

**University of Peloponnese  
Faculty of Social and Political Sciences  
Department of Political Studies and International  
Relations**

**Master's Program in  
"Mediterranean Studies"**

**Obama in Syria: strategic confusion in a time of US  
retrenchment**

**Charalampos Tsitsopoulos**

**Corinth, Greece, October 2018**

# **Obama in Syria: strategic confusion in a time of US retrenchment**

**Keywords:** US foreign policy, Barack Obama, realism, grand strategy, Arab Spring, Syria

## **Abstract**

This dissertation deals with former US President Barack Obama's policy towards Syria, after the outbreak of the country's rebellion in 2011. With reference to Syria Barack Obama is widely considered to have been a realist. By explicating Obama's policies vis-à-vis four main critical junctures in the country's civil war, the essay aims to show that President Obama's Syria policies were not realist, locating this within the context of his general failure to formulate and subsequently pursue a clearly defined grand strategy towards the country. Rather, it is asserted, Obama's Syria policies were the sum of ad hoc measures informed by generally pragmatic instincts, which should not be equated with realism. Having inherited a bitter legacy from his predecessor and facing a regional and global context in flux, Obama's overarching guiding principle was to keep America away from further adventurism, focus on domestic priorities, while preparing for a pivot to Asia. It is borne in mind that the Syrian conflict presented the President with immense complexities and was extremely hard to navigate. Yet from a US vantage point, while Obama cannot be reproached for pursuing a more cautious approach than President Bush, he can certainly be charged with not pinpointing America's regional interests in the context of the Syrian war and then pursuing a clear strategy to advance these interests.

## Table of contents

Abstract	
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Realism and US policy</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3. Literature review</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4. Recent history of US policies towards Syria</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>5. Obama and Syria</b>	
5.1 Obama's initial response to the uprisings: from realism to policy confusion	12
5.2 (Not) arming the rebels: from 2012 to 2013	16
5.3 Chemical weapons and 'red lines'	21
5.3.1 The background of the 2013 crisis	
5.3.2 Syria's chemical weapons in the context of realism	23
5.4. The anti-ISIS campaign and the Russian intervention: a realist turn?	27
5.4.1 The anti-ISIS campaign	27
5.4.2 The Russian intervention	30
<b>6. The regional and international implications of Obama's Syria policies</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>7. Conclusion</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>37</b>

# 1. Introduction

This essay inquires into the nature of former US President Barack Obama's policy towards Syria, with a focus on Obama's post-Arab Spring policies vis-à-vis the country. The 2011 revolt in Syria was preceded by two years of US engagement. During this time, US policy towards the country was one of accommodation. Obama recognized Syria's importance in regional affairs, particularly in light of a 2010 effort by Turkey to mediate Syrian-Israeli talks.

The outbreak of Syria's rebellion put an abrupt end to the US approach of engagement. This essay puts forth the notion that, contrary to received wisdom, President Obama's approach towards Syria was not one of realism. While true that President Obama's stance in Syria was usually cautious, mostly avoiding his predecessor's adventurism and direct entanglement, this essay purports that this was not because the Obama administration pursued a carefully thought out, coherent policy of realism. As a matter of fact, the essay's departure point is that Obama can hardly be considered a realist president. What at times has been called the 'Obama Doctrine' is not much more than a catch-all term, mostly informed by a tendency towards ad hoc engagement and an abstract multilateralism in tackling outstanding issues, with a general prioritization of domestic affairs leading to a feeling of international retrenchment.

In large part, Barack Obama's policies should be understood in the context of this abstract foreign policy dogma. The latter is not a coherent unit, but its certainly informed by certain overarching principles the former President tried to abide by: minimizing America's footprint abroad (at any cost, some have argued), avoiding new uncertain entanglements, working in a multilateral framework where and if engagement is necessary and focusing on domestic nation-building and the bequeathal of a legacy of progressive reforms. Pertinently, Obama's presidency began within a domestic and international context in flux; domestically, a US economy in recess and public fatigue with wars; internationally, a global financial crisis, two regional wars in full gear and the rise of China, with concomitant talk of a pivot to Asia.

All of the above has meant that President Obama at times seemed eager to avoid further foreign entanglement at any cost, even at the expense of formulating a

coherent strategy. In Syria, this has had several unfortunate effects: highly vague policies leading to uncertain expectations, increasing allied dissatisfaction, gains by the US's regional foes and in the end, the continued destabilization of a country ever at the heart of regional developments. The above are hardly ingredients of a realist policy. At the same time, President Obama's idealist pronouncements were never followed up on. The result was a policy that was neither realist nor idealist, as suggested by some.

The essay will begin by briefly defining the contours of realism. It will proceed with reviewing the literature on Obama's Syria policies. As will be asserted, there is a preponderance of realist views of President Obama's policies. Some scholars also view Obama's Syria policies as a mix of realism and idealism, although the case for the latter is very weak. The essay will then proceed with a brief overview of US policies vis-à-vis Syria under previous US Presidents. It will then analyse President Obama's policies after the outbreak of the uprisings in the country. To assess the nature of President Obama's policies, the dissertation will look into what Yacoubian (2017) has called the Syrian turmoil's 'critical junctures'<sup>1</sup>: the reaction to the outbreak of demonstrations and the call for Assad to go, the US relationship with and (non)arming of the Syrian rebels, the 2013 chemical attack controversy, and Russia's intervention and the US response.

The essay is by no means a polemic against the former US President. It is duly understood that, possibly more than any other country, Syria presented Barack Obama with immense complexities that can only be fathomed in hindsight. Rather, an attempt is made to pinpoint the nature of Obama's Syria policies, which were implemented outside the context of a grand, or for that matter any kind of, strategy. That the latter never materialized does not mean that the Obama administration had no strategic deliberations and calculations whatsoever. It does mean, however, that means were hardly tied to certain goals and at the end, the estimation of immediate consequences trumped the formation of a long-term, cohesive strategy vis-à-vis the country. As Saunders (2014) has eloquently put it, realism is much more than pragmatism. And

---

<sup>1</sup> These junctures are generally accepted by most analysts, even if not by the same name. For example, in its comprehensive report on Western involvement in Syria, Chatham House (2017) calls these junctures 'inflection points'.

Obama's Syria policies did not seem to be much more than a sum of pragmatism in isolated cases.

## 2. Realism and US policy

The school of realism encompasses a wide range of definitions and ideas. As Donnelly (2000, pg. 6) points, it is not a theory defined by an explicit set of assumptions and propositions, but ‘a general orientation’. This orientation, however, is informed by some core principles common to all of its strains: the core of it is defined by ‘the conjunction of anarchy and egoism and the resulting imperatives of power politics’ (Donnelly, 2005). For Gilpin (1986) realism’s distinctive feature is the primacy in all political life of power and security.

Debates between scholars about the most accurate definition of realism notwithstanding, most realist work since the 1970s has been more or less rigorously structural (Donnelly, 2005). Structural realism was first conceived during the bipolar Cold War era but was also used during the subsequent uni- (or multi-) polar one, with only a modest comeback of neo-classical realism.<sup>2</sup> In addition to notions of a structural ordering of the world system and power politics within the restraints of this system, structural realism also places important emphasis on alliances and offshore balancing, namely the notion of utilising regional allies to check the rise of new regional powers.

However, structural realism’s almost obsessional prioritization of *realpolitik* has been challenged by a number of international relations theories, not least by the neo-classical realist current itself, which ascribes more importance to international norms and institutions, even if these are to be used by great powers precisely in their pursuit of legitimacy or even power maximization.

Therefore, to explicate whether vis-à-vis Syria Obama was a realist, as is so often claimed, this essay will examine Obama’s policies not solely via the prism of all the realist strains’ least common denominators –namely a focus on alliances, the pursuit of one’s strategic interests with little regard for moral repercussions and power as the main vector of international strategy - but also via that of international institutions and norms, which for some realists also help to further one’s (realist) strategic interests.

---

<sup>2</sup> See for example Rose, G., 1998. Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy. *World Politics*, 51(1), pp. 144-172

A caveat should be borne in mind: even the most ardent purist would agree that grand strategies are never all-encompassing. This means that even if the general context of a US president's policy is one of, for example, realism, specific policies might stretch this realism or encompass elements of other models. This means that at times, even a realist or idealist president can pursue specific policies whose outcomes contradict these outlooks. For example, it is reasonable to believe that as Brands (2017) writes, Obama's grand strategy fits squarely within the broad contours of post-Cold War American statecraft, with the objective of maintaining U.S. primacy and a liberal international order. But in Syria, as will be shown, Obama at times acted in ways that militated against both of these objectives.



### 3. Literature review

Literature on the Obama administration and Syria has been in no shortage. This is only natural, as the country has been part of the Arab Spring uprisings. In addition, Syria has been probably the only case in the context of these uprisings where the Obama administration's stance cannot be explained by a certain set of principles, or at best clear overarching guidelines. By admission of the former President himself, the Syrian war haunts him (Liptak, 2016). Yet, interestingly enough, academic treatment of Obama and Syria has mostly taken place within the context of the wider discussion on US policies vis-à-vis the Arab Uprisings. Within this discussion, the predominant conceptual framework through which US policies towards the Arab uprisings have been understood is one of tension between two normative preferences: that of a stable order that secures the safety of Israel, the free flow of energy and the global fight against terrorism and that of a democratic order (Huber, 2015). In simpler terms, it is the long-standing tension between protecting "interests" (foreign policy realism) and pursuing "values" (foreign policy idealism) (Atlas, 2012). For the sake of a conclusive debate, one could also add the concepts of internationalism and isolationism, which at times have been attributed to Obama's Syria policies, although these concepts –the latter one in particular- are hardly constructive in understanding his policies.

In the most comprehensive monograph devoting a large space to Obama's Syria policies so far, Christopher Phillips (2016) lays out a conceptual framework whereby Obama's handling of Syria ought to be understood as part of a general approach of retrenchment from a region undergoing transition (Phillips, 2016, pg. 25), in which, however, realist elements came to dominate over idealist ones. Although Phillip's analysis of US retrenchment makes enough sense, his explication of Obama's realism in Syria leaves something to be desired: he explains this realism by means of Obama's most influential foreign policy advisers being realist, while liberal interventionists (Hillary Clinton, Samantha power and Susan Rice) were either marginalised or paid less attention to on key decisions (Phillips, 2016, pg. 26). However, as will be pointed later, Obama's decision-making process was quite person-centered: while the President liked to deliberate with an expanded group of advisors, the final decision always laid with him. Fathoming the personal impact each strain of advisors (realist, interventionist) had on him is thus next to impossible.

