The Power of Personality in Decision-Making
A study of Obama's Decision to Launch Air Strikes in Syria

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Date of submission: 2016-01-04
Words: 13910
Abstract

Barack Obama’s personality is studied to understand how the personality of a leader can contribute to the decision-making process in foreign policy. The study connects literature from foreign policy analysis as well as psychology to contribute with an example of how these two fields of study can be used simultaneously. Barack Obama is examined through the Five-Level Model of personality in order to understand his characteristics and his behavior. Each level of Obama’s personality is analyzed in regard to the decision to use air strikes towards the terrorist organization Daesh in Syria. The findings show that Obama prefer softer and more peaceful tactics, but also that he has a strong determination to fulfill his goals and to use force when America is faced with a direct threat.

Key Words: Barack Obama, Personality, Foreign Policy, Psychology, Decision-making, Five-Level Model, Daesh, Syria, Terrorism
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1. Introduction

After the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, many thought that the American involvement in the Middle East was over. President Barack Obama pledged to leave Iraq and to forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan. He also stated the importance to use other measures than missiles and tanks to provide security for the American people and to face the new threats of today.¹ These promises were proven difficult to keep and right now, American soldiers are positioned in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and the US are also involved in the conflict in Syria, by using air strikes to defeat the terrorist organization Daesh. In the beginning, Obama hesitated to attack but eventually did so despite the Congress disapproval of an intervention and the lack of a UN Security Council mandate to take military action. Several factors could be said to have influenced the forceful actions taken by the US in Syria, but this thesis focuses on the psychological approach of the decision and Obama’s personality in order to understand how he influenced the decision.

1.1 Purpose and question

The personality of a leader explains to what extent the leader will be able to fulfill his or her goals and influence the world. By studying personality it can be possible to assume what actions a leader will take and understand how the leader organizes his or her advisors and closest staff.² The purpose of this thesis is to find a deeper understanding of how Barack Obama’s personality affected the decision to launch air strikes in Syria. The choice to focus on Obama is because he has become one of the central actors in the Syrian conflict and is leading one of the most powerful states in the world. Obama’s decisions affect many other countries and are reported in the news globally. By studying Obama’s personality and how it affects his decisions, it is possible to argue that a president with a different personality might have made another choice in the same situation. This study will be an addition to the literature about political leadership and can be used as an example of a leader’s influence on the decision-making process. I will not try to make a judgment whether the decision was good or bad, but evaluate how the decision corresponds with Obama’s personality.

¹ The White House, President Obama’s Inaugural Address, 2009-01-21
The thesis is written with the perspective of the psychological approach of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). FPA is a theory within international politics that has been described by Alden and Aran as “… the product of human agency, that is, individuals in leadership positions identifying foreign policy issues, making judgments about them and then acting upon that information”.\(^3\) The objective of the thesis is to use this perspective to answer the following question:

*How does Obama’s personality contribute to explaining the decision to launch air strikes in Syria, to combat the terrorist organization Daesh?*

### 1.2 Disposition
The main part of the study is the analysis of Obama’s personality according to the Five-Level Model (FLM). To understand the model, and why it is used in this specific context, I will begin by briefly describe what has happened in Syria since the beginning of the civil war in 2011 and give some background information about Obama’s life before he became president. Previous research in the fields of foreign policy, counterterrorism and psychology are explained because it has provided information and theories to base this study on. The theories I have chosen to study are described in the ways they have been used before and how they can be applied in this context. In the analysis, the focus is on Obama and how his personality contributed to the decision to launch airstrikes in Syria. An evaluation of his personality is made through the FLM to be able to answer the central question of the thesis.

### 2. Method

#### 2.1 Limitations
The thesis is limited to focus on the decision-making process leading up to the choice to use air strikes against Daesh in Syria, and will not discuss other softer measures that have been taken by the US to combat Daesh. I have chosen to research the choice to launch airstrikes in Syria, even though it had already been done in Iraq a couple of months earlier against Daesh. The decision-making process was different concerning Syria because of the ongoing civil war and because the US did not have the same involvement there as they did in Iraq after the war. Another difference is that the US did not have support by the Syrian government to attack

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\(^3\) Alden, Chris & Aran, Amnon, *Foreign policy analysis: new approaches*, 2012. p. 19
Daesh, and they did not coordinate attacks along with the regime, as they did in Iraq. The study will also be limited to focus on Barack Obama as leader of the United States, even though his advisors, political opponents and others influenced him and gave their opinions of the situation. Group psychology and the organization of the bureaucracy can also be researched due to their impact on foreign policy, but these are not included in this study. To not write another biography about Obama’s life, I have focused on the events that I believe have had a big impact on his personality and on the fragments that portray his prominent traits, which are of importance for the objective of this thesis.

2.2 Definitions
The concept of personality is used plenty of times throughout this thesis. I have chosen to study personality from the definition used by McAdams and Pals: “Personality is conceived as (a) an individual’s unique variation on the general evolutionary design for human nature, expressed as a developing pattern of (b) dispositional traits, (c) characteristic adaptations, and (d) self-defining life narratives, complexly and differentially situated (e) in culture and social context.” A more detailed explanation of the definition and its operationalization is to be found in the chapter of Theory, when the Five-Level Model is described.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), The Islamic State (IS) and Daesh are all names used to describe the same terrorist organization. I will use the name Daesh throughout this thesis because it is now becoming the most widespread name to use when talking about the organization and it makes clear that the organization does not have the status of a state. The other names might be used in quotations and in the sources since people have different preferences about which name to use.

2.3 Methodology
This is an interpretative personality study, meaning that the empirical information found concerning Obama and his life has been interpreted by me, and applied on his decision-making in the case of counterterrorism in Syria. The study is theory-based and uses a psychological model of personality to construct a qualitative study of the importance of

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4 Chulov, Martin, Ackerman, Spencer, Lewis, Paul, US confirms 14 air strikes against Isis in Syria, The Guardian, 2014-09-23
5 McAdams, Dan P., Pals, Jennifer L., A New Big Five: Fundamental Principles for an Integrative Science of Personality, 2006. p. 204
leaders’ personality in significant foreign policy decisions. The validity of the study can be said to be high because the Five-Level Model used to evaluate Obama’s personality measures his personality through a clear structure. Variables are ordered vertically as well as horizontally which reduces the risk of overlapping. The levels are also carefully explained to be able to know how to measure personality at each level.⁶ There is although a risk to make conclusions about someone’s personality without meeting the person and relying on secondary sources, but I believe many aspects of Obama’s personality that are relevant in regard to the purpose of the thesis can be studied from the information available about Obama. The interpretative approach of the study gives the study a low reliability since it is not certain that someone else would make the same conclusions of the information collected as I have made, or even believe that the same information about Obama is important to answer the question. The thesis presents a simplification of Obama’s personality and can therefore limit the explanatory power that the model can contribute with, but it still gives a better understanding than if only one level or one trait would have been analyzed.

Obama’s personality and its development is studied to be able to see how it corresponds with the decision to use airstrikes in Syria. His leadership style regarding counterterrorism is discussed from his most significant statements made before being elected as president up until his choice to launch airstrikes in Syria. I will briefly explain the pledges he has made in regard to foreign policy and terrorism since his election campaign, but the main focus is on the attacks on Daesh and how the US has worked to combat this organization in Syria. The study is based on the psychological approach of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), and uses a personality model that is mainly used in the field of psychology. The study is also complemented by theories of counterterrorism to deepen the understanding of the decision and its possible outcomes. The main goal is not to generalize to a broader context, but to understand this specific event from a personality perspective.

