the regions it is occupying.<sup>24</sup> There is an undercurrent to his argument, suggesting that if the US was not operating from a politically weakened position, then the US would still have the ability to assert its will on the Middle East. Instead, its demands are taken far less seriously than they would have been in the decade prior to the Iraq War.

The United States certainly could be perceived to have lost power during the Iraq War, but it did not so much lose power as it did expose a weakness that always existed and exists in every state that overextends its influence. If anything, the Iraq War exposed that unilateral military operations are not viable, especially when the ultimate goal is state building. Obama's stress on multilateralism, rather than a sign of weakness, is a return to the norm that had governed the presidency of George H. W. Bush. Unilateralism is often extremely attractive, particularly to the United States, as its expenditure on its military by far surpasses that of any other state. When the US is spending so much more money on defense, it would seem to make sense for the US to dictate how its military should act and pursue its goals regardless of the opinions of the rest of the world. During the Bush administration, it was believed to be in the US's national interest to act unilaterally, but this is not the case under the Obama administration. This shift could be the result of Steele's perceived power loss, as the US is now admitting that it cannot act alone. This shift does not have to necessarily be one of changing power relations, but one of changing norms in world politics. Wendt writes that, "Structural change depends on changing a system of expectations" and "how much 'slack' a social structure contains."<sup>25</sup> Social Constructivism allows for the system and the definition of power to change; it allows for interests to change without necessarily permanently damaging a country's standing. During the Iraq War, unilateral action, while not favorable on the international stage, was an acceptable option, and it was essentially the only way the United States could invade Iraq. Now, the option of unilateral military action has been disregarded by the Obama administration.

The article, "The Jigsaw Puzzle and the Chess Board," addresses another facet of US foreign policy during the transition between the presidencies of Bush and Obama, comparing Bush's typically more aggressive style with Obama's preference for more diplomatic measures. Obama's style would seem to favor the threat power Steele stressed to be critical to the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>25</sup> Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," 80.

maintenance of US prestige, but Nau sees both Bush and Obama's policies as problematic.<sup>26</sup> Nau accuses Bush's policies of undermining US alliances, allowing for other states' expansionist endeavors, and treating the world politics like a chess match. Obama, conversely, sees it too much as a jigsaw puzzle, relying heavily on diplomacy without proper follow through to ensure support from American allies.<sup>27</sup> As the world can operate under both models, however, US foreign policy requires a balance of the two. The United States cannot afford to respond to every situation with violence, nor can the government ignore its allies, potential or established, in favor of pursuing limited goals in its own self-interest; such a position weakens the US. Similarly, the US cannot respond solely with diplomacy to any and all threats, as both allies and enemies may become skeptical of the US's likelihood of acting. As such, it is typically better for politicians to utilize both Nau's approaches: a chessboard and a jigsaw puzzle.

This, however, is not the norm in American politics. Typically, politicians must choose one or the other, and the public will tend to support either the chessboard or jigsaw puzzle, but not both simultaneously. It is easier to back a primarily assertive or diplomatic leader, as their policies appear to be more consistent with the media and the populous. Politicians who pick one strategy are perceived to be stronger leaders, whereas those who might choose to pursue a blend of both, as Nau suggests, are often accused of being indecisive and ineffectual. Also, a combination policy often proves to be far more difficult and nuanced than an approach which only subscribes to one form, resulting in others misunderstanding or misinterpreting actions. It can also lead to more mistakes on the part of important advisors and state officials if a president chooses to pursue both. As of now, other state officials know what to expect from President Obama, as past state officials knew what to expect from President Bush while he was in office. Although there is certainly room for miscalculations and disagreements to occur, both presidents have followed banal patterns that, at least partially, reduce the potential for conflict. Additionally, other states can anticipate decisions of the US government. While imperfect by all standards, this ability prevents many states from making preventable blunders.

It is important to note, however, that utilizing both styles in conjunction with one another would be the better strategy. It has the potential for error, but it would grant the government a

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<sup>26</sup> Henry R. Nau, "The Jigsaw Puzzle and the Chess Board: The Making and Unmaking of Foreign Policy in the Age of Obama," 20.

<sup>27</sup> Nau, "The Jigsaw Puzzle and the Chess Board: The Making and Unmaking of Foreign Policy in the Age of Obama," 13-14, 17.

unique amount of flexibility concerning policy construction, and America's response to foreign policy issues would be more centered on the events occurring, rather than rhetoric espoused months, or years, prior to those events. This requires forethought on the part of politicians and a willingness to withstand public backlash to policies that do seem unintuitive. Certain states, for example, have certain threat levels associated with them, and those threat levels demand a specific response in order to retain the status quo.<sup>28</sup> Combining both types foreign policies generates different responses to older problems. This is certainly more innovative than either Obama's or Bush's policies, under Nau's analysis of them, could ever be. Politicians desiring change and looking to solve longstanding issues cannot rely upon predictable and formulaic behavior. Nau's argument would seem to demonstrate that neither the Bush Administration nor the Obama Administration truly desired this change, as they both made the same choices but worded them differently.

An analysis of Obama's position on ISIL published by the SETA Foundation further explains this argument. The article argues that the US's goals of not getting involved with Syria and withdrawing from Iraq have proved untenable, and that while the US had a hand in 'breaking' these two states, it is not clear how Obama plans to fix them.<sup>29</sup> More recently, ISIL has demonstrated that the US cannot afford to not be involved in the Middle East. Their violence threatens an already unstable region that has just recently begun to rebuild. A strictly military response from the US, however, could strengthen the internal resolve of ISIL, which is the last thing the US desires. ISIL itself may be "degraded and destroyed," but the underlying causes of their rise to power, including the region's instability and the power vacuum left in the wake of a weakening Syrian regime, remain unaddressed.<sup>30</sup> These two states need non-sectarian, inclusive governments, according to the author, and the US currently does not have a political strategy to provide the two states with this. It is a recent development that powerful states are expected to rebuild those states, which they occupy, as independent, self-sustaining governments. Presently, there are no commonly accepted measures with which to pursue such a course of action. These shifting goals are a sign of an expansion in the ideas of self-determination and democracy. These are, primarily, concepts that have captured the attention of people across the globe and are the

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<sup>28</sup> Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," 73.

<sup>29</sup> Kadir Ustun, "Obama's Anti-ISIL Strategy Lacks a Political Goal," *SETA: Foundation for Political, Economic, and Social Research*, (Sept 24, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Kadir Ustun, "Obama's Anti-ISIL Strategy Lacks a Political Goal."

shaping forces behind not only political movements throughout the globe, but also the US's response to them. Social Constructivism is the only theory that can truly account for the power these ideas possess outside of the explicit policies pursued by political leaders.

The United States has been acutely involved with the political situation in Iraq for the better part of three decades. Throughout this time period, the US has been headed by several different presidents, all with different political outlooks. When Obama took office in 2008, he was not inheriting a blank slate when it came to relations with Iraq, so even though his rhetoric promised change, the reality did not necessarily conform to this. Judging by his speeches alone, his policy would seem to be a blend of realism and liberalism, but neither theory can adequately explain his policies towards Iraq. When the actions and the rhetoric are taken into account, along with the ideas fundamental to the perception and reality of the War on Terror and American responses to anything deemed 'terrorism' since the 9/11 attacks, Social Constructivism more aptly explains US actions with regards to this region.

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