Huber (2015) has no patience for either realism or idealism. For her, the wider US response to the Arab Spring showed no clear patterns of goals or instruments. In light of this, and despite Syria being “a country of major interest for the US”, the latter displayed a stark lack of either a strategic vision or concrete goals for the country. This lack has led to only limited security goals. In the same vein, in Syria the US has displayed an ad hoc set of reactions, where instruments have often contradicted each other (Huber, 2015). At the same time, some room is left for internationalism, as Huber regards the lack of an international consensus –as in Libya- as the main factor behind the lack of the use of force by the US in the country. Finally, Huber asserts that it is precisely the uncertainty as to its geostrategic interest, notably in the case of Syria, that renders any talk of realism prohibitive. Tyler (2017) views Obama’s Syria policies via a totally different prism; she explains Obama’s actions via an ‘arc of disenchantment’, whereby Obama’s initial realist worldview, swept by the fervor of the promise the uprisings held, was transformed into idealism in Egypt and Libya<sup>3</sup>. Following disappointment with the course of events in these two, Obama reverted to realism, which for Tyler explains his policies towards Syria. In the latter, Obama was determined to avoid mistakes made in Egypt and Libya (Tyler, 2017).

Prominent realist scholar Stephen Walt deems that despite the existence of some realist elements in Obama’s worldview<sup>4</sup>, these were not applied in the Syrian case. While Walt considers no vital interests to have been at stake in Syria and thus holds Obama’s decision to stay out as correct, he lambasts Obama’s Syria policy as not genuinely realist. A realist policy in Syria would have ‘eschewed “regime change” and other forms of social engineering’ and would have instead returned to a strategy of ‘offshore balancing’ (Walt, 2016). Walt also deplores Obama’s general lack of strategic vision for the region, which left his policies vacillating between a vague realism and a vague idealism. That Obama did not present a realist strategy for Syria did not prevent some from calling him a realist. Renowned Israeli Syria expert Eyal Zisser calls Obama’s Syria policy one of ‘pure realism, even a cynical one’ (Zisser,

---

<sup>3</sup> This is in itself disputable. It could be argued that Libya, where the US had no major geostrategic interests and thus made an intervention ‘on the cheap’, offered some space for idealism. Yet in Egypt Obama did not exactly prove his idealist credentials. He only called on Mubarak to step down when the latter’s fate had been sealed.

<sup>4</sup> Such as that U.S. power is not unlimited, that military power is a crude instrument that cannot solve every problem, Obama’s belief that the U.S. is extremely secure and that no foolish wars need to be fought in order for the U.S. to keep its credibility

personal communication, 2018). David (2015) sees Obama's Syria policies 'both violating and supporting' the realist approach.

Finally, Josef Joffe has articulated a view of Obama that might strike one as extreme: taking Syria as the 'perfect case study', Joffe calls Obama an isolationist (Joffe, 2016). Joffe's argument is mostly based on Obama's way of handling the 2013 chemical weapons crisis, which opened the door for the Russian strategic re-entry into the Eastern Mediterranean. This argument should not be discarded outright. However, as is the case with many accusations hurled at Obama *ex post facto*, the intellectual clarity accorded by hindsight should not be projected onto past events: it was other, stronger considerations that drove Obama to strike a deal with the Russians in mid-2013 and not a belief in the inevitability of America's retreat from the Middle East.

This essay sets itself the following task: while a lot has been written on Obama's Syria policies, academic articles are scarce after 2015. The same is true regarding academic books on Syria, where in most a passing reference is made to US policies without delving deeper.<sup>5</sup> The number of academic articles inquiring into the precise nature of Obama's Syria policies also becomes smaller after the above date. This essay aims to address this gap.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> See for example, most recently, Nikolaos Van Dam's *Syria* (2017), Frédéric Pichon's *Syrie: une guerre pour rien* (2017) and Régis Le Sommier's *Assad* (2018).

<sup>6</sup> The completion of the Obama presidency as well as the time elapsed since then allow for a lucid assessment of Obama's Syria policies. Careful not to abuse the benefit of hindsight, the essay will not try to draw connections between events and possible corollaries which could have not been predicted at the time the events took place. After all, history moves in non-linear and non-teleological ways.

## 4. Recent history of US policies towards Syria

US-Syrian relations have never been uneventful. After the end of World War II and the establishment of the state of Israel, Syria's primary role as the beating heart of Arabism, its closeness to the USSR and its positioning as the 'principal hardliner' of the Arab-Israeli conflict (Lucas, 1994) have meant that for the most part US-Syrian views have diverged. It should be remembered that Syria's position has always been that a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict should be holistic and not piecemeal.<sup>7</sup> In that sense, the US approach toward Syria has never been a purely bilateral one. Rather, Syria has always figured as inextricably linked to a larger scheme of regional balances.

Precisely because of Syria's regional importance, communication channels with the country were always kept open.<sup>8</sup> Between 1950 and 1981 Syria received \$627.4 million in development, economic and food aid (Sharp & Prados, 2007). As Richard Murphy, US ambassador to Syria in 1974-1978 later claimed, after the 1973 War 'the United States was little concerned with Assad's repressive domestic policies' (Murphy, 2012). Ronald Reagan's coming to power further solidified the 'reign of the realists' (Sadat and Jones, 2009). Reagan saw conflict in the Levant as potentially increasing the Soviet Union's appeal (Leverett, 2005). Thus, Syria was deemed too powerful to snub or alienate, even as the Reagan administration placed increasing emphasis on fighting terrorism, of which Syria was labelled a main sponsor. In the mid-1980s talk of a possible strike on Syria was widespread and the country was seen as hostile to the US.<sup>9</sup> Reagan's realism lay in not completely alienating or bullying Syria. But in terms of constructive engagement not much was done: as claimed by a Syrian Foreign Ministry official in late 1983, it was indeed Washington that drove Syria into the Soviets' arms (Lucas, 1994).

Under President George H.W. Bush realism remained the norm. Syria's stature in the Arab world convinced the American President that the country needed to be included in the coalition that aimed to expel Saddam Hussein's forces from Kuwait. In a

---

<sup>7</sup> Hence Syria's virulent opposition to the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel in 1978 and the Israeli-Jordan Peace Treaty of 1994.

<sup>8</sup> This being the case even after 1979, when Syria was added to the list of state sponsors of terrorism.

<sup>9</sup> Although never to the extent of Libya or Iran.

shifting global context, Syria did not need do too much thinking and curried favour with the US. Hafez al-Assad also accepted the American invitation to the ensuing Madrid Middle East Peace Conference.

President Bill Clinton's approach to Syria was not too different. Clinton understood the importance of Syria for a regional settlement. This meant that despite U.S. Congress skepticism in light of Syria's occupation of Lebanon and accusations of seeking to acquire weapons of mass destruction (Dumbrell, 2002), Syria was engaged. Clinton tried to advance bilateral Israeli-Syrian talks, despite the latter shortly floundering (Zisser, 2017).<sup>10</sup>

George W. Bush's presidency marked an important shift regarding the country. A half century-long policy of realism was punctured by Bush's aggressive idealism.<sup>11</sup> Bush's volte face was indeed impressive if one considers that Syria had hardly altered its bilateral policies.<sup>12</sup> Following the 9/11 attacks Syria provided the Americans with high quality intelligence on Al-Qaeda. This was possibly an opening by President Bashar al-Assad aimed at improving ties with the US (Perra, 2016). But it was short-lived. President Bush's priorities lay elsewhere, namely in regimes that were long thought to sponsor terror, contravening the American president's regional democratization agenda and in states that sponsored enemies of Israel, mainly Hamas and Hizbullah. At the same time, Syria's willingness to cooperate was not entirely unwelcome: a kind of conceptual schizophrenia ensued, which resulted in the US adopting an 'ambiguous and somewhat incomprehensible policy' (Scheller, 2013, p. 57), where an attempt was made at reconciling realism and neo-conservative idealism. This did not last more than a year. In mid-2002, the official policy towards Syria became 'opposition through isolation' (Sadat & Jones, 2009).

---

<sup>10</sup> Clinton was the first US President to visit Syria after Nixon and his Secretary of State Warren Christopher made over twenty trips to the country (Lesch, 2005, p. 104).

<sup>11</sup> Although beyond the scope of this paper, it would be pertinent to briefly address the rise of neo-conservatism. David W. Lesch, a foremost Syria expert has mapped out the influential chorus that, starting in the mid-1990s, became increasingly vocal about the need for a harsher stance against Damascus, whose engagement was deemed dangerous to U.S. and Israeli interests. Working from within the think-tank, media and academic establishment, this group laid the ground for a U-turn regarding Syria. The election of George W. Bush and the events of 9/11 led to the 'more propitious environment' (Lesch, 2005, p. 106) needed for such a shift.

<sup>12</sup> As a matter of fact, Syria welcomed Bush's election in the hope that he would be less beholden to what Syrians saw as the outsized influence of the Israeli lobby than his predecessor (Zisser, 2009).

Not before long things turned sour. Although not mentioned in the infamous ‘Axis of evil’ speech, Syria was soon added to the list of ‘rogue states’ by John Bolton, then undersecretary of state for arms control. As the Iraq War approached, powerful neo-conservative voices in Washington opposing US-Syria engagement became louder. When Syria opposed a UN mandate for war in Iraq, it was considered an anti-American move (Hadar, 2007). This played right into neo-conservative hands.<sup>13</sup> Amidst the rising anti-American insurgency in Iraq, Syria was accused of aiding the insurgents. The US Congress passed the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act<sup>14</sup>, while sanctions were imposed in mid-2004. The murder of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in mid 2005 threatened further escalation. Not only did Washington join with France in an international campaign to implicate –and thus further weaken- al-Assad, but during the 2006 Lebanese-Israeli war Bush encouraged Israel to extend its campaign to Syria. In late 2006, the chargé d’affaires at the U.S. embassy in Damascus sent a cable indicating that destabilizing the Syrian government was ‘a central motivation of U.S. policy’ (Wikileaks, 2006).

President Bush’s strategy did not bring about the desired results, or any results for that matter. As Zisser (2013) asserts, Washington failed to create any effective means of leverage. By severing channels of communication, Syria was impelled to strengthen its ties with Iran, support for Hamas and Hezbollah was boosted and turmoil in Iraq increased Iran’s regional footprint (Kabalan, 2016). Thus, late into its second term, the US administration took a somewhat realist turn: in 2007, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with Syrian officials twice to discuss the war in Iraq. Syria participated in the Annapolis Middle East Peace Conference late in the same year and seemed to rehabilitate itself in the international community.<sup>15</sup> A refocused Bush administration now opened up opportunities for the influence of realism on its policy toward Syria (Sadat & Jones, 2009).