2.4 Material and Source Criticism

The different theories I have used are found in books and scientific articles from the fields of international relations, terrorism, foreign policy and psychology. I have also used news articles from some of the major news channels in The US and Great Britain to find

⁶ Jennstål, Julia, Traits and Talks: lessons about personality and deliberation from the negotiations between Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk, 2012. p. 36
information about the civil war in Syria and the involvement of the US. Information about Obama’s politics and the statements he has made are from the White House website where they publish all of Obama’s speeches. To find sources that do not try to favor president Obama, as the White House have a tendency to do, I have also used articles by researchers who have studied his behavior from a critical point of view. For information regarding his life and personality, I have read biographies written by different researchers who have all focused on different perspectives of his life. These biographies are based on interviews with Obama’s friends and family, who can give biased statements of how they perceived Obama throughout their life. It can be problematic to use secondary, and even tertiary sources to evaluate Obama’s personality, but since I have not been able to meet him in person to study his actions, I have been limited to use the information that others have gathered about his life and personality. The people who have discussed Obama as a child also did this many years later, and their views might have changed when Obama became famous. Obama has written memoirs about his life, but since this study focuses a lot on how others have perceived him, I have chosen to read biographies that others have written, and not his own books. The biographies that I have read all study Obama’s life through interviews with several people in his surroundings, and also with Obama himself, to give a nuanced picture of him, and I have used information from plenty of these people in my analyze of his personality to make it as correct as possible.

I have been limited to use material in Swedish and English, which might give me a biased picture of Obama and also of the events taking place in Syria. By using different news sources, based in separate countries, I have limited the possibility to attain a partial view of the situation. The Syria Times, which is a Syrian e-newspaper written in English has been used to see the conflict from a different perspective. One thing that is different about this source compared to the western news is although that it is affiliated with the Ministry of Information in Syria and hence has a tendency to be positive towards the Syrian government.

3. Background

3.1 The Civil War in Syria
The Baath Party came into power in Syria through a coup d'état in 1970. The Party controls the society strongly and the constitution gives the President complete authority. The Syrian people belong to a variety of different religious groups, and tensions between these groups
have created conflicts throughout the history of Syria. The President, Bashar al-Assad took over the post after his father in 2000 and has continued to strengthen his power and push back opponents. The ongoing conflict in Syria originates from the protests that began in Deraa in March 2011. The government used force to push back the protesters, which made them even more upset. The conflict escalated quickly, spread across the country, and took the lives of many Syrians in a short period of time. In August 2011, president Obama called on Assad to step down, and froze all assets of the government subject to the US jurisdiction. The UN also tried to intervene but the mission in Syria was suspended in June 2012 because the violence hindered the ability to achieve the goals that were set up. The conflict continued between the regime and the rebels, and both parts used extreme violence, which caused many fatalities. There are also other groups actively fighting in Syria; the two major ones are the Kurds that are trying to protect their territories in northern Syria and the terrorist organization Daesh that tries to expand as much as possible by using violent tactics.

3.2 The Rise of Daesh

Daesh was founded in the beginning of 2000, after Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was released from prison in 1999. He cooperated with Osama Bin Ladin and trained Salafi terrorist form the organization Jama’at al-Tawid wa'al-Jihad (JTJ), also called the Al Qaeda in Iraq. Zarqawi was killed in an airstrike by the US in 2006, but his successor, Abu Ayub al-Masri, managed to maintain the group’s size and power. Today, the group calls themselves the Islamic State and it has declared a Caliphate, which it rules over. The civil war in Syria could be used as a training ground for Daesh because of the lack of stable security mechanisms. This helped Daesh to expand and take control over territory in both Iraq and Syria.

3.3 The US Actions in Syria

At first, the US limited its military actions against Daesh to Iraq, where they started to use targeted air strikes in August 2014. In reaction to these strikes, Daesh killed the American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff, and threatened to continue to kill more Americans.

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7 Landguiden, (Syrien: Modern historia), 2015-03-27
9 Rodgers, Lucy, Gritten, David, Offer, James, and Asare, Patrick. Syria: The story of the conflict. BBC News, 2015-10-09
10 Stanford University, Mapping Militant Organizations: The Islamic State, 2015-05-15
11 The White House, Statement by the President, 2014-08-07
if the air strikes continued. In a statement made the 10th of September 2014, President Barack Obama condemned the killings and made clear that he would not hesitate to take action against terrorists who threaten America, even in Syria if necessary. Obama ordered the US first strikes in Syria the 22nd of September, with bipartisan support from the Congress. Obama also made clear that several Middle Eastern countries joined the US in this action, among these were Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Bahrain, and Qatar. The involvement has been debated and different reasons for involvement have been discussed. Obama himself has said that the fight is against terrorists and that these measures are taken to protect the people of America, but this statement is countered by the Syrian Assistant Information Minister, Dr. Khalaf al-Miftah who compares the involvement of western countries to colonialism and believes that the US wants to create chaos in the Arab region. The Russian president, Vladimir Putin supports the Assad regime and has stated that America gives assistance to terrorists and that the training and backing of rebel groups is illegal according to the UN charter.

4. Theory

4.1 Previous Research

4.1.1 Foreign Policy Analysis

Foreign Policy Analysis traditionally focused on states and their power. It discussed how states protect their borders and how they decide to go to war or defend themselves when attacked by another state. In recent years, globalization has changed the way states interact and therefore the research has changed as well. More issues are included in foreign policy and several new actors are engaged in foreign policy making. In FPA, many different reasons for decisions are brought up and the analysis separates the individual, the state and the international level. The individual level is discussed throughout this thesis and is influenced by psychology to understand leaders better.

12 Carter, Chelsea J. and Fantz, Ashley. ISIS video shows beheading of Steven Sotloff. CNN, 2014-09-09
13 The White House, Statement by the President on ISIL, 2014-09-10
14 The White House. Statement by the President on Airstrikes in Syria, 2014-09-23
15 The White House. Weekly Address: We Will Degrade and Destroy ISIL, 2014-09-13
16 Dr Khalaf al-Miftah. Colonialism in its New Form. The Syria Times, 2015-07-30
18 Breuning, p. 5-6
19 Ibid, p 11-12
The psychological approach of FPA is used to evaluate the leader’s options and why a certain decision was taken in a situation. The mind of the leader and its powerful effect in foreign policy decisions is central in FPA. In the book *Foreign Policy Analysis; New Approaches*, Alden and Aran describes the background to FPA, how it has developed from a realistic, more state-centric approach, to bring in more actors that can influence decision-making. The authors explain Putnam’s view of decision makers and how they operate in two separate environments, the domestic and the international environment. The outcome of the decisions must reflect the shared interests of the international actors as well as work on the domestic level for a leader to keep the support from the people.

### 4.1.2 The Importance of the Leader

Leaders can be found everywhere in society and are therefore studied in many disciplines. Not only are they important in international relations as head of states, they can also make a big difference for business, schools, sports teams etcetera. The power of the leader depends on the surroundings, which in politics can be the legislative system, the organizational structure of the bureaucracy and the importance of the state in world politics. Marijke Breuning addresses that there are two factors that constrain foreign policy and therefore the importance of the leader. These factors are the size and diplomatic representation of the state and the domestic public opinion. Smaller states face constraints because it is difficult to influence the international arena, and states where the public opinion opposes the foreign policy procedures face constraints because of the lack of support from the people. When applying this to the US one can see that the first factor is insignificant since the US is one of the largest and most influential countries in the world. The second factor of constraint is up for debate. In a poll made by Gallup the 28-29th of May 2013, 68 % of the respondents said that the US should not use military action to attempt to end the civil war in Syria. Since a majority of the people did not support military action in Syria, this can be viewed as a constraint for Obama’s influence on foreign policy.

