

Obama's crisis speech on San Bernardino attack

By Patrick Martin
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The speech delivered by President Obama Sunday night from the Oval Office in the White House, devoted to the massacre in San Bernardino and its connection to terrorism, was a reflection of the mounting political crisis of the Obama administration.

Obama sought to counter criticism from his Republican opponents, which have centered on calls for a dramatic escalation of US military intervention in the Middle East, and for domestic repression against Muslim-Americans and immigrants. At the same time, he gave ground to these demands, which emerge from the logic of the policy of the US ruling elite as a whole.

The president claimed to oppose the introduction of large numbers of US ground troops into Syria and Iraq, but he has been doing so piecemeal over the past 18 months, including recent decisions to send US special forces into Syria, reversing a previous declaration not to use US ground troops in that country.

More importantly, Obama ended his speech with the demand that Congress take action to formally authorize US military operations against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS, or in White House language, ISIL). Such an Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) would amount to a US declaration of war, similar to the resolutions passed by Congress before the Bush administration's invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003.

Passage of an AUMF would not only provide retroactive sanction for US military action throughout the Middle East and North Africa, it would be open-ended, enabling the administration or Obama's successor, who will take office in 13 months, to wage war throughout that vast region indefinitely. It would also provide a legal pretext for government attacks on opponents of US wars in the Middle East.

Congress has taken no action on the administration's request for an AUMF against ISIS because of Republican

demands that the authorization be as broad as possible, opening the way to the introduction of ground troops and the outright conquest of any country that stands in the way of the plans of US imperialism in the world's largest center of oil and gas production.

On the domestic side of the "war on terror," Obama also sought to portray himself as the voice of reason, pushing back against increasingly hysterical demands that the US government target the entire Muslim-American population for surveillance and repression. The leading Republican presidential candidate, billionaire Donald Trump, has called for placing mosques under surveillance, creating a database on all US Muslims, and reviving the torture policies of the Bush administration, including waterboarding and similar forms of savagery.

Obama was careful, however, not to name names, or political parties, in declaring his opposition to a generalized targeting of Muslim Americans. Instead, he made a series of concessions to his right-wing critics, embracing their demands that he toughen up the language used by the White House to characterize the struggle against ISIS/ISIL.

He flatly declared the San Bernardino massacre to be an act of terrorism, although many critical details remain to be investigated and there is no known connection between any terrorist group and the two attackers, Syed Farook, an American-born Muslim of Pakistani descent, and his wife Tashfeen Malik, a recent immigrant also from Pakistan.

In fact, the San Bernardino massacre has the character of a hybrid attack, a product of endless war abroad and its intersection with the social pathologies of American capitalism at home.

Violence pervades American society, a product of the extreme social crisis within the country and the militarization of the state. A report in the *New York Times* published over the weekend notes that since the September 11 attacks, 45 people have been killed by

attacks attributed to Islamic extremists. In the same period, 48 have been killed by white supremacists and other right-wing extremists. A staggering 200,000 people have been killed in homicides, while the police in the US kill more than 1,000 people every year.

Moreover, Obama, as well as his Republican critics and most of the US media, have had little to say about the connection of the two attackers to Saudi Arabia, the most important Arab ally of US imperialism, where they met and were married and where Malik grew up. In the 9/11 attacks and countless other acts of terrorism over the past 15 years, Saudi Arabia has supplied the ideology, the financing and frequently the actual manpower (15 of the 19 hijackers on 9/11 were Saudi citizens).

While silent on Saudi promotion of reactionary Islamic fundamentalism, the US president described ISIS as a “cult of death” which “we will destroy,” and he warned American Muslims: “An extremist ideology has spread within some Muslim communities. That’s a real problem that Muslims must confront without excuse.”

Most importantly, Obama embraced the lie that is the foundation of US imperialism’s policy of war and repression for the past 15 years, declaring, “Our nation has been at war with terrorists since Al Qaeda killed nearly 3,000 Americans on 9/11.”

In this upside-down world, history begins with an unprovoked attack on the United States by Islamic militants in 2001, not with the US military interventions throughout the Middle East for more than three decades, including not only direct assaults like the 1991 Persian Gulf War, but the depredations of the US ally and proxy, the state of Israel.

Both Al Qaeda and ISIS are the outcome of such US military interventions, not as unintended by-products, but directly created and assisted by the US military-intelligence apparatus. The Reagan administration laid the basis for Al Qaeda through the CIA recruitment of Arab Islamic fundamentalists to fight the Soviet army in Afghanistan. The Obama administration helped build up ISIS as part of its encouragement of Islamist militants fighting first the Gaddafi regime in Libya and then the Assad regime in Syria.

Neither Obama nor his Republican opponents can acknowledge the fact that ISIS is a Frankenstein’s monster created by the United States and its reactionary allies like Saudi Arabia and Qatar. But this reality underlies the conflict over foreign policy. Obama speaks for the faction of the military-intelligence apparatus that,

having been burned by the blowback from US intervention in the Middle East, wants to proceed more cautiously—while still employing all the vast US machinery of death, from drone-missile strikes to bombing raids and raids by Special Forces assassins.

Demands for the expansion of war abroad have been accompanied by calls for a further attack on democratic rights within the US. Hillary Clinton, Obama’s former secretary of state and now the leading Democratic candidate to succeed him, told ABC News Sunday that technology companies had to join the war against ISIS, both in censoring online activity by Islamists and in providing information on their customers to the US intelligence services.

“We’re going to need help from Facebook and from YouTube and from Twitter,” she told ABC’s “This Week” program. “They cannot permit the recruitment and the actual direction of attacks or the celebration of violence by the sophisticated internet user.”

In a speech later in the day to a Washington lobbying group, she dismissed the threat to democratic rights. “You’re gonna hear all the usual complaints: freedom of speech, etcetera” she said, adding, “if we truly are in a war against terrorism and we are truly looking for ways to shut off their funding, shut off the flow of foreign fighters, then we’ve got to shut off their means of communicating.” This had to include Silicon Valley cooperating with US intelligence agencies to put an end to encrypted communications, she concluded.

Obama echoed these calls in his own speech, insisting that “high-tech and law enforcement leaders [must] make it harder for terrorists to use technology to escape from justice.”

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