---

<sup>13</sup> For the latter, as Zunes (2004) has pointed, Syria’s greatest offense was opposing Bush’s regional foreign policy agenda. By the time the Iraq War was launched, there was even talk of extending regime change to Syria.

<sup>14</sup> The Act’s purpose was to end Syrian support for terrorism, end its presence in Lebanon, to stop its development of weapons of mass destruction and to end its shipments of arms to anti-US forces in Iraq

<sup>15</sup> Also by intensifying contacts with European countries, which in late 2007 and 2008 visited Damascus, and later signing business deals and being invited to the inauguration of the Union for the Mediterranean

## 5. Obama and Syria

### 5.1 Obama's initial response to the uprisings: from realism to policy confusion

The regional context President Obama inherited has already been explained. It has also been asserted that for two years the country had not only been treated as a necessary nuisance but also actively engaged. This is not to say that the bilateral climate was sanguine. But Syria seemed to be the last arena where President Obama would want new trouble.

Thus, when uprisings broke out in the country the US administration was naturally cautious. The last thing Obama wanted as the US was withdrawing from Iraq was a destabilized Syria operating as a launching pad for jihadists crossing into Iraq (Lesch, 2012, pg. 123). At the same time, a potential collapse of the Syrian state and consequent spillover into other regional countries could mean that the US could be sucked in (Lesch, 2012, pg. 124) just when its retrenchment from the region was being carried out. Finally, it would be hard to overstate the potential domestic repercussions of a new US military embroilment in the Middle East.

Yet, as has been pointed already, the driving forces behind Obama's strategic calculations were far from monolithically realist. To begin with, a kind of anti-Syria inertia had been left over from the days of George Bush (Lesch, 2012, pg.). At the same time, Obama's repeated pronouncements regarding the Middle East (and the world in large) had been a mix of realist, idealist and internationalist elements, at times the latter two being very prominent. Thus, while realist calculations about stability in Syria came first, Obama could not be seen as completely ignoring what was perceived as an increasingly brutal anti-protestor campaign in the country. Very importantly, Obama might not have been surrounded by Bush's aggressive idealists but he was surrounded by a young cohort of the liberal interventionist variety (The Economist, 2013). Also weighing heavily was domestic cross-party criticism regarding his handling of the Syria crisis.<sup>16</sup> This meant that if al-Assad did not

---

<sup>16</sup> Although most of this criticism came from the Republican Party, a non-negligible amount of Democrats also castigated Obama as hedging his bets.

introduce some kind of reforms shortly, pressure on Obama to do, or at least say, something would increase exponentially.

Predictably, the Obama administration hardened its stance in late April, when the end of the use of violence was deemed imperative and sanctions imposed. Bashar al-Assad himself was sanctioned on 18 May.<sup>17</sup> July 2011 was the catalyst in terms of the US administration's increasingly confrontational attitude towards the Syrian regime; On 11 July Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that Assad has lost legitimacy, is not indispensable and that the US had absolutely nothing invested in him (Epstein, 2011). Yet this was in flagrant contradiction with one of the Obama's administration hitherto main concerns: to avoid rekindling the Syrian narrative whereby behind the events in Syria lay foreign interference. It can not be fully ascertained whether this break was intentional or came about in the heat of the moment. Yet it signalled a slight shift in the US administration policy towards the country; while this policy had so far been based on pragmatic assumptions, a stronger normative element was now inserted into it.<sup>18</sup> On 18 August Obama officially claimed that 'Assad must go'. Despite its less immediate impact, this call has rightly been called one of the Syrian war's critical junctures or even the most consequential one (Yacoubian, 2017).

As this essay explains the particular framework within which American foreign policy vis-à-vis Syria was formulated and pursued, an examination of the US call for al-Assad's departure in terms of its *locus standi* is beyond the essay's scope.<sup>19</sup> Yet, the incident sheds important light on the contradictions of US policy and the corollaries of its actions. Having created idealist expectations since taking office but also under heavy pressure domestically, Obama felt compelled to condemn the al-Assad regime's increasingly ham-handed clampdown. In the same vein, Phillips (2016, pg. 80-82) has added that the scenario of the regime's fall before Obama called for its departure would be a major embarrassment for the President. However, as any straight-thinking strategist would find easy to admit, rhetoric should always correspond to the potential to act. Put simply, given the US's limited leverage and limited military options, 'a

---

<sup>17</sup> It was a round that time that a rising chorus of congressmen and pundits in Washington called on Obama to bridge the gap between his rhetoric and his actions.

<sup>18</sup> The 'foreign interference' scenario was predictably picked up by the Syrian regime, which in turn castigated the US for blatant meddling into its affairs.

<sup>19</sup> The most popular argument being that the US has no *locus standi* in calling for heads of other states to remain or go.



delicate balance had to be struck between the rhetoric and the ability to match that rhetoric with action' (Lesch, 2012, pg. 157). This is even more pertinent in the case of a superpower like the US, where even perceptions can very easily have tangible consequences on the ground.<sup>20</sup>

In light of the above, Haass (2016) has asserted that those who engaged Syria with limited will and limited means should have set limited goals if they were to accomplish even a limited amount of good. Despite lofty rhetoric, the U.S had few policy instruments to bring to bear (Lynch, 2012, pg. 166). Its economic leverage was limited after years of sanctions; its ambassador just arrived; while everyone understood that it had no interest to intervene militarily. But this was not the impression either side of the conflict had. The July 2011 visit of ambassadors Chevalier and Ford to Hama had created the exact opposite impression among the opposition, namely that US support was forthcoming (Van Dam, 2017, pg. 133-134). Indicatively, following that visit Syria witnessed its largest protest to date in that very city, its numbers reaching 500,000. A month later, when Obama called for al-Assad to go, expectations were clearly raised rather than dampened.

These strategic blunders can best be assessed by understanding the two main considerations that led to hasty actions. None of these considerations could in any context be conducive to the formulation of a coherent and equanimous strategy. As mentioned already, the first consideration was that by August 2011 the domestic cost of not opposing al-Assad outright 'was getting too high' (Phillips, 2016, pg. 80). In simple terms, this meant that Obama was afraid that his stance on Syria would be used by his political opponents to discredit him in the upcoming 2012 election. The second factor was the Obama team's conviction that the regime was on its last legs. But this was problematic due to a number of reasons. To begin with, intelligence and expertise on Syria were minuscule. As Phillips strikingly points, in the beginning of Obama's term the State Department's Syria desk numbered one (!) person. The Obama administration failed to see the mass support still commanded by President al-Assad, the unwillingness of the army to turn against him and the insignificant defections. How problematic this conviction was could also be seen by the number of objections

---

<sup>20</sup> For example, Lynch (2012) has documented how the Syrian protests gained momentum immediately on the heels of the NATO intervention in Libya. Concomitantly, Assad was encouraged to clamp down hard, to nip this momentum in the bud.

immediately raised by parts of the US administration; the new US Ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, himself opposed the call for al-Assad's departure<sup>21</sup>, as the US could not bring it about and the regime seemed more stable than thought (Phillips, 2016, pg. 79). Concerns were raised among many State Department staffers (although not Secretary Clinton herself). The British Ambassador to Syria warned that certain conditions, which at the time seemed far from fulfilled, had to be met for the regime to collapse.

Probably the most plausible explanation of Obama's hastiness is given by one of his most trusted advisors, Ben Rhodes. In his just published memoir, Rhodes demonstrates how Obama and he calculated that the regime would crumble as a result of the combination of abroad isolation and pressure from within (Rhodes, 2018, pg. 119). Yet, probably inadvertently, Rhodes exposes Obama's strategic confusion: despite calling for al-Assad to go, Rhodes explains that Obama was highly skeptical; shortly after his August 18 statement, Obama is quoted saying that 'Syria could be a longer slog than we think' (Rhodes, 2018, pg. 119).

Finally, the nebulosity of Obama's actions following his call for al-Assad's departure could be seen merely by the ensuing stance of the administration; Rhodes (2018, pg. 119) claims that a series of meetings and talks were held to discuss what would happen after Bashar left, whether he would leave peacefully and which regime figures could participate in a possible transition. But as Phillips (2016, pg. 81) demonstrates, when tangible strategies for regime change were prepared, they were ignored<sup>22</sup>. Obama also refused to explore contingency plans and possible follow-up actions. It seemed that the President was merely content to have made the call, which was not much more than 'a statement without a strategy' (Jervis, 2017). Phillips sums up Obama's paramount mistake as having no intention to follow up with actions, while not taking into sufficient consideration that both al-Assad's backers and his enemies would proceed to act in Syria on the assumption that the US would eventually step up, as has been pointed above. Unsurprisingly, by the end of summer of 2011, the camps of the Syrian war had been clearly delineated. It thus makes sense that Rhodes laments these developments; as he writes, he has since been haunted by

---

<sup>21</sup> Similarly, a similar brawl took place within the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where French Ambassador to Syria Eric Chevallier counselled caution but was overruled by Nicolas Sarkozy's diplomatic adviser, Nicolas Galey.

<sup>22</sup> As happened with State Department Syria expert Fred Hof's plan

the question of whether, following Obama's call, some 'more assertive diplomatic initiative' could have avoided the violence that followed, 'even without Assad's immediate ouster' (Rhodes, 2018, pg. 119).

Some clear conclusions can be drawn: in this first, critical juncture of the Syrian war, Obama did not come up with anything remotely resembling a coherent strategy, all the more a realist one. A genuinely realist President would have most likely wanted to avoid the collapse of the Syrian regime, which as mentioned could cause further problems for the US in Iraq, further embroil the US in regional wars, tarnish its image and lead to regional destabilization. A realist would therefore make a more nuanced statement that would not 'box the administration into a regime change strategy' (Yacoubian, 2017).

## **5.2 (Not) arming the rebels: from 2012 to 2013**

The debate around arming the rebels in two distinct time periods of the Syrian war corresponds to the second decisive juncture. As has been explained already, in early 2012 Obama found himself in a contradictory situation, to a large extent of his own making: on one hand he had called for al-Assad to step down. Part due to its wishful thinking, and part due to inaccurate intelligence, the administration thought that al-Assad's departure was imminent. On the other hand, Obama's administration showed very little in terms of a strategy to bring this about. This phase of ambiguity was wrongly interpreted by the US's regional allies as the prelude to further US intervention. Thus, by early 2012 Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia had already embarked on a campaign of arming the rebels.<sup>23</sup> These allies viewed al-Assad as being on his last legs and were certain of eventual US intervention. In early 2012, they even informed the Syrian opposition of their certainty about the latter (Phillips, 2017).