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20 Alden, Aran, p. 14  
21 Ibid, p. 17  
22 Foley, Michael, *Political Leadership: themes, contexts, & critiques*, 2014 p. 5-7  
23 Breuning, p. 30  
In foreign policy decision-making, there is never one single person who researches the situation and thereafter acts according to his or her personal opinion of the given information. Many advisors and bureaucrats are involved in the process and try to help and influence the leader to come up with the best possible solution.\textsuperscript{25} Decision-makers are affected by the way information is presented to them, their own interpretation and understanding of the problem, and knowledge of comparable prior events that can say something about possible outcomes.\textsuperscript{26} Time constraints and stress can cause decision-makers to become more emotional and to fixate with single solutions or even to behave more aggressively.\textsuperscript{27} It is usually not possible to have all the information needed or to know what the outcome will be since one action is not possible to isolate from other variables that could affect the outcome. The organizational structure of the decision-making process and different opinions within the bureaucracy also affects the decision, which makes it difficult to make a decision that is rational.\textsuperscript{28}

4.2 Personality as an Analytical Tool

The personality of the leader is important in order to understand decisions and to predict what actions the leader will take in the future. Depending on the personality, the leader will either adjust to the environment or try to influence and change it.\textsuperscript{29} The Five-level Model of personality outlined by McAdams and Pals can be used as an analytical tool to describe one’s personality and its origins. The theory consists of the five levels: (1) evolutionary psychology, (2) dispositional traits, (3) characteristic adaptations, (4) life narrative, and (5) culture.\textsuperscript{30}

4.2.1 Evolutionary Design

The first level, evolutionary design rests on the premise of human nature and human design. Human beings are individual variations of a general design that can be said to have evolved through adaptation to the environment in order to increase the prospects of survival and reproduction. What characterize humans from other species are cognitive programs and abilities that enable them, such as to develop language, forge alliances, predict intentions of others and by these abilities create culture. This principle explains the common characteristics among human behavior, but also points out our differences. The differences that are to be

\textsuperscript{25} Breuning, p. 12
\textsuperscript{26} Sylvan, Donald A., Voss, James F., \textit{Problem representation in foreign policy decision making}, 1998. p. 30-33
\textsuperscript{27} Alden, Aran, p. 22-23
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, p. 32
\textsuperscript{29} Breuning, p. 33
\textsuperscript{30} Jennstål, p. 36-37
found at this level can be viewed as a core set of dispositional traits. It is very difficult to point out which traits that can be considered core traits; therefore the analysis on this level will be limited, since it would be very speculative.

4.2.2 Dispositional Traits

The second level, dispositional traits, focuses on the differences between individuals and is therefore the main focus of the analysis. Researchers have after a long time of deliberations come up with the ‘Big Five’, the five most foundational human traits. These traits are: Extraversion, Openness to experience, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Agreeableness. These show the overall style of how a person behaves, thinks and feels in general. Someone’s specific traits can often be used to predict one’s general behavior over time, even though it is hard to predict the behavior in one certain situation. Studies have proven that at least 50% of the differences in traits depend upon genetic differences between people, and therefore shows how we are born different, but still all have a general design as explained by the first level.

Extraversion includes characteristics such as sociability, engagement with the world, and need for external stimulation. Extroverts also tend to be warm, gregarious, assertive, and might have an ambition to seek excitement. Professionally, they tend to have social jobs where they meet more people, such as teaching; sales; personnel work and similar. Extroverts tend to do better than introverts in performing tasks that require divided attention and they also resist distractions better. To analyze this trait, the interactions with others and someone’s social skills are studied. If one can be said to possess the mentioned characteristics, it will result in a high score on extraversion while contradicting descriptions will bring down the level of extraversion.

Openness to experience is used to explain boundaries in one’s consciousness. If someone is very open to experience, it means that this individual can think broadly and deeply. When measuring openness to experience, factors such as feelings, actions, fantasy, values, ideas and aesthetics are used. People who score high in this dispositional trait tend to be more accepting.

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31 McAdams, Pals p. 205-207
32 Ibid p. 207-208
34 Encyclopedia of psychology, (Extraversion and Introversion), 2000, p. 306
towards minorities and to be liberal in their political position.\textsuperscript{35} To measure this trait, the ability and willingness to take in information and to listen to different opinions are studied. A strong eagerness to learn from a variety of perspectives and initiatives to gather more information than presented prove a high level of openness to experience.

Conscientiousness describes how well organized, hardworking, and responsible an individual is, as well as how goal-directed one is and how well impulses are handled in a normative way. Four facets are often included in conscientiousness; Responsibility (e.g. punctuality, meeting responsibilities, keeping promises); self-control (e.g. ignoring distractions, overcoming temptations); industriousness (e.g. pursuing goals, working hard); and orderliness (keep the surrounding well organized).\textsuperscript{36} When one is described in these terms, the score will be high, whether words as sloppy, careless, or irresponsible would indicate a low score of conscientiousness.

Neuroticism can be seen as the level of negative emotions an individual scores. People with high levels of neuroticism often blame themselves for problems, are sensitive to criticism and cope poorly with stress. They have a quite negative view of the world and see problems that others do not. Extremely high levels of this trait are strongly correlated with personality disorders such as anxiety, depression and borderline disorder.\textsuperscript{37} When measuring neuroticism, difficulties to handle criticism, and a negative worldview, will result in a high score. A stable person who does not easily get upset or angry, and has a positive view of the world, will score low on this trait.

Agreeableness can be used to describe how an individual get along with others and how likable they are. People with high agreeableness tend to have more empathy for others, have fewer prejudices and perceive less conflict. Field, Tobin, and Reese-Weber has researched agreeableness in regard to conflict-solution strategies and the result shows that higher levels of agreeableness correlates positively with strategies of negotiation and compromising and is negatively correlated to attacks and power assertion as conflict resolutions.\textsuperscript{38} To have high

\textsuperscript{35} Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning, (Openness to Experience), 2012, p. 2522-2523
\textsuperscript{36} Eisenberg, Nancy, Duckworth, Angela L., Spinrad, Tracy L., Valiente, Carlos, Conscientiousness: Origins in Childhood? American Psychological Association, 2014, p. 1331-1332
\textsuperscript{37} International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences, (Neuroticism), 2001, p. 10610
agreeableness means to be able to get along with people well and to avoid conflicts. How caring and thoughtful one is also measures the level of agreeableness.

The “Big five” traits are nowadays quite established, but it has not always been the case. Extraversion and Neuroticism has been called the “Big two”, but Costa and McCrae have pointed out how many traits that would not be accounted for if only those two traits were taken into consideration. Personality psychology research has used agreeableness, openness and conscientiousness throughout history to explain traits among people and these can be considered to have the same basic form as extraversion and neuroticism because of their universality. Eysenck has criticized the use of these traits as the fundamental ones and argues that the explanations for using these five traits is not based on enough evidence. He claims that other theories of personality traits are just as good as the theory presented by Costa and McCrae, and that five factors should not be considered basic. He wants to keep the debate open and not settle around factors that are not fully established. This criticism is taken into consideration, but the “Big five” are for now the set up of traits that are mostly used in personality research and will therefore be used in this study as well.

