

# THE EXPRESS TRIBUNE

## Obama — Lord of War

Taha Ali

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In the final stretch of their terms, US presidents tend to market their ‘legacy’, muse about their ‘achievements’ in select interviews, reflect on the end of a glorious era, and so on. Despite saccharine sweet accounts by the likes of *The New York Times*, the *Atlantic*, and *The Washington Post* (which has launched a virtual museum glorifying the Obama presidency), Barack Obama himself is having a particularly frustrating time at it; he thinks he has accomplished big things, yet Americans just don’t seem to care.

As a frontline state in the war on terror, what would be our take?

There are undeniable highlights to the Obama presidency — he resisted direct Syrian intervention despite immense pressure, he mended fences with Iran and Cuba, and the recent visit to Hiroshima was a first. He is very charismatic, likable, and he gives great speeches. But history tends not to care for charisma. Decades from now historians will be paying more attention to brute facts, to what actually happened on the ground. And brute facts suggest that Obama is actually right up there among the worst US presidents ever.

His record on war is outstanding. Obama started out as an anti-war candidate, one who would fix the grand mess made by George W Bush — that was the rationale for the famous Nobel prize in 2009, his “extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples”. But this May, *The New York Times* reported that Obama has now been at war longer than any other US president — the only US president in history to serve with two full terms at war. And, of course, the world is in far worse shape now than it was when he started his term.

Obama picked up Bush’s cues almost effortlessly. The drone strikes programme — which Noam Chomsky colourfully describes as a “global assassination campaign” — radically expanded under Obama’s watch. Ironically enough — perhaps this was a sign of things to come — when Obama picked up his Peace Prize some eight months into his first term, he had already launched more drone strikes than Bush did in his two full terms combined.

Whistleblowers from within the ranks of drone operators have testified that not only are the vast majority unintended victims (perhaps even up to 90 per cent!), but moreover that these strikes fuel hatred and are a “fundamental recruiting tool” for terrorists. Small wonder, terrorism has grown by orders of magnitude on Obama’s watch. We, in Pakistan, are as keenly

aware of this as anyone else. One may loathe Donald Trump but it's very hard to disagree with him on this count: "The legacy of the Obama-Clinton interventions will be weakness, confusion and disarray — a mess," he says. "We've made the Middle East more unstable and chaotic than ever before."

Former FBI counterterrorism expert Kim Jensen goes one step further. His conviction is that Obama's true legacy is the establishment of the Islamic State — "a harbinger event", one "that has really changed the landscape of terrorism for the entire world. It's been the single most significant event, I would say, in the last 80 or 90 years, since the 1920s."

Likewise, some of us might recall that the second major point on Obama's Nobel award was his dedication to nuclear non-proliferation. In a very famous speech, in 2009, he spelt out this commitment: "As a nuclear power, as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon, the United States has a moral responsibility to act ... today, I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons."

This March, in an op-ed, Obama congratulated himself on progress on this front, that by 2018, "the number of deployed American and Russian nuclear warheads will be at their lowest levels since the 1950s". He doesn't mention that the US stockpile of about 5,000 warheads has declined a mere five per cent in the last six years (the reduction was almost 50 per cent under George W Bush). And alarmingly missing is the fact that Obama just signed a \$1 trillion nuclear weapons modernisation programme to develop smaller, more reliable, and far more precise and effective nukes. Unsurprisingly, Russia, China and North Korea have strongly condemned the move. Behind the scenes, a new arms race has already begun. Cold War 2.0, courtesy President Obama.

And that's not all. Obama also excels in exporting war. As per the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute last year, the Obama Administration has become the world's largest international arms dealer — the largest since the Second World War, to be precise (Richard Nixon held that record last). Obama has outdone Bush's arms sales by a hefty \$30 billion. This is another grand record.

And we know where these weapons have gone, we have seen them being used to arm terrorist and rebel forces in the Middle East, to clamp down on democratic movements in Egypt and Bahrain, to pulverise Yemen, and ring-fence Russia. War and fear and terror magnified exponentially.

It gets much worse though. Obama's most damning indictment is America's own transformation — the US has been a global bully for decades, but in the last eight years, with systematic legislation and unprecedented executive actions, Obama has actually institutionalised the practice of war. As per Gene Healy of Cato Institute: "Barack Obama's most far-reaching achievement has been to strip out any remaining legal limits on the president's power to wage war." The next president, Healy warns, "will enjoy near-limitless war powers".

How's that for a legacy?