In mid-2012, Obama's Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and CIA Director David Petraeus proposed arming what in Washington were seen as the 'moderate' factions of the rebels (henceforth the Clinton-Petraeus plan). The proposal was met with an outright rejection by the President. Before engaging with the intricacies of this

---

<sup>23</sup> Robert Fisk has claimed that Qatar had started arming much earlier than that, possibly even in the beginning of the demonstrations.

decision, one must understand the wider context within which it was taken: on the domestic level, Obama understood that even a minimal intervention in a Middle Eastern conflict could be construed at home as renewed foreign adventurism. As Dueck (2015) points, the last thing Obama wanted as the 2012 election campaign got under way was ‘another complicated American military engagement in the Muslim world.’ On the foreign policy level, tied to the domestic one, Obama had previously issued his Defense Strategic Guidance of 2012. While the document did not mention Syria specifically, its general spirit emphasized the need for more ‘offshore balancing’ via the US’s regional allies.

The Clinton-Petraeus plan went beyond these concerns. It proposed identifying and arming a group of ‘moderate’ rebels. As Ambassador Ford asserted, ‘the purpose was not to have a military parade down the streets of Damascus’ (Phillips, 2016, pg. 142). And Petraeus asserted that, far from changing the direction of the war, these deliveries would allow the US ‘to build relationships with the opposition’ (Rhodes, 2018, pg. 145). In short, the US would provide some of the least radical fighting groups with weapons, which would allow them to enhance mutual understandings with the US, protect civilians from slaughter and pressure the regime to come to the negotiating table. In principle, this was not necessarily an unconstructive tactic. But in the particular context of Syria’s civil war, it could not have been implemented: as Obama pointed out, the US could hardly define who was ‘moderate’ and who was not. The point could be made that the Free Syrian Army was ‘moderate’; yet not only was it highly disorganized (more like an umbrella of organizations in scarce contact with each other), but it often fought along extremists. Obama was also wary of what would happen if arms delivered to the moderates ended up in the hands of the extremists.<sup>24</sup> He also inquired as to the success of the US’s previous arming of insurgencies.

In his 2016 book *cum* diatribe against Obama’s Arab Spring policies, Gilbert Achcar levels a highly original criticism towards these policies. Achcar castigates Obama for not providing the rebels with game-changing anti-tank weapons and anti-missile MANPADS. He brushes aside the argument that these weapons should not have been delivered because they could have catastrophic consequences in the hand of terrorists. In that he is in concert with Ahmad (2015) who has written that for many years the

---

<sup>24</sup> Which interestingly enough did not take long to happen: US-supplied arms fell into the hands of Al-Nusra in September 2013.

primary US concern had been for those weapons to not affect 'Israel's ability to bomb Syria'. Hokayem (2013) adds to the discussion by pointing that the US was also attentive to Turkish concerns were Syrian Kurds to get hold of them. But as Achcar points, the know-how exists for these weapons to be modified in such a way so as to limit the areas where they can operate and their life span (Achcar, 2016, pg. 22). In simple terms, Achcar rejects Obama's rationale for not providing those weapons to avoid being used against the West or commercial airlines. He concludes that Obama's ulterior motive is 'to avoid the repetition of the Iraqi debacle' (Achcar, 2016, pg. 24).

Interestingly enough, Achcar criticizes Obama mainly from the idealist angle. He holds that the failure to provide these weapons had the effect of maintaining the regime's superiority. Thus no incentive was given to the regime to engage in negotiations and the suffering of the Syrians continued. Yet, in agreement with this essay, Achcar criticizes Obama for his half-baked realism too; he asserts that it would have been acceptable if Obama, as part of a realist grand strategy, had pursued a policy of non-intervention. But Obama did intervene quite decisively by 'preventing its regional allies from providing the Syrian opposition with the qualitative weapons it needed' (Achcar, 2016, pg. 19). Achcar refers to the July 2012 US decision to halt MANPAD deliveries from Libya and subsequent pressure on its allies to avoid doing so as well.

The contradictions of the Obama administration's policy emerge clearly: as Hillary Clinton notes in her memoirs, US intelligence was present at a March 2012 meeting in Riyadh where not only it was acknowledged that some countries were funnelling arms, but also that the CIA facilitated many of their deliveries (Clinton, 2014, pg. 447-470). In late 2012, the US also coordinated a shipment of Central and Eastern European weapons to Saudi Arabia (Marzouk et al., 2016). If the US did not think that these weapons sufficed to either overthrow the regime or force it to the negotiating table, the reason it was so willing to turn a blind eye to them reaching Syria is puzzling. As has been noted earlier, when it came to game-changing weapons the US was categorical in prohibiting its allies from supplying them. Thus, and given Vice

President Joe Biden's 2014 assertion that 'our biggest problem was our allies'<sup>25</sup>, one is at pain to understand what the exact US objective was.

The inescapable conclusion is that at the time the Syrian war began to fully escalate, the Obama administration was in strategic confusion; one on hand it could not be seen to ignore al-Assad's clampdown and had to be seen to 'do something'. Had the regime fallen, Obama would have accepted this development as part of the Arab Spring's grand narrative<sup>26</sup>. But al-Assad's overthrow was never Obama's first priority. Combined with his unwillingness to get embroiled in new adventures for the reasons mentioned, Obama thus refrained from seriously engaging America's regional allies at a time when he himself was unsure as to what he wanted or how to go about it, even while viewing these allies' actions with suspicion.<sup>27</sup>

Having discussed the intricacies of Obama's decision not to arm the rebels in mid-2012, the decision to proceed with such provisions in June 2013 begs the question of what changed in the meantime. As Chollet (2016) notes, Obama's policy in the first two years of the conflict evolved around the notion of 'contain and mitigate'. While the latter was of a purely humanitarian nature, the former focused on a) shielding US allies from further threats and b) preventing wider regional instability. Chollet claims that by mid-June 2013 Obama's risk calculus with regards to these goals had changed. In addition, the questions as to the moderates' potential were 'partly answered'. Chollet thus holds that, in this new phase, what was possible could be better understood via providing military support. Lund (2016) notes that an official close to Obama confided to him that the understanding of the opposition had advanced and that the new supplies to be provided could bring about the desired results.

These claims should be taken with a grain of salt, as they are convincingly contradicted by a number of analysts. Phillips (2016) paints a radically different

---

<sup>25</sup> Referring to their funnelling of weapons into Syrian extremists from 2012 onwards

<sup>26</sup> In any case, America could not do much to prevent al-Assad's regime's implosion.

<sup>27</sup> A third, middle-of-the-road hypothesis has been suggested whereby Obama wanted neither the regime to fall nor for it to remain in power. Rather, the theory goes, Obama adopted a wait-and-see approach whereby the US would wait out the conflict until a new regime came to power, which could then be molded in the US's interests or at least be coaxed to accommodate those interests. This is hardly convincing. As has been mentioned, Obama's and his teams concerns about the potential ascent of radical Islamist forces were genuine. Rhodes himself admits that the mere notion that the US could engineer the Syrian opposition spoke to US hybris (Rhodes, 2018, pg 38.).

picture: in mid-June 2013 radicals still enjoyed immense advantages: they were far better organized, had roots in Syria and had eschewed the FSA's corruption (Phillips, 2016, pg. 145). Jervis (2017) notes that by that time, the military position of the moderates had worsened further, to the benefit of the radicals and the regime. Although it could be argued that it was precisely because of this deterioration in the standing of the moderates that Obama decided to arm them, this sounds implausible; because of their strategic disadvantage and the unwillingness of the US to provide the above-mentioned sophisticated weaponry, very little could realistically change in the moderates' fortune. This gained further credence by developments that followed the weapons' arrival: Jervis (2017) notes that the purpose of the funds was unclear, with at least 'a dozen of rationales' being given. Phillips (2016, pg. 145) asserts that deliveries were limited and only a handful of fighters vetted. And a former senior administration official that when Obama finally went in, 'the pace at which it was pursued was glacial' (Yacoubian, 2017). Zenko (2013) sums up the policy thus: 'never in the history of third-party interventions in civil wars has so much been asked of so little'.

Lund (2016) has pointedly hinted that the move to arm the rebels coincided with Hezbollah's open entry into the war. Drezner (2013) noted at the time that Obama's decision only came down to the regime's use of chemical weapons against the rebels, which in August 2012 Obama had called a 'red line'. Obama himself did not offer a clear explanation for his move. As a matter of fact, the operation remained covert, which in itself was counterproductive. As Yacoubian (2017) notes, for an arming program to be successful it should be overt, in order to 'send strong political and strategic messaging components'.

It is thus evident that in this second critical juncture, Obama did not have a coherent strategy either. As has been shown, his policies were mainly informed by realist instincts, namely the desire to avoid new unnecessary adventurism and shield America's allies from threats. But coordinating allied deliveries of weapons to Syrian rebels, while denying those rebels the opportunity to be more efficient, rather speaks to a lack of strategy. A genuinely realist strategy would have placed more emphasis on coordinating US policies with its regional allies to bring about the desired results. It is of course understood that the US might not have had too big a leverage with these

allies. As Phillips (2016) points, probably nothing short of a US full intervention would have deterred allies from boosting the radicals in such a haphazard and sloppy manner. But he points that what Obama can be criticized for is raising unrealistic expectations among regional allies and rebels (Phillips, 2016, pg. 146) as well as ‘not communicating sufficiently’ with these allies (Phillips, 2017). At the end of the day, not only was Obama’s ambiguous approach unhelpful to his allies but every arming initiative led to counterescalation by the regime, the deepening of the conflict and the entrenchment of Iran and Hezbollah in the conflict (Yacoubian, 2017). As Achcar sums it up, the outcome was the worst of all possible ones, not only for the Syrian people but even for US interests themselves (Achcar, 2016, pg. 31).

### **5.3. Chemical weapons and ‘red lines’**

#### **5.3.1 The background of the 2013 crisis**

Obama’s setting of a ‘red line’ regarding Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile was the Syrian crisis’ third critical juncture. It was also a very consequential one. As the focus since has been on the President’s handling of the (repeated) chemical weapons crises, it is often forgotten that Obama’s ‘red line’ pronouncement in August 2012 was itself not the reflection of an –even nascent- strategy. This is not problematic by default; however, as will be shown later, the offhand nature of Obama’s announcement was suggestive of a more general ad hocery with respect to Syria’s chemical weapons.