4.2.3 Characteristics Adaptations
The third level of the FLM is characteristics adaptations, which means that our personality adapts to what we are doing, for example the work role. Characteristic adaptations seek to answer what motivates a person to a certain act. It evaluates motivation from a social-cognitive perspective and also shows how motivations change as an effect of the individual’s life-stage. The characteristic adaptations contain for example goals, values, motives, self-images and virtues. These can change easier than the dispositional traits and are more adaptable to the social world.

4.2.4 Narrative Identity
The fourth level, narrative identity, is said to be a ‘psychological construction of the self”. It illuminates how individuals use the past to explain who and where they are today and the place they have in a broader context. It also focuses on the imagined future an individual have

39 Costa, Paul T., McCrae, Robert R., Four ways five factors are basic, 1991, p. 657
40 Eysenck, H.J., Four ways five factors are not basic, 1991, p. 672
41 Jennstål, p. 37-47
42 McAdams, Pals p. 208
and how it fits in with the purpose and meaning that person sees in life. Personal experiences can influence how a person feels about his or her meaning in the world and therefore change the life narrative. The way an individual presents oneself and one's goals show how the life narrative is built up and what role in society that person believes to have.

4.2.5 Culture
Lastly, the fifth level of the FLM is culture, which implicates that the surrounding milieu affects the development of the personality from day one. Culture can affect all the other levels in different ways and is therefore an interactional perspective. The strongest influence is on the level of life narrative, where individuals are given alternatives to the way they can make meaning out of their lives. Individuals find their characteristic design within the culture and environment. It can be seen to affect the expression of certain traits even though it does not change the traits someone has genetically. The level of culture is mainly important to understand how the dispositional traits and the life narrative have developed, but can in itself not explain a lot about the decision-making process in foreign policy.

5. Analysis
5.1 The Decision-Making Process of Foreign Policy
The President of the United States is also titled the Commander in Chief and need to approve of foreign policy decisions such as presence in a conflict zone, expenditure of resources and deployment of troops. The National Security Council (NSC) discusses all the matters in the field of peace, stability and relief operations. It includes the President, the vice President, the Secretary of State (the Minister of Foreign Affairs) and the Secretary of Defense. The NSC also includes a number of advisors as well as the Principals Committee (PC) and Deputies Committee (DC). In foreign policy issues, the Congress exercises supervision and provide authorization and appropriations for actions taken by the NSC. Support by the Congress is desired, therefore are consultations with the Congress a central part of the decision-making procedure.

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43 McAdams, Pals p. 209-210
44 Jennståhl, p. 37-47
45 McAdams, Pals p. 211-212
5.2 The Life of Barack Obama

Barack Obama was born the 4th of August 1961, in Honolulu. His mother, Stanley Ann Dunham, was from Kansas and his father, Barack Obama Sr., came from Kenya.47 His father had come to Hawaii to go to university, but when he graduated in 1962 he left Hawaii to continue his studies at Harvard University, leaving Stanley Ann and Obama behind.48 Obama’s mother raised him with help from the grandparents, and after a few years she met another man, Lolo Soetoro. Soetoro was from Indonesia, and when he was called back there in 1967, Stanley Ann and Obama came with him. At that time, he was six years old.49 After having spent a few years in Indonesia, Obama returned to America and lived with his grandparents, before his mother and younger sister followed after a few months.50 After three years, when Stanley Ann decided that she wanted to go back to Indonesia, Obama stayed in Hawaii with his grandparents.51 After he finished High School, Obama chose to study at Occidental University, in California. Two years later, he transferred to Columbia University in New York, where he started to really commit to his studies.52 His focus was on political science and around the time of the transfer his will to make the world a better place started to grow.53 He later attended Harvard Law School after having spent some years working as a community organizer in Chicago. In 2004, Obama was elected to the Senate, where he was the only Afro-American politician at the time. Four years later, in 2007, he announced that he was running for president as the candidate for the Democratic Party.54

5.3 Obama’s Counterterrorism Policies

There are a number of different theories that discuss the use of force against terrorist organizations. Some researchers, such as Della Porta argue that when governments respond with softer tactics, the likelihood of further violence increases. To use harder and forceful measures will make it difficult for the challengers to mobilize and continue to take action. On the other hand, forceful measures can also be said to increase terrorist activity under certain circumstances. Lichbach claims that offensive measures can make oppositional groups more organized, dedicated and violent because the force is seen as unjust and creates frustration and

47 Nationalencyklopedin, (Barack Obama)
48 Remnick, David, The bridge: the life and rise of Barack Obama, 2011, p. 55
49 Ibid, p. 58
50 Ibid, p. 70-71
51 Ibid, p. 76
52 Ibid, p. 98-100
53 Ibid, p. 114
54 Nationalencyklopedin, (Barack Obama)
anger among them. After several terrorist attacks, the governments of the attacked countries have overreacted and resorted to violations of the laws of war to respond to the attacks. These overreactions have caused anger and fear, and have led to a stronger support of the terrorists who are fighting against these stronger forces. Research in the field of conflict resolution theory support the contention that conflicts escalate fast when hard tactics have a mobilizing effect, more people get involved and when the actions produce anger, fear and threats.  

Barack Obama was in contradiction of the war in Iraq and pledged to change the work of counterterrorism that the Bush administration had practiced. He wanted the policies to be more transparent, nimble and ethical compared to what they had been during the Bush era. The actions Bush talked about as the “war on terrorism”, Obama replaced with the campaign “countering violent extremism”, but force is still widely used. Jessica Stern, a lecturer at Harvard University, has questioned the implementations of the pledges Obama made before he was elected. She argues that the rise of Daesh shows both the failure of Bush’s counterterrorism and Obama’s withdrawal from Iraq. She claims that the disengagement from Iraq was premature and that the consequences of the decision were not considered carefully.

Another promise Obama made when being elected into office was to close the US detention center in Guantanamo bay. He required that it should be shut down within a year, but it is as of today still open, much due to congressional opposition to close it down. Obama’s counterterrorism strategy has put more focus on the underlying reasons for terrorism recruitment, and the ‘White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism’ has been arranged. It is a three-part plan with the goal to prevent the spread of extremism. The three parts are to (1) discredit terrorist ideologies, (2) address the political and economic grievances the terrorists exploit, and (3) improve governance in the regions where the groups recruit.

In a speech made at the graduation ceremony at U.S. Military Academy in May 2014, President Obama talked to the audience about leadership, and how military action should not be the only, or even primary, component of leadership. When talking about the times when direct action is necessary he said, “…In taking direct action, we must uphold standards that

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55 Sheehan, Ivan Sascha, When terrorism and counterterrorism clash: the War on Terror and the transformation of terrorist activity, 2007, p. 8-10
57 Ibid, p. 63-64
58 Ibid, p. 68-69
reflect our values. That means taking strikes only when we face a continuing, imminent threat, and only where there is near certainty of no civilian casualties. For our actions should meet a simple test: we must not create more enemies than we take off the battlefield.\(^{59}\) In the National Security Strategy of 2015 he empathizes the leading role America should have even more. It is stated that America will lead with purpose and with strength, lead by example, and lead with capable partners. It should also lead with all the instruments of U.S. power and with a long-term perspective.\(^{60}\)

Obama’s continuing emphasis on the limited use of force shows that this is something he feels strongly about, but he also makes clear that American leadership is necessary and that strikes are needed when facing an imminent threat. When Daesh expanded its territory and attacked American citizens, the terrorist organization became a bigger threat and Obama needed to change his strategy. It was also important for him to prove that America was still a great leader of the world, and show that they took action. By studying Obama’s personality it is possible to understand how he thinks and behaves, and why his tactics changed.