As Kessler (2013) notes, the statement was an offhand one and ‘prepared statements should be given more weight than off-hand’ ones. The New York Times later reported that Obama’s ‘unscripted’ language stunned his aides (Baker et al, 2013). In addition, Obama’s formulation was ‘very loose and informal’ (Kessler, 2013). As Filkins (2013) has written, the wording was not very sharp, with the President talking about ‘a whole bunch of weapons’ and stopping short of saying that the use of chemical weapons would be cause for military force. Rather, Obama talked of a game-changer. In December 2012, he called the use of such weapons ‘totally unacceptable’ (Phillips, 2016, pg. 175). In an early 2013 interview with the Atlantic, Obama restated his belief that intervention in Syria would oblige the US to intervene anywhere there is



humanitarian catastrophes. He thus seemed to leave open the possibility of strikes but preclude that of a mass intervention.

By some accounts, the ambiguity of Obama's message was not lost on the Syrians; for example, in late April 2013, the White House stated that chemical weapons had been used twice. Gary Samore, until then Obama's White House Coordinator for Arms Control and Weapons of Mass Destruction, asserted that these attacks were attempts to gauge Obama's resolve and Assad's arsenal's tactical value.<sup>28</sup> On June 13, Obama's close advisor Ben Rhodes stated that the U.S. intelligence community, with "high confidence," assesses that "the Assad regime has used chemical weapons, including sarin...against the opposition multiple times in the last year." (Bloomfield Jr., 2013). But an official that attended a State Department meeting in April 2013 asserted that no one wanted to say that Assad did it, because no one wanted to deal with it (Filkins, 2013).

The attack on the Ghouta suburb of Damascus on August 21, 2013 that killed around 1,400 people and the subsequent US 'non-strike' were 'something of a watershed' (Phillips, 2016, pg. 169). In a CNN interview on August 23, Obama admitted that he had not given much thought to how it would respond (Stern, 2014). Rather, he passed the bucket to the UN. In an August 26 PBS interview, Obama affirmed that the US would not get drawn into a long adventure, but would act in a clear, decisive and limited way. On the same day, Secretary of State John Kerry issued a statement *cum* warning to the Syrian regime where it was affirmed that the US was weighing its response. At the same time, the US dispatched four warships to the Eastern Mediterranean.

Although an analytical description of the handling of the crisis is beyond the scope of this essay, Obama's subsequent steps speak volumes as to his strategy. They also offer a good explanation of the aftermath of the crisis and its impact on the situation on the ground, for allies and enemies alike. Over the week following the Ghouta massacre, the US administration's inter-agency meetings examined different plans, concluding on the preferred one being a 48-hour campaign, commencing on September 2. Yet at the same time, Obama embarked on an

---

<sup>28</sup> This has been Assad's tactic with conventional weapons as well, whereby attacks started small, then grew gradually.

intensive domestic and international campaign to gauge the intent of other players. On August 29, the British Parliament voted 285 to 272 against strikes. On August 30 Obama announced that he would seek Congressional approval, although his legal advisors repeatedly point that the case did not require this approval (Sterner, 2014). But the President proceeded and as he found out, not enough votes would be secured in the US Congress. US public opinion was against the strikes, in a ratio of about two to one. Obama let the timeframe for the strikes pass.

On September 6, Obama met Russian President Vladimit Putin on the margins of a G-20 meeting, where Putin broached the idea of a deal destroying Syria's chemical arsenal in exchange for the US refraining from attacking. At a press conference on September 9, John Kerry stated that the US was planning an 'unbelievably small' attack 'to hold Bashar al-Assad accountable without engaging troops on the ground or any other prolonged kind of effort in a very limited, very targeted, short-term effort that degrades his capacity to deliver chemical weapons without assuming responsibility for Syria's civil war' (Wintour, 2013). He also claimed that the Syrian regime could avoid an attack by voluntarily destroying its arsenal, although this 'was never going to happen'. However, following a call by his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov proposing the exact same bargain, an American team was dispatched to Geneva to work with Russia on the deal. On September 14, a framework was announced, with Syria admitting its possession of chemical weapons, joining the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). On October 10, the destruction process began, accompanied by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2118.

### **5.3.2 Syria's chemical weapons in the context of realism**

To understand where Obama's response to the Ghouta massacre can be located within the policy nexus of this essay, the situation on the ground regarding Syria's chemical weapons has to be understood, as well as the US view of the latter.

Chemical weapons in Syria were dispersed throughout the country. Not only had they been scattered for some time in dozens of locations (some put the number to fifty), but as the regime and the rebels had recently traded ground some of these weapons had been moved. US intelligence assessments at the time talked of 'zero

visibility' regarding part of the arsenal and asserted that their location could be spotted only after they had been used (Filkins, 2013). To make matters worse, part of the arsenal was found in populated areas. It therefore becomes clear that strikes alone could not disable the entirety of Syria's arsenal, not to mention the civilian losses that would result from toxins potentially being released into the air.<sup>29</sup> As Samore said at the time, an effective strike would have to be huge and meticulously coordinated with some kind of forces on the ground. Overall, however, strikes of any form would be a 'nightmare military scenario' (Filkins, 2013).

In terms of putting boots on the ground, one option would be seizing the chemical facilities. However, as the Pentagon estimated at the time, the number of the troops needed for such an operation would be around 75,000 (Martosko, 2013). Rubin (2013) has suggested that some combination of US special forces together with Israeli or Jordan troops and specially trained rebel units could achieve the same objectives. Yet it is obvious that ground operations would complicate the Syrian war in the best of cases. At worst they would embroil the US in indirect clashes with its regional enemies and would enhance the exact adventurism Obama wanted to avoid. The US would thus come to 'own' another war and 'mission creep' would be looming. As Phillips (2016, pg. 184) claims, it would simply be 'a gamble'.

Soon after the August 2013 massacre, however, scholars overwhelmingly belonging to the realist school launched a major attack on Obama's Syria choices, putting forth a third way between massive strikes and boots on the ground: although the US had gotten some kind of a deal, it had paid a heavy price in other areas, which did not bode well for the Syrian war's future and for America's standing in the region and the world. The US, this school of thought argues, should have responded to the Ghouta chemical attack not for the sake of appearing to do something, but because through its muted response it emboldened and strengthened both its regional and international foes. This response should have come in the shape of limited but painful strikes, likely followed by intensive diplomacy. Interestingly enough, some of Obama's closest former advisors would in later years come to embrace this mindset. As the latter holds, the fact that Obama clinched a deal that seemed to alleviate his two main concerns is not the same as following a

---

<sup>29</sup> Tracy has noted the US's reluctance to use agent-defeat munitions, which would serve towards this goal but were still in an experimental stage

coherent strategy; not only is there a difference in tactics but the long-term results of the two are likely to be different.

To begin with, a major realist critique evolved around international norms or what some cynically call the ‘credibility argument’. This argument goes beyond the use of force for the sake of force itself; as Obama has stated regarding the chemical crisis, “dropping bombs on someone to prove that you’re willing to drop bombs on someone is just about the worst reason to use force” (Goldberg, 2016). However, Noonan (2013) points that even if realists tend to dismiss reliance on norms, once the latter are established they matter precisely because others are watching and base their behaviors on what they see happening to violators. Through this prism, Obama’s argument looks disingenuous. Strikes would not have been self-referential; rather they would have enforced the international norm against the use of chemical weapons. Ass Rubin (2013) concludes, allowing Syria to violate the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) without some kind of penalty was a major blow to the existing arms controls regime. Philip Gordon, who at the time held the Middle East portfolio at the National Security Council and was generally wary of deeper US engagement, later spoke along the same lines: for Gordon, not doing anything amounted to a ‘welcome to use chemical weapons as much as you’d like’ (Goldberg, 2016). Although Gordon admits the risk that Assad might have used chemical weapons again despite US strikes, this time he ‘would also have had to run that risk’ (Goldberg, 2016), meaning that his strategic calculus would have been changed. Gordon also points that these strikes need not lead to the slippery slope of further involvement (Goldberg, 2016).

A second realist critique, not impertinent to the first, focused on wider American leadership issues. As Vice President Joe Biden claimed at the time, ‘big nations don’t bluff’ (Haaretz, 2013). This, of course, is not to say that policies and strategies cannot be adapted, modified or even turned on their head. What it does mean, however, is that the price of renegeing on commitments can be as great as that of pursuing wrong policies. Thus, as Phillips (2016, pg. 184) notes, the aftermath of the Ghouta massacre and the US’s non-strike was catastrophic: not only were now allies certain that US intervention would never come about and sought new approaches; but the direct corollaries were Saudi Arabia’s wholehearted turn to and arming of Salafists, the Islamist rebels’ denunciation of the National Coalition (with whom they had hitherto

engaged in a symbiosis of convenience in the hope that the latter would eventually bring about US intervention), the same rebels' certainty that Washington now had a vested interest in keeping Assad in power (Erlich, 2014, pg. 115) and Turkey's sense of 'betrayal'. Even Chollet (2016, pg. 37), who is generally supportive of Obama's policies, notes that in retrospect, the US could have tried earlier to use at least the specter of intervention to get Russia to pressure Assad, thus maintaining a sense of US leadership. It thus comes as no surprise that, according to Sterner (2014), America's non-strike set a poor precedent for the use of deterrence and would have a long-lasting damage to America's deterrence posture well beyond the Middle East.

Sterner (2014) concludes that American actions and rhetoric with regard to Syria's chemical arsenal failed on three fronts: they failed to contemplate the cost-benefit calculations of the country's regime. They downplayed the deterrent value of its own capabilities. And they clearly signalled to the Syrian regime that US retaliation would have little impact on Syria's freedom to act.

A final realist critique centered on the deal itself. The deal with Russia was enshrined in UN Security Council Resolution 2118 on September 27, 2013. However, Ioffe (2013) has aptly pointed that the resolution, drawn up in haste, contains no specific consequences in case of non-compliance, but rather the rereferral to the UN Security Council. In a similar vein, the OPCW also has no authority or capability too compel compliance (Sterner, 2014). Finally, in light of what has been mentioned regarding the weapons' multiple locations, there were few –if any- ways to ascertain that Syria's chemical arsenal was destroyed in its entirety. These fears were increased in the following years, when several chemical weapons attacks took place inside Syria<sup>30</sup>.

It is indicative that even Phillips, whose account of the US's Syria policies is the most elaborate so far and who in general views the former President through a largely realist prism, criticizes Obama both for sending mixed signals and for not comprehending the impact his lack of action had on players on the ground (Phillips, 2016, pg. 187-188). To sum up, a simple distinction should be made: that Obama

---

<sup>30</sup> For example, an OPCW inspection team was attacked on a mission in May 2014, after French allegations about the use of sarin by the regime. The same organization voiced grave concerns on the possible use of chemical weapons by both the regime and ISIS in November 2016. Also, in April 2017, sarin attacks took place, to which the US, now under President Donald Trump, responded with missile attacks.

managed to get a relatively good result out of a severe crisis is not tantamount to his following a clear, coherent strategy to get there. Chollet (2016, pg. 31) admits as much when describing the deal as an ‘outcome no one even dreamed was possible’. As Sterner (2014) notes, the Syria chemical deal was ‘a result that the United States blundered into. It would not be an unwelcome outcome, but it is not the result of an effective deterrent strategy’. In an assessment of Obama’s strategic conundrums, Hulsman (2013) claims, in concert with our analysis so far, that Obama’s ‘red line’ promise was ‘tending to his disappointed humanitarian intervention base’. As with so many other things, Hulsman points that the response to the ‘red line’ crisis had little to do with facts on the ground in Syria and a great deal to do with what goes on in Washington. As he shrewdly concludes, the chemical accord was ‘so much less than meets the eye’.

By following a relatively ‘hands-off’ approach, Obama was neither realist nor idealist. His approach could be more aptly described as informed by pragmatic, even realist instincts that failed, however, to morph into some kind of long-term vision. Not without risk, limited stand-off strikes followed by intensive diplomacy could have been a watershed (Yacoubian, 2017). Without drawing the US deeper into conflict, this strategy could have unnerved the regime sufficiently and force it and its allies to change calculus. It would be admittedly difficult and risky, but in view of the consequent escalation and intensification mentioned above, it could also have led to a decrease in killing and atrocities by both sides.

## **5.4. The anti-ISIS campaign and the Russian intervention: a realist turn?**

### **5.4.1 The anti-ISIS campaign**

In June 2014, ISIS overran the city of Mosul in Iraq (having previously established its working capital Syria’s Raqqa) and proclaimed its ‘Caliphate’. Obama was quick to assemble an international coalition and launch strikes against the organization. In a sense, these developments can be considered Obama’s most clear and unequivocal realist turn to date.

Phillips (2016, pg. 207) has summed up the three reasons that compelled Obama to take action: first and foremost, ISIS represented an immediate danger to US regional interests that Assad did not. In addition, it was dismembering a state (Iraq) the US had fought to rebuild. Secondly, although Obama had been cautious on foreign adventurism, he had clamped down hard on Al Qaeda and militant jihadism. The Mosul takeover convinced Obama that ISIS was equivalent to Al Qaeda. Finally, the siege of the Yazidis, a minuscule ethnic/religious minority in Iraq, was also a factor. Evidently, Obama was mainly driven by realist concerns, complemented by a tinge of idealism. For Allin (2014), Obama was no exception in having to balance between realism and idealism although this time the two fortunately coincided. In addition public opinion, to which Obama was always hyper-sensitive in foreign affairs, was supportive of further action.

By definition, the mid-summer 2014 events do not offer much in the way of scrutinizing the exact nature of Obama's policies. As will be shown later, Obama's previous choices had immensely narrowed down his freedom of action. This meant that from now on, only the intricacies of his policies would be subject to debate.

US responsibility (albeit certainly not exclusive) for the rise of ISIS could hardly be questioned. Analysing Obama's predecessor's multiple *faux pas* would hardly be necessary. Yet Obama himself made a significant number of miscalculations. To begin with, Obama (obviously to his credit) kept his pre-electoral promise of withdrawing from Iraq. In addition, keeping US troops in the country after late 2011 would need Parliamentary approval and Iraqi popular opinion was staunchly against Americans staying. Thus, Obama should by no mean shoulder the bulk of the responsibility. What Obama can be criticized for is failing to even broach the idea to the Iraqi President of some sort of lingering security cooperation. According to Iraq expert Kirk Sowell, 'Obama never really tried' (Fordham, 2015). As Fordham (2015) asserts, a significant US presence in Iraq would have helped slow the growth of ISIS. But given Obama's strong retrenchment proclivities that have been analyzed in detail, this was a non-starter.

A second mistake has been the Obama administration's ignoring of intelligence assessments. As the US Defense Intelligence Agency warned in August 2012, al-Qaeda in Iraq (later ISIS) and fellow Salafists were the major driving forces of the

insurgency in Syria with the aim of establishing a salafist principality (Milne, 2015), which is basically what happened two years later. Obama not only ignored these warnings but, as has been claimed already, was at the time more focused on preventing the moderate rebels from acquiring game-changing weapons.

Third, to compensate for the US withdrawal and to prop up the Iraqi army, Obama kept sending weaponry to the latter, when it knew it was marred by corruption, poor organization and incompetence. These arms were often captured from the Iraqi arm by ISIS (Cohen, 2015), were outright stolen (Chivers, 2016) or sold in the black market. Amnesty International has put the values of these weapons at over \$1 billion (Amnesty International, 2017).

Finally, Obama largely underestimated ISIS. Although warnings about ISIS' rising powers went as far back as July 2013, Obama seems to have got carried away by the chemical weapons crisis. In addition, limited intelligence-gathering capacity in both Syria and Iraq exacerbated the magnitude of these miscalculations (Liptak, 2014). It is striking that had Obama wanted to collaborate with the Syrian regime to get on intelligence on ISIS, it could have done so. But it was so hell-bent on publicly demanding on al-Assad to go that it could show no flexibility. Thus, when in January 2014 Obama was asked about ISIS' capture of Fallujah, he compared it to a second-rate basketball team posturing as the Lakers.

In short, at the time of ISIS' first major success in Iraq, Obama was in as precarious a position as he could be. When in February 2014 he resumed lethal assistance to the moderate rebels, his approach was the exact same as previously: first, he failed to come to grips with the fact that these rebels had been undermined numerically and strategically by their former comrades who now joined organizations such as the Islamic Front. Second, once more Obama provided the type of arms that could not and would not break the stalemate; MANPADs and anti-tank weapons were again ruled out (Hosenball, 2014).<sup>31</sup>

Thus, as has been asserted, Obama had very few options but to bomb ISIS starting in August 2014. By virtue of not having invested much in the Syrian regime's downfall,

---

<sup>31</sup> As Phillips (2016, pg. 192) notes, these deliveries were more of a reward to these rebels for grudgingly agreeing to attend the January 2014 Geneva Conference.



the US now seemed to put the latter option on the back burner. This was a cold realist turn by the President. But it still didn't mean that a coherent overall strategy was present.

A new \$500 million train and equip program was soon launched that aimed to vet non-radical rebels to prioritize the anti-ISIS campaign. The program suffered from the exact same shortcomings as before. It was hastily put together (Phillips, 2016, pg. 208), not taking into account that no amount of moderate rebels being trained could be a match for the established Islamist ones. In addition, and most importantly, whatever moderate rebels had been left saw Assad as the main enemy and so a lot of them deterred from joining.

At the same time Obama seemed to employ an 'off-shore balancing' approach, insisting that his local partners do the job. The latter included the Iraqi government and the KRG and, effectively, Iran too. But as Cordesman (2015) points, this effort was never really integrated with US allies, instead being very reactive. In addition, no thought was given to the simple fact that the coalition was rather a collage of states with different political objectives and end states. The Gulf States demonstrated more commitment to the downfall of al-Assad to calm their public (Alpher, 2014). Turkey was still prioritizing Assad's departure and viewed the YPG, the Kurdish militia that came to be the US's ground troops, as an offshoot of the terrorist PKK (Abbas, 2016). Being unable to come up with a unified and comprehensive strategy, it was thus a natural corollary that these operations were 'very limited in comparison with other recent US campaigns' (Abbas, 2016).

#### **5.4.2 The Russian intervention**

While the radicals grew in strength in early 2015 and Obama's anti-ISIS campaign faltered, the Russians decided to intervene, starting in September. At least 28 planes, 2,000 personnel and Russia's Black Sea Fleet were dispatched. The mere fact that the US accepted, even half-heartedly welcomed, this intervention spoke volumes to its strategic conundrums. It might not have been explicitly admitted, but by now co-owning the Syrian war, Russia gave the US some room to breathe. Interestingly, the US approach towards the Russian intervention was two-pronged: at the level of action,

it was grudgingly accommodating and at times combative. At the level of rhetoric, it was outright hostile. In reality, the Russian intervention seemed to mirror precisely all of the US's strategic shortcomings in four years.

When the Russians first entered Syria, they were castigated by US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter for taking on not only ISIS but also 'everyone who is fighting Assad' (Kozhanov, 2015). The statement alluded to US-backed rebels as well extremists such as al-Nusra. Yet Americans knew better: the rebels the US backed were only a handful and militarily negligible. The non-ISIS extremists had by then gained significant ground and were directly threatening the regime. The US might have declared that its campaign was exclusively anti-ISIS, yet a potential collapse of the Syrian regime would obviously be a large boost for ISIS, by complicating matters worse and by making things awkward for America, which would then have to pick sides in a war between radical extremists and ISIS. The Americans knew very well that their sole, existential even, regional threat was now ISIS. Attacking Russia verbally was simply to keep up appearances. In a sense, 'Obama's focus on destroying the Islamic State now did Putin's work' (Tiersky, 2016).

What followed manifested that the US still lacked a clear Syria strategy, or what Achcar (2016, pg. 57) called an 'amazing degree of complacency and wishful thinking'. One would be hard-pressed to understand how, for example, the US could reconcile Carter's statements with John Kerry's welcoming at the UN Security Council of Russia bombing al-Nusra, on September 30, 2015. If that wasn't enough, at the exact turning point of the war where virtually everyone had accepted that the solution to the war would be military, in an interview with MSNBC John Kerry expressed his hope that Bashar al-Assad would transition of his own accord and that his supporters would encourage him to do so for the sake of the country (Achcar, 2016, pg. 58). Equally problematic were Carter's statements that 'at least some parts of the anti-Assad opposition belong in the political transition going forward.' (Kozhanov, 2015). Not only was such a transition ruled out by the regime at every juncture but, as mentioned, a political solution to the conflict was out of the question. Furthermore, Americans never explained how their own supported moderate rebels would be reconciled with the extremists. As Simon and Stevenson (2014) aptly point,

after the anti-ISIS campaign was launched an overall strategy towards Syria had been sidelined by the US itself.