### 5.4 Obama’s Personality, the Five-Level Model

Barack Obama’s personality is evaluated through the five-level model in order to show the characteristics he can be described to possess. The findings will thereafter be analyzed in regard to the decision to act with force against Daesh in Syria.

#### 5.4.1 Evolutionary Design

The traits that one can be said to have from the beginning are as mentioned very difficult to isolate. Genetics play a big role, but it is nearly impossible to be sure that a certain trait depends on genetics and is not a result of culture and adaptations to the surrounding environment. Obama’s parents’ traits and characteristics are briefly studied to make assumptions of which traits that can have been passed down to him.

Obama’s father, Barack Hussein Obama Sr., was born in Kaloleni, an area in Kenya largely populated by the Lou people. A common trait among the Lou culture, which Obama Sr.

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59 The White House, Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony, 2014-05-28
possessed, was to be self-confident, which by some was interpreted as being arrogant. Obama Sr. was involved in political rallies\textsuperscript{61} and was part of a literacy program in Kenya that was organized by American volunteers.\textsuperscript{62} Obama Sr. came to Hawaii in August 1959 to attend university, leaving a pregnant wife and son in Kenya. He was determined to finish his studies and move back to Kenya to perhaps work in the government service.\textsuperscript{63}

The mother of Barack Obama Jr., Stanley Ann Dunham, was sensitive and quiet, but still social. As a child, she moved around plenty of times, and until ninth grade, she had never gone to the same school for more than two years.\textsuperscript{64} Stanley Ann was on the honor roll all four years of high school due to her excellent grades, and she was also involved in extracurricular activities. She had a great sense of humor, was often sarcastic and had a sharp tongue: traits that can be used to explain her son as well.\textsuperscript{65} When Stanley Ann was about to start university, the family moved to Hawaii.\textsuperscript{66} She met Barack Obama Sr. in Russian class her first semester at university and they started dating. Before Christmas, Stanley Ann realized she was pregnant and the couple got married in February 1961, when Obama Sr. claimed to have divorced his first wife. Their marriage was quite controversial since interracial marriages were very uncommon at this time, and even illegal in several states.\textsuperscript{67}

It is difficult to say how much of his parents’ characteristics Barack Obama acquired, but both of his parents were intelligent and interested in different cultures and politics, just as Obama. Due to the speculative direction the analysis would have to take in order to say anything more about Obama’s core traits, this level will not be discussed further. It is although possible to conclude that the varied backgrounds of his parents and their personalities have affected Obama and the choices he has made in life.

5.4.2 Dispositional Traits

The level of dispositional traits includes five fundamental traits that every person can have. Each one of these is discussed in accordance to Barack Obama and says something about the way he acts in different situations. This level of the model is important to understand how

\textsuperscript{61} Maraniss, David, \textit{Barack Obama: the story}, 2012, p. 95-96
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid, p.104
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, p. 139-141
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid, p. 121-122
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid, p. 128-129
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid, p. 136
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid, p 157-162
Obama thinks and acts, and will therefore serve as the main part of the analysis. Each trait is measured from low to high, and where one is placed on this scale, say something about that individual’s behavior.

**Extraversion**

Obama has never been very open with his opinions and what he stands for. In his youth, he had conflicting thoughts of race and where he belonged in society, but he hid these thoughts well. His teachers and friends were surprised when reading his memoirs, because they never realized he had these concerns. Despite his unwillingness to open up and tell people about his feelings, Obama was very social and friendly during his school years and had many friends to hang out with. He was a basketball player, sang in the choir, and wrote poems for the campus literary magazine.

By colleagues at the research firm International Business, Obama was described as hard-working and friendly, but he did not socialize a lot with them or tell them much about his life outside the office. He was said to be “a little aloof” and never fully engaged in what he was doing. The same cannot be said about his career as a politician as he has been very active and ambitious in this arena. Obama is a verbal man with good rhetoric skills who tries to be informative and straightforward to the people. Obama’s rhetorical skills have often been empathized and he is, compared to other presidents, very verbal as a leader. He has been said to be among the most gifted public communicators, but this is a statement criticized by Stanley A. Renshon. He argues that Obama can be inspirational, but that he lacks the ability to persuade people through his speeches. He tends to lack enough passion to win support and even though he can perfectly repeat his opponents’ arguments, he seems to not really listen to them. Obama’s strong belief in his own ambitions can make him seem arrogant, and the public can feel ignored by him. Renshon’s criticism about Obama’s difficulties to persuade his opponents can indicate that he could not convince the administration to rely on indirect measures, such as helping the rebels and provide aid to civilians in Syria. This shows a potential weakness in his power to take decisions, since his suggestions will only go through if he can persuade those involved in the decision-making process that his position is right.

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69 Remnick, p. 77
70 Ibid, p. 118-120
71 Renshon, p. 20
72 Ibid, p. 65-66
Obama is not only mentioned every day in the newspaper, but has also appeared on several talk shows and in celebrity magazines. He has even been called “celebrity in chief” because of his many appearances on TV, and in both the political and cultural sections of the news. Obama also wants to show that he is just like every other American and that he has a good sense of humor, for example by making a video for BuzzFeed where he informs people about his health care reform in a humorous manner. Even though Obama is not very open about his own feelings or opinions, he has never been shy. He has made friends easily and has always been a social person who can start a conversation with almost anyone. In his younger years, Obama would not be the one who spoke up and expressed his opinions much. This is something that seems to have changed over his life; nowadays he is very keen on expressing his ambitions and does this with strong confidence. Obama has spoken about terrorism and Daesh many times in public, and has stated his opinions on peaceful measures since his presidential campaign. His level of extraversion seems to be quite high, but he does not have troubles being alone and he is not a person who seeks adventures or is involved in high-risk activities that he cannot control, which brings down this level a bit.

Openness to Experience

Even though Obama was never described as adventurous, he has not been close-minded nor restrained himself from new experiences. Obama has since his childhood been open to learn about cultures, ideas and history. He read about the civil rights movement when trying to find his own identity and make meaning of the history of blacks and whites, and was eager to learn more about it. During Obama’s first two years of college, he spent a lot of time with a group of people who often discussed political matters such as feminism, Marxism, and neocolonialism. He also went to meetings among a variety of student groups with political agendas, but he mostly observed their work to begin with. At a divestment rally in 1981, Obama held his first public speech as a political actor, proving he would get involved in politics when it was important enough. Obama talks about himself as a pragmatist, even though his records from the Illinois Senate, and from the US Senate, showed that his opinions were liberal. His liberal political view, along with his eager to learn more about political matters, gives him a higher score on this trait because it is connected to openness towards experience.

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73 Renshon, p. 37-38
74 *Buzzfeed Videos.* Things Everybody Does But Doesn’t Talk About, Featuring President Obama, 2015-02-12
75 Remnick, p. 100
76 Ibid, 109-111
77 Renshon, p. 129
minorities and to differences between people. He has also been through experiences that have shaped his ideas in certain ways, such as his travels.

Obama traveled a great deal in his early years, which probably helped him adjust to new environments. He was eager to see new places and wanted challenges, which is why he moved to new places; from California, to New York and later to Chicago. Before he started school in New York, he traveled to Pakistan to visit his friends, and this trip is said to have changed his view of life since he saw poverty and other life styles in ways he had never done before. His education in political science has provided him with information about the world and different political views, but for Obama, the education in school was not enough. He wanted to understand the diversity between blacks and whites and learn more about the history of the situation. In that sense, he was very open to experiences. The same can be said about his eager to learn from the different mentors he has met in life. He would ask many questions and try to take in everything they could tell him. These mentors have probably shaped Obama’s opinions later in life and given him certain perspectives on political questions that he might not have had if he never met them.

Renshon also brings up Obama’s boredom as an explanation for his desire to explore new opportunities. He says that Obama has not been stimulated enough at his former jobs and that he has wanted change quickly. One of Obama’s closest advisors, Valerie Jarrett, said that “He’s been bored to death his whole life. He is just too talented to do what ordinary people do. He would never be satisfied with what other people do.” According to this saying, it is not surprising that he has strived for more power to do something meaningful in life.

In sum, Obama has throughout his life soaked up new information from a variety of sources, and he still does this to shape his politics and take decisions. He is open-minded and ready to challenge himself as soon as he becomes too comfortable in a situation, therefore he scores high on openness to experience. The argument that he seems to not really listen to his opponents that was brought up in regard to extraversion can be applied to this trait as well, and will bring him down from the highest score of openness to experience.

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78 Remnick, p. 112
79 Ibid, p. 131
80 Renshon, p. 177-184
81 Remnick, p. 274
Conscientiousness

David Maraniss has studied the life of Barack Obama from his early childhood up until he decided to become a politician and he explains how Obama’s life has been shaped through his determination to avoid traps in life. The traps he brings up are Obama’s unusual family, the geographical trap of spending his childhood in Hawaii and Indonesia and the trap of race, how being black in America often is connected with rejection and cynicism. Maraniss supposes that these traps have made Obama more cautious and made him analyze life ahead. Obama was aware of his background and how his family and society had shaped him. This also made him conscious about the choices he made and how he could shape his own life by looking past the struggles he went through.82 Obama’s sister, Maya, has explained that Obama was “…one of those people who even as a young man was like an old man” and she has said that the family sensed that he would do something important in his life.83

His sister’s words seem quite doubtful if solely looking at Obama’s behavior in high school. He was never the top student; he was intelligent but sometimes paid more attention to basketball and partying than studying to achieve the highest grades.84 The distractions of his adolescence decreased when he grew older and realized that it would do him good to focus on his studies. Since then, Obama has been very ambitious and focused. As president, he has put forward many new policies that he has been determined to implement. He is dedicated and very observant of everything and everyone around him, and also very organized. These skills have helped him to be well prepared in political debates as well as in policy decisions.85

As a community organizer, Obama realized that the power to change was from the top, and mentioned that being mayor could help to accomplish his goals within the community.86 Renshon describes that Obama has approached his mentors with focus on his own goals, and was determined to achieve these goals with help from them. This proves his strategic thinking skills and his willpower to accomplish great things in life. Obama’s dedication to accomplish what he has decided to do in life shows that he has a high level of conscientiousness. This is probably Obama’s most distinguished feature of his personality, and the high score on this trait should make him very cautious when facing important decisions, such as taking action in

82 Maraniss p. 22-23
83 Remnick, p. 90
84 Renshon, p. 93
85 Ibid, p. 66-67
86 Remnick, p. 161
Syria. This might be the reason for him to hesitate before he acted in Syria. He wanted to have as much information as possible before he could take a decision, and tried to negotiate in the UN Security Council to be able to act legitimately.

**Neuroticism**

Obama’s younger sister has said that Obama has never been neurotic. He has always worked things out in his own way without involving others. The abandonment by his father, and later his mother, can have caused feelings of not being enough and questions of what he did wrong. To do something important in his life can be seen as a way to prove to them that he was worth more. His choice to prove that he was better than they thought, instead of feeling alone and worthless, shows that he can turn around something negative that could have pushed him down, to being a motivator for him.

Obama is aware of problems in the world, and has seen differences in how people are treated and how they live in other parts of the world. The way he addresses these problems and his concern about them shows that he has some neurotic influences. His level of neuroticism is although not very high, because he is convinced that these problems can be overcome and he has hope in change. The fact that he believed in himself and had hopes of becoming president shows a great amount of self-confidence, and little self-criticism. Many people in his surroundings have remarked his self-confidence as supreme and Obama himself has said “I have high expectations of myself and I usually meet them”, which would imply that he has strong faith in himself.

In regard to foreign policy issues, Obama expressed to have greater knowledge than his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, as well as the Republican candidate, John McCain. His amount of self-confidence can sometimes be so strong that it becomes difficult for him to handle criticism or to be put secondly. Renshon brings up Obama’s frustration of not being in the starting five when playing basketball and his anger of having received a B on a paper when he thought he deserved an A as examples of times when he did not handle criticism very well. These situations can show some neuroticism in his personality, but most of the

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87 Remnick, p. 83
88 Renshon, p. 81
89 Ibid, p. 157
90 Ibid, p. 168
91 Ibid, p. 19-121
time, Obama can be said to be a stable person because he keeps calm and even-tempered. Obama’s high level of conscientiousness brings down his neuroticism because it makes him less impulsive and makes him think through situations instead of panicking. Over all, he does have a bit of neurotic influences, but this is the dispositional trait where he scores the lowest.

Agreeableness

Obama’s Indonesian teacher has said that he was very helpful towards his friends and wanted everyone to be happy. His friends had many different backgrounds and according to one friend at Occidental University, Wahid Hamid, Obama could understand where both blacks and whites came from. He easily got along with people and they tended to like him right away, even though he moved around within different groups who had a variety of ethnicity. Barack Obama is said to have had a gift of being able to talk to everyone, no matter the position the person had in society. As a community organizer, he listened carefully to the thoughts of the community leaders and talked to the people easily. He worked every day of the week and the little free time he had was spent writing stories about his experiences. Even though he never had a problem socializing or get along with people, he preferred to focus on his work and his writing. The job as a community organizer shows that Obama has a great deal of empathy and a will to help those who are struggling in life. To be able to have this empathy, it is necessary to have the ability to create emotional attachments to people, which Obama has done, especially with his family. There have been times when this empathy has been lacking, for example when he decided to push through his transformational policies even though a large section of the American public tried to make him slow down. This indicates that he has empathy for the people he can identify with, but has trouble showing the same empathy to people with other beliefs.

Even though Obama was social and got along with most people, he was not very close to anyone for a long time and does not seem to have had someone he told everything during most of his childhood. It might be that he had a lack of trust, perhaps because of the distance of his parents. Overall, he would be placed a bit higher than the average level in regard to this trait. Obama’s position above average on this trait would imply that he has a tendency to

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93 Remnick, p. 101
94 Ibid, p. 121
95 Ibid, p. 137-138
96 Renshon, p. 196-198
solve conflicts peacefully, which he tried to do in Syria through negotiations in the UN and through support to the opposition groups working against Daesh. A president with a lower score in agreeableness and conscientiousness might have acted with military means sooner since someone with those characteristics has a tendency to act more aggressively and impulsively. Figure 1 shows a summary of where Obama is placed on a scale from very low to very high on each dispositional trait according to the findings from this study.