In the early stages of the Russian intervention, the US was strategically at a loss. Militarily, Obama admitted that the latest train and equip programme had managed to train 'four or five' people (Kristian, 2016). Diplomatically, in the context of the Vienna talks convened in November 2015, the US approach had undergone two shifts: a) it suggested that al-Assad's departure was no longer an end in itself and b) Iran was allowed to participate, most likely because of a cautious rapprochement in the context of the recently concluded nuclear deal. However, this relative diplomatic softening could hardly translate into policy: the US had very few cards in its hands, now directly training a small number of rebels and providing air operations and cover for the Kurdish YPG. These groups could hardly be seen as catalysts for the future of Syria. As former US Ambassador Robert Ford stated at the time 'the Russians understand the relationship between military means and diplomacy infinitely more than Obama does' (Toosi, 2016).

Washington's strategic irrelevance only increased with time. Three events strikingly encapsulated this irrelevance: in mid-2016, the YPG-dominated Syrian Defense Forces, backed by the Pentagon in the context of the anti-ISIS campaign, clashed with the Knights of Justice Brigade, backed by the CIA in the context of the anti-regime campaign (!). In October 2016, in reaction to an inability to reduce violence by the regime, John Kerry suspended all bilateral contact with Russia. Two days later, Kerry rescinded this suspension and re-engaged in talks with his Russian counterpart, evidently desperate to maintain relevance (Robbins, 2016). And when a country-wide cease-fire was negotiated in late 2016 by Russia, Iran and Turkey, the US was kept out of it. The US was in a strategic muddle, irrelevant yet anxious to do something. Bruce Jentleson, a former State Department official put it simply: Obama 'knew what he didn't want to do. He never knew what he wanted to do. He over-learned the lessons of Iraq' (Toosi, 2016).

## **6. The regional and international implications of Obama's Syria policies**

In Syria, more than any other country, Obama's policies cannot be understood in isolation. It has already been explained how the Iraqi campaign next door was inextricably entwined with the Syrian conflict and ended up with the emergence of ISIS in a huge area straddling the Syrian-Iraqi border. In that sense, Obama failed to foresee the potential repercussions of his Iraq choices on Syria, despite the fact that this did not require a great deal of imagination.

Lebanon is the country that probably paid the highest price of all the neighboring ones, in both security and humanitarian terms. Not only is the overwhelming majority of Lebanon's 976,00 Syrian Refugees (UNHCR, 2018) the overwhelming majority is Sunni. Even if a very small number has been radicalized so far, this has led to clashes with Lebanese Shiites, mainly in the northern town of Tripoli. But one can discern another long-term corollary: by perpetuating the conflict in the manner explained above, Obama inadvertently offered Hezbollah the chance to mature militarily and strategically, transforming itself into a battle-hardened militia potentially dangerous to Israel. In addition, Hezbollah's increasing self-confidence and assertiveness also carries the risk of turning it into an implacable player in Lebanon's domestic politics.

Israel maintained a relatively discreet approach towards the conflict. Although initially it seemed to prefer al-Assad's staying in power (Erich, 2014, pg. 196), over time it seemed content with both sides bleeding and only intervened with strikes when Iranian weapons reached Syria, which was Israel's own 'red line' (Filkins 2013b). Yet, as has often been mentioned in this essay, Obama's ill-thought-out policies and mismanagement of Arab allies resulted in escalation by all sides. This had the indirect outcome of strengthening Iran and its Hezbollah ally, bringing both a stone's throw away from the Israeli-Syria border. For the US's paramount strategic ally in the region, this is hardly a good development.

Iran is probably the greatest strategic conundrum of the Syrian war and a brilliant illustration of the outcomes of Obama's muddled policies. Since 2012, Obama perceived Iran exclusively via the prism of the highly coveted nuclear deal. To ensure his personal legacy, but also because Iran offered a paramount opportunity for saving

face in the Islamic world, Obama did not converse with Iran on the Syrian issue but only on the nuclear one (Barbandi, 2018) and this despite the fact that it was on Syria that US allies wanted to see some kind of pushback of Iranian expansionism by the US (Wittes, 2015). Iran was thus given a free hand to act at will in the country. Regionally, Iran deepened its participation in the proxy war in Yemen, while exerting substantial influence over the government of Iraq (Calabrese, 2012). Interestingly enough, it was this leeway Iran was provided with that strengthened perceptions of a regional sectarian war. As Lieber (2016) has aptly summed up, Obama's conciliatory approach toward adversaries was based on the assumption that their own behavior was largely a reaction to US policy. Thus, internal sources and motivation shaping this behavior has been downplayed, even ignored.

It was Saudi Arabia that led the Sunni pole of the new sectarian war. As has been noted, the Kingdom's main source of dismay with the US was the latter's rapprochement with Iran and not the US's policy vis-à-vis Syria. Yet the dashed expectations raised by Obama's call for al-Assad's departure in mid-2011 and the former's inability to coordinate an arms provision policy resulted in Saudi Arabia stepping up provision of arms to extremist groups, which in turn led to a Shia counterescalation, thus compounding the sectarian war.

## 7. Conclusion

This essay has attempted to define the nature of former US President Barack Obama's policies vis-à-vis Syria. Although in his two first years in power Obama understood Syria's importance for regional affairs and thus opted for a policy of engagement, the outbreak of the Syrian uprising plunged the President in a strategic muddle: while internal pressures and personal liberal instincts impelled the President to appear to 'do something', his actual policies were not informed by a well thought out realist strategy. First, Obama's administration failed to clearly communicate its objectives to its allies. This meant that although the US was not directly involved in the conflict with boots in the ground, its at times turning a blind eye and at others encouraging of the provision of weapons to an archipelago of extremist organizations by its regional allies inflamed the war, without however bringing it to the proverbial constructive stalemate that would have forced both sides to the negotiating table. Second, Obama's public pronouncements often created expectations the President was unwilling to meet. This was true with regard to both the ever-impending US intervention and the chemical weapons' 'red lines'. Regarding the latter, Obama tried to present the striking of a deal with Russia for their removal as the direct result of the threat of the use of force by the US. But the retraction of the US commitment to enforce its red lines begs the question of what the world's sole superpower would have done had the Russian proposal not come about so opportunely. Most likely the US would not have done much.

Obama should certainly not be blamed for opting for a more cautious approach towards the region than his predecessor. The region –and world- Barack Obama inherited was radically different than George W. Bush's. US finance was in dire economic straits and public opinion greatly fatigued with two regional wars. In addition, China's rise had early on convinced Obama that the future lay eastwards. Greater engagement in East Asia would therefore be predicated on less (direct) engagement in the Middle East.

Obama can, however, be reproached for not thinking through and pursuing a clear, cohesive Middle Eastern policy. His prescription of 'don't do stupid shit' was certainly welcome, especially in light of his aggressive predecessor's ill-founded

adventurism. But at times it seemed to constitute his policy's only guiding principle. The benefit of hindsight always allows for clearer thinking on issues that at the time were immensely intricate. President Obama inherited a Middle East in flux, where tectonic shifts took place. Frustratingly, Syria was at the heart of this volatile Middle East. He tried to navigate some very treacherous waters, while minimizing America's regional footprint to the greatest extent possible. But he did so without strictly defining America's strategic interests and then following a path to pursuing these interests adamantly. His policy can therefore be said to have contained some realist instincts, but was generally a far cry from the prescriptions of realism. In sum, it was an admixture of realist, idealist, internationalist and retrenchment elements, with the balance between those elements changing at all times.

# Bibliography

## English and French

Achcar, G., 2016. *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising*. London: Saqi Books

Allin, D.H., 2014. Obama and the Middle East: The Politics, Strategies and Difficulties of American Restraint. *Adelphi Papers*, 54, pp. 165-184

Atlas, P. M., 2012. U.S. Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring: Balancing Values and Interests. *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 21(2), pp. 353-385.

Brands, H., 2017. Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Grand Strategy. *The Washington Quarterly*, 39(4), pp. 101-125

Chollet, D., 2016. *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World*. New York: PublicAffairs

Clementi, M., M. Dian, B. Pisciotta (eds.), 2018. *US Foreign Policy in a Challenging World*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing

Clinton, H. R., 2014. *Hard Choices*. New York: Simon & Schuster

David, S.R., 2015. *Obama: The Reluctant Realist*. Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 13. Ramat Gan: The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.

Donnelly, J., 2000. *Realism and International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Donnelly, J., 2005. 'Realism', in Burchill, S. et al (eds.) *Theories of International Relations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 29-54

Dumbrell, J., 2002. Was There a Clinton Doctrine? President Clinton's Foreign Policy Reconsidered. *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 13(2), pp. 43-56

Dueck, C., 2015. *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Erlich, R., 2014. *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books.

Gerges, F.A., 2012. *Obama and the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Gilpin, R.G., 1986. The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism, in R. O. Keohane (ed.), *Neo-Realism and Its Critics* (New York)

Hadar, L., 2005. *Sandstorm: Policy Failure in the Middle East*. Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan



Hadar, L., 2007. *A Diplomatic Road To Damascus: The Benefits of U.S. Entanglement with Syria*. Independent Policy Report. Oakland, CA: The Independent Institute.

Hokayem, E., 2013. *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge

Huber, D., 2015. A Pragmatic Actor – The US Response to the Arab Uprisings. *Journal of European Integration*, 37(1), pp. 57-75.

Jervis, D., 2017. Barack Obama, Syria, and the exertion of American military power. *Teka Kom. Politol. Stos. Międzynar.*, 12(1), pp. 41-61

Kazemzadeh, M., 2018. The sources of the Middle East's crises and American grand strategy. *Comparative Strategy*, 37(1), pp. 56-72

Khatib, L. et al., 2017. *Western Policy Toward Syria: Applying Lessons Learned*. Chatham House Research Paper, March. London: Chatham House

Layne, C., 2009. America's Middle East grand strategy after Iraq: the moment for offshore balancing has arrived. *Review of International Studies*, 35, pp. 5-25

Lesch, D.W., 2005. *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press

Lesch, D.W., 2012. *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press

Leverett, F., 2005. *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press

Lieber, R.J., 2016. Saudi Arabia, US Middle East Policy, and the Consequences of Retrenchment. *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 10(2), pp. 267-277

Lucas, I., 1994. The paradox of Syria. *Asian Affairs*, 25(1), pp. 3-12.

Lynch, M., 2012. *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*. New York: PublicAffairs

Nakayama, T., 2015. Strategic Patience in a Turbulent World: The Obama Doctrine and its Approach to the World. *Asia-Pacific Review*, 22(1), pp. 1-15

Perra, A., 2016. From the Arab Spring to the Damascus Winter: The United States, Russia and the New Cold War. *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 3(4), pp. 363-386

Philips, C., 2016. *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Pichon, F., 2017. *Syrie, une guerre pour rien*. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf

Rhodes, B., 2018. *The World As It Is: Inside the Obama White House*. London: The Bodley Head

Sadat, M.H. & Jones D.B., 2009. U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Syria: Balancing Ideology and National Interests. *Middle East Policy*, 16(2), pp. 93-105.