**Figure 1. Obama’s dispositional traits**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dispositional Traits</th>
<th>Very Low</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Very High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness to Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.4.3 Characteristic Adaptations

This level is where a person adapts to the social world the most. In his younger years, Obama felt a bit out of place, only when he played basketball he could feel as one in the team and just adapt to the role of a basketball player. He loved to play but was a bit frustrated about not being one of the best players on the team.97

When he transferred to Columbia University, his ambitions to study grew stronger, and since then he has been motivated to work hard. When he got involved in politics, it was no surprise that he strived for the highest possible position. The only thing that could have stopped him from trying to become president was his family. The role of a husband and father is one that he takes very seriously, and his wife, Michelle, was the one with the final say in if he should run for president or not.98 Michelle has also been seen as the one that can ‘put him in place’

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97 Remnick, p. 91-92
98 Price, p. 17
and keep his feet on the ground during his successful career.\textsuperscript{99} As president, he has worked hard to take in and process all the information that is handled to him. He has explained that in order to take good decisions, it is important to be well informed and to understand what the main issue is. Obama says the job is a lot of hard work, but he still tries to spend time with his family and do other things he enjoys.\textsuperscript{100} This shows that he takes his job very seriously and is motivated to adjust his life to the busy schedule of a president, but he will not let it take over his life with his family.

To study Obama’s decision-making, it is important to understand the events taking place around him. At the time when he was elected, the financial crisis had caused high unemployment, a chaotic housing market and many institutions and industries were close to insolvency. The support of George W. Bush had decreased distinctively and the American people wanted change. Obama quickly filled that position and became a leader of hope for the future.\textsuperscript{101} When he was elected president, he had big goals for the future and of what he wanted to accomplish as president on both domestic and international levels. In the field of foreign policy, he sought to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, work closer with allies, ease tensions in Iraq, Iran and North Korea as well as decrease the use of nuclear power. What can be asked in regard to these strong ambitions is where the motivation came from to do it all?\textsuperscript{102}

Obama did not only have great ambitions for his presidency, he also wanted to act quickly. He seemed to believe that he had a time constraint of passing his legislation changes and therefore pushed for many changes right away. Some would say that everything happened too fast and that the public could not keep up with his pace.\textsuperscript{103} Obama knew his time as president was limited and that the possibility to change America from the top would decrease rapidly. His normal state of planning and thinking over every choice seemed to not be his highest priority once he was elected, instead his self-confidence and ambition of transformation took over and he did not want to wait for approval or work with one change at a time. Obama had worked hard to reach the position of president of the United States and wanted to make the most of it while it lasted.

\textsuperscript{99} Renshon, p. 172
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid, p. 61-62
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid, p. 5-6
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid, p. 25
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid, p. 150
Five years later, at the time of the decision to take military action in Syria, half of his second term as president had passed and he knew that his possibilities to change policies were limited. He came into office with a vision to change terrorism policies in the US, but after the failure to close down Guantanamo Bay and take home the forces in Iraq, Obama might have lost his hope in creating more peaceful counterterrorism policies. The Gallup poll shows that the support for intervention in Syria was low, but Obama still chose to act with force. If Obama would have been running for president again, his decision might have been different since the support of the people would have been more important.

5.4.4 Narrative Identity

Renshon has analyzed Obama from a psychological perspective and mentions that Obama sees himself as deliberate and methodological in his decision-making. This would mean that he always considers a decision from different perspectives and thinks of the possible consequences. What is interesting is that Renshon does not agree that these characteristics fit with the way Obama has made decisions as president. He describes Obama as an extreme risk taker who can be impatient and ambitious, which can take over his deliberativeness. This shows that Obama’s thoughts about himself do not always correspond with his actions. It has been difficult to point out exactly where Obama stands politically and what type of leadership style he can be associated with. When elected, he did not have a long record of political engagement, which made it hard to predict what decisions he would take in certain situations. He says himself that he is a consummate pragmatist who wants to solve problems with the best ideas, whether these ideas are liberal or conservative.

Obama spent a lot of his life trying to find his political identity and his role in society. During high school, he changed his behavior, trying to immerse himself in an African-American culture. He listened to music and read books by African-Americans and discussed the subject of race with African-American friends. Barack Obama has a special background of a mix of cultures and relatives living in different parts of the world. These factors have made it possible for him as a politician to use himself as a metaphor for American diversity.

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104 Renshon, p. 3
105 Ibid, p. 9
106 Ibid, p. 76-77
107 Ibid, p. 9
108 Remnick, p. 78-80
109 Ibid, p. 69
believes in fairness and justice, and considers himself a moral leader. This can be seen as a legacy from his mother who was an open-minded woman working to improve social justice. His mother was focused on treating everyone fairly, which has influenced Obama to shape his politics around this value.\textsuperscript{110} Obama has also expressed a will to transform America and to change the world. He made clear that he wanted to become a great president, which he explained to be one “who transforms how we think about ourselves as a country in fundamental ways”.\textsuperscript{111}

In the Syrian conflict, Obama’s view of himself as a moral leader was important. He says that he believes in fairness among people; which should make it impossible for him to not take action when a terrorist organization like Daesh acts violently and kills innocent people. A president without the same view of America as a moral actor in the world might have solely helped by giving aid to civilians and by supporting local troops who are fighting Daesh, but would not have wanted to get America directly involved. The reason to use harder measures can be based on Obama’s pragmatic leadership and strong goal-orientation; when he had set the goal to destroy Daesh, this goal became more important than the tactics used to reach it.

5.4.5 Culture

About his heritage, Obama has said; “I was as an Indonesia child and a Hawaiian child and as a black child and as a white child. And so what I benefit from is a multiplicity of cultures that all fed me.” Obama was born in Hawaii and his African father and American mother has given him a difficult time finding his own identity in society. Hawaii, where he mainly grew up, was a multicultural state, but there was a very limited amount of African-Americans living there. He tried to find his own place within society from what others had said and what his mother could tell him about the black culture.\textsuperscript{112}

Obama has attended several top schools, and therefore been surrounded by high achievers, most with rich families. As a child, he was able to get into Punahou, the finest private school in Hawaii.\textsuperscript{113} Later in life, he was accepted to Harvard Law School, one of the Ivy League

\textsuperscript{110} Renshon, p. 100-104
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid, p. 85
\textsuperscript{112} Renshon, p. 26
\textsuperscript{113} Remnick, p. 71
The different cultures surrounding Obama has given him an ability to understand people from different backgrounds, but has also made it hard for him to fit in. He chose to identify himself as black and felt comfortable in the black neighborhoods in Chicago, even though he was genetically just as much a white man. The black heritage he had was from his father who came from Africa, and not from an Afro-American family, therefore he had a different cultural background than the black community he became a part of in Chicago. His way to find his identity has been filled with struggles as well as opportunities, but it was when he had finally found himself he could start to think of what he wanted to accomplish in life and start his journey to become president.

5.4.6 Summary of the Five-Level Model

Obama’s mix of cultures, as well as the other four levels of his personality has shaped his life, his political views and his decision-making. The analysis of the level of evolutionary design is limited, and mainly describes how parts of Obama’s personality are based on his genetics. The level of dispositional traits is the main level of this study since it describes Obama’s traits and how they affect his actions. Obama’s most distinguished trait is conscientiousness, which implies that he is very intelligent, goal-oriented and cautious. Obama also scores high in openness to experience and therefore is motivated to find information about the situation and to see it from different perspectives. Extraversion says more about how he presents himself and his choices than about the factors that lies behind the decision. Obama’s agreeableness is found to be above average, but his strong self-confidence and difficulties to show empathy for the people he cannot identify with brings down this level. All the traits are connected to each other in some ways, it is for example impossible to be very cautious and very impulsive at the same time, which implies that the high score in conscientiousness brings down the score in neuroticism to a low level.

The level of characteristic adaptations is used to understand the situational effect and the circumstances that shape one’s personality in certain moments of life. When Obama was elected, the American people were tired of Middle Eastern wars; which Obama benefitted from. A few years later, the conflict in Syria had intensified; Daesh had enlarged its territory significantly and become a bigger threat. Here is where the level of life narrative becomes central, because it shows how Obama sees himself and how this view shapes his actions. The

114 Nationalencyklopedin, (Ivy League)
importance of this level can differ between people depending on how strongly one believes to have a possibility to change, and how one considers the available options. Obama wanted to be a moral leader and believed to be able to change the world. The level of culture can mainly be used to describe how a person’s traits have developed and how one’s view of the world has been founded. Culture cannot in itself say much about the decision, but it builds up the traits that are unique for each person.

5.6 Options
As president, it is important to have leadership integrity, meaning that one needs to have the character to stand up for one’s convictions, no matter the circumstances, and to have a political identity. The identity of a president does not only include the beliefs and values he claims to have, but also that he actually governs on behalf of these claims. It is important for a president to follow his promises to provide legitimacy for the voters. According to this, Obama must follow the promises he has stated and make decisions that suit his stated goals. To be able to act legitimately, he had to choose wisely among the options he had to make sure that he acted according to his promises.

The counterterrorism strategies that have been used throughout history have been shaped by the circumstances of that time. During the Cold war, deterrence was the main strategy used in foreign policy. The strategy is based on threats to prevent someone from doing a certain act and was still used in the years after the end of the Cold war, up until September 11th, 2001. After 9/11, a new strategy was addressed, a 4D-strategy that should be used against the terrorist threat. The four pillars building up the strategy were to defeat, deny, diminish, and defend against the enemy. The 4D-strategy was used in the invasion in Afghanistan and the idea was to attack terrorists more frequently and more relentlessly to defeat them faster. The Bush administration also declared that preemption could be used if necessary, and the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, justified the invasion in Iraq by saying that America could not wait for an unconventional event to happen before they acted.

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115 Renshon, p. 125-126
116 Sheehan, p. 15-18
In a speech held in 2009 on national security, Obama declared that the former government had done hasty decisions based on fear rather than foresight. He said that the way terrorism had been fought was neither sustainable nor effective, and was not based on American values and traditions.\textsuperscript{117} Obama came into office declaring a more peaceful strategy where military action should not be the principal way of solving problems. He empathized the efforts to stop the cause of terrorism, such as failed states and inequalities, and not only to fight the active extremists. These strategies are said to be less risky than forceful attacks, but it takes time to see any result, and it is also difficult to measure such results.\textsuperscript{118}

On a domestic level, Obama’s new measures were not very popular, neither among the public nor in the Congress. It is although the measures that would suit best with his ambition to use peaceful strategies, but it can be questioned if it correspond with Obama’s ambition to promote a fair and just society and to be a moral leader of the world?\textsuperscript{119} If only the domestic level is considered, the risk of fueling extremism that Stern mentioned would decrease, and Americans would not be directly threatened. The option to attack forcefully shows that America acknowledges Daesh as a threat and that the White House is willing to take action to stop the organization. Military attacks could have been used either from the ground or from the air. The first choice would have integrated American soldiers to the opposition groups, to increase the size of the group and add knowledge from well-trained soldiers. This option could have limited civilian casualties and destruction. The other option, which was chosen, was to strike Daesh-controlled territory through aircraft and drones. This was considered the safest method in regard of protecting American lives, since the risk of American casualties is low when there are no boots on the ground. Because of the complicated situation in Syria, there was also a question of who to support if getting involved. In the fight against Daesh, there were three different options of groups to support: the forces of the regime, the Kurds, and the rebels who were working against the regime and Daesh. America chose to support the rebels and the Kurds, who both were fighting against Daesh and the Assad regime simultaneously.\textsuperscript{120} \textsuperscript{121}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[117] Renshon, p. 90
\item[118] Stern, p. 62-63
\item[119] Renshon, p. 99-100
\item[120] Syria Crisis: Where key countries stand, \textit{BBC News}, 2015-10-30
\item[121] Under Kurdish attacks, ISIS loses main stronghold in Hasakah, \textit{ARA News}, 2015-03-01
\end{footnotes}
Obama has made clear in several speeches that the goal is to degrade and ultimately destroy Daesh, but also that it’s not in the interest of America to send ground troops to combat the organization. He stated that it could fuel extremism to put boots on the ground, and therefore it was not an option. Hillary Clinton said in an interview in August 2014, one month before the air strikes started, that Obama had been too cautious in his foreign policy and that America could have given more help to the Syrian rebels. She also said that the US failed to back up the opposition, which created a vacuum that was filled by jihadists. This shows different views of the situation that can be identified among the Democratic party, but it is impossible to say what the consequences would have been if harder measures would have been used sooner.

6. Conclusion and Further Research

Obama’s personality can explain the decision to launch airstrikes in Syria in several ways. His conscientiousness explains the hesitation to use harder measures early, because he wanted to analyze the possible outcomes of his options. His strong confidence upheld this strategy, and he was determined not to start another armed conflict in the Middle East. Obama’s level of agreeableness implies a will to solve conflicts peacefully, but this will was eventually overthrown by his stronger motivation to combat Daesh and prove that he defended America and the world from terrorists. The executions of the American journalists James Foley and Steven Joel Sotloff can have worked as a trigger to act with harder measures since these acts proved that the organization was a direct threat towards the US.

The way Obama narrates himself as a moral leader suggests that the change in tactics was not very surprising; he saw civilians being brutally killed by a terrorist organization that is opposed to the liberal values of the Western world, and wanted to show that he despises this behavior. His personality has shown to include facets that imply that he might not always stick to the peaceful strategies as he first said he would follow. When he is pressured, and when America is directly threatened, his will to change the situation quickly overthrew his cautiousness; therefore he acted more aggressively and decided to use military means to combat Daesh in Syria. The negotiations in the UN Security Council did not result in any effective actions because of the vetoes from Russia and China, but Obama did not let that stop

122 The White House, Weekly address: We will Degrade and destroy ISIL, 2014-09-13
him. This can be explained by Obama’s level of agreeableness; he prefers to solve conflicts through deliberation, but since he scores around the average level on this trait, he does not entirely oppose other means of solving the situation.

The study concludes that the personality of a leader can be used to explain foreign policy decisions. Some may suggest that other factors have been more important, such as the organizational structure of the bureaucracy or the relationships with other states in the international arena. Because of the lack of transparency in the process leading up to a decision it is also hard to know exactly what Obama’s personal opinion is and if it was the one they followed in this case. The purpose of the study was although not to compare alternative factors, but to understand how personality can contribute to the explanation of decision-making, which has been done using the Five-Level Model in relation to the attacks against Daesh. If the study would have been done through another perspective, for example the realism perspective where states are the central actors, the result might have been different. To be able to fully understand the decision-making process leading up to the decision to launch air strikes in Syria, studies focusing on other factors or using other perspectives need to be completed in the future. A comparison between the actions of different presidents in similar situations can also be done as a contribution to the literature.
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