Scheller, B., 2013. *The Wisdom of Syria's Waiting Game: Syrian Foreign Policy Under the Assads*. London: Hurst & Co.

Sharp, J.M. & Prados, A. B., 2007. *Syria: U.S. Relations and Bilateral Issues*. CRS Report for Congress Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service

Sterner, E., 2014. Dictators and Deterrence: Syria's Assad, Chemical Weapons, and the Threat of U.S. Military Action. *Comparative Strategy*, 33(5), pp. 407-423

Tyler, H., 2017. The Politics of Policy: the Obama Doctrine and the Arab Spring. *Rice Historical Review*, no. 2, pp. 70-87

Van Dam, N., 2017. *Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria*. London: I.B. Tauris

Yacoubian, M., 2017. *Critical Junctures in United States Policy toward Syria: An Assessment of the Counterfactuals*. Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide Occasional Papers No. 3/August 2017. Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Zisser, E., 2003. Syria and the War in Iraq. *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 7(2), pp. 44-56

Zisser, E., 2009. Syria's Diplomatic Comeback: What Next? *Mediterranean Politics*, 14(1), pp. 107-113

Zisser, E., 2017. Syria – from the six day war to the Syrian civil war. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 44(4), pp. 545-558.

Zunes, S., 2004. U.S. Policy Towards Syria and the Triumph of Neoconservatism. *Middle East Policy*, 11(1), pp. 52-69

## Online sources

Alpher, Y., 2014. *The U.S.-led campaign against the Islamic State: many questions, few answers*. Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution Expert Analysis, Oslo. Available at: <https://noref.no/Publications/Regions/Syria/The-U.S.-led-campaign-against-the-Islamic-State-many-questions-few-answers> (accessed 2 July 2018)

Amnesty International, 2017. *Iraq: US military admits failures to monitor over \$1 billion worth of arms transfers*. [online] London. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/05/us-military-admits-failures-to-monitor-over-1-billion-worth-of-arms-transfers/> (accessed 25 August 2018)

Baker, P. et al., 2013. Off-the-Cuff Obama Line Put U.S. in Bind on Syria. *The New York Times*, 4 May. Available at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/05/world/middleeast/obamas-vow-on-chemical-weapons-puts-him-in-tough-spot.html?pagewanted=all>

Barbandi, B., 2018. Iranian-Gulf Relations and the Syrian Crisis. *The Syrian Observer*, 24 September. Available at: [http://syrianobserver.com/EN/Commentary/34821/Iranian\\_Gulf\\_Relations\\_the\\_Syria\\_n\\_Crisis](http://syrianobserver.com/EN/Commentary/34821/Iranian_Gulf_Relations_the_Syria_n_Crisis) (accessed 24 September 2018)

Bloomfield Jr., L.P., 2013. A Plan for Syria. *The National Interest*, 21 August. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/plan-syria-8924> (accessed 14 August 2018)

Calabrese, J., 2012. The Regional Implications of the Syria Crisis. *Middle East Institute*, 21 December. Available at: <http://www.mei.edu/content/regional-implications-syria-crisis> (accessed 26 July 2018)

Chivers, C.J., 2016. How Many Guns Did the U.S. Lose Track of in Iraq and Afghanistan? Hundreds of Thousands. *The New York Times*, 24 August. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/23/magazine/how-many-guns-did-the-us-lose-track-of-in-iraq-and-afghanistan-hundreds-of-thousands.html> (accessed 7 August 2018)

Cohen, Z., 2015. Amnesty report: ISIS armed with U.S. Weapons. *CNN*, 9 December. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/08/politics/amnesty-international-isis-weapons-u-s/index.html> (accessed 29 June 2018)

Drezner, D.W., 2013. Why Obama is arming Syria's rebels: it's the realism, stupid. *Foreign Policy*, 14 June. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/06/14/why-obama-is-arming-syrias-rebels-its-the-realism-stupid/> (accessed 22 July 2018)

Epstein, R.J., 2011. Clinton: Assad has 'lost legitimacy'. *Politico*, 12 July. Available at: <https://www.politico.com/story/2011/07/clinton-assad-has-lost-legitimacy-058766> (accessed 12 July 2018)

Filkins, D., 2013. The Thin Red Line. *The New Yorker*, May 2013 Issue. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/05/13/the-thin-red-line-2> (accessed 23 August 2018)

Filkins, D., 2013b. Israel's Red Line in Syria. *The New Yorker*, 6 May. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/israels-red-line-in-syria> (accessed 27 July 2018)

Fordham, A., 2015. Fact Check: Did Obama Withdraw From Iraq Too Soon, Allowing ISIS To Grow?. *National Public Radio*, 19 December. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2015/12/19/459850716/fact-check-did-obama-withdraw-from-iraq-too-soon-allowing-isis-to-grow?t=1536658692084> (accessed 4 August 2018)

Goldberg, J., 2016. The Obama Doctrine. *The Atlantic*, April 2016. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/> (accessed 8 August 2018)

Haaretz, 2013. Full Text of Biden's Speech at AIPAC Policy Conference. 4 May. Available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/full-text-of-biden-s-speech-at-aipac-policy-conference-1.5232499> (accessed 29 July 2018)

Haass, R. N., 2016. Aleppo's Sobering Lessons. *Project Syndicate*, 23 December. Available at: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/lessons-of-syria-assad-by-richard-n--haass-2016-12?barrier=accesspaylog> (accessed 4 August 2018)

Hosenball, M., 2014. Congress secretly approves U.S. weapons flow to 'moderate' Syrian rebels. *Reuters*, 28 January. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-syria-rebels/congress-secretly-approves-u-s-weapons-flow-to-moderate-syrian-rebels-idUSBREA0Q1S320140127> (accessed 27 July 2018)

Hulsman, J. C., 2013. Syria and Obama, the closet realist. *Aspen Institute*, 17 September. Available at: <https://www.aspeninstitute.it/aspenia-online/article/syria-and-obama-closet-realist> (accessed 2 August 2018)

Ioffe, J., 2013. UN Syria Resolution: As good as it gets. *The New Republic*, 29 September. Available at: <https://newrepublic.com/article/114908/un-syria-resolution-good-it-gets> (accessed 2 August 2018)

Joffe, J., 2016. Obama Is Not a Realist. *The Atlantic*, 10 March. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/obama-doctrine-goldberg-realist-isolationist/473205/> (accessed: 25 July 2018)

Kabalan, M., 2016. Fuzzy footprints of Obama foreign policy. *Gulf News*, 17 June. Available at: <https://gulfnews.com/opinion/thinkers/fuzzy-footprints-of-obama-foreign-policy-1.1847768> (accessed 28 July 2018).

Kessler, G., 2013. President Obama and the 'red line' on Syria's chemical weapons. *The Washington Post*, 4 September. Available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2013/09/06/president-obama-and-the-red-line-on-syrias-chemical-weapons/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.dfecd3ca1706](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2013/09/06/president-obama-and-the-red-line-on-syrias-chemical-weapons/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.dfecd3ca1706) (accessed 28 July 2018)

Kozhanov, N., 2015. What's at stake for Russia in Syria?. *BBC*, 21 September. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34290965> (accessed 2 August 2018)

Kristian, B., 2016. Stop the Syria Misadventures. *U.S. News*, 13 July. Available at: <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2016-07-13/stop-washingtons-misadventures-in-arming-syria> (accessed 5 August 2018)

Liptak, K., 2014. How could Obama have 'underestimated' ISIS? *CNN*, 30 September. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/29/politics/obama-underestimates-isis/index.html> (accessed 10 August, 2018)

Lund, A., 2016. The Long View. *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 6 December. Available at: <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/66343> (accessed 20 June 2018)

Martosko, D., 2013. Syria's chemical weapons: Pentagon knew in 2012 that it would take 75,000 ground troops to secure facilities. *Daily Mail Online*, 5 September.

Available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2411885/Syrias-chemical-weapons-Pentagon-knew-2012-75-000-ground-troops-secure-facilities.html> (accessed 2 August 2018)

Marzouk, L., Angelovski, I. and Patrucic, M., 2016. Making a Killing: The 1.2 Billion Euro Arms Pipeline to Middle East. *Balkan Insight*, 27 July. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/making-a-killing-the-1-2-billion-euros-arms-pipeline-to-middle-east-07-26-2016> (accessed 24 July 2018)

Milne, S., 2015. Now the truth emerges: how the US fuelled the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. *The Guardian*, 3 June. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/03/us-isis-syria-iraq> (accessed 19 June 2018)

Murphy, R.W., 2012. Why Washington Didn't Intervene In Syria Last Time. *Foreign Affairs*, 20 March. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2012-03-20/why-washington-didnt-intervene-syria-last-time> (accessed 2 August 2018)

Noonan, M., 2013. Attacking Syria, Realism, and Magical Realism. *War on the Rocks*, 28 August. Available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2013/08/attacking-syria-realism-and-magical-realism/> (accessed 6 August 2018)

Rubin, J.P., 2013. Why Syria's Chemical Weapons Matter: The Case for Punishment. *The New Republic*, 6 May. Available at: <https://newrepublic.com/article/113124/why-syrias-chemical-weapons-matter-case-punishment> (accessed 28 June 2018)

Saunders, P.J., 2014. Barack Obama Is Not a Realist. *The National Interest*, 26 August. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/barack-obama-not-realist-11124> (accessed 12 August 2018)

Simon, S. & Stevenson, J., 2014. A New Plan for Syria. *The New York Review of Books*, 26 September. Available at: <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/09/26/how-stabilize-syria/> (accessed 4 August 2018)

The Economist, 2013. *Action women – Barack Obama's foreign-policy team*. 8 June. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2013/06/08/action-women> (accessed 22 July 2018)

Tiersky, R., 2016. Obama's Bet on Putin Has Collapsed. *RealClearWorld*, 17 October. Available at: [https://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2016/10/17/obamas\\_bet\\_on\\_putin\\_has\\_collapsed\\_112091.html](https://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2016/10/17/obamas_bet_on_putin_has_collapsed_112091.html) (accessed 17 August 2018)

Toosi, N., 2016. US sidelined as Putin calls the shots on Syria cease-fire. *Politico*, 30 December. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/syria-barack-obama-vladimir-putin/> (accessed 18 July 2018)

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018. *Syria Regional Refugee Response*. [online] UNHCR. Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71> (accessed 5 September 2018)

Walt, S.M., 2016. Obama Was Not a Realist President. *Foreign Policy*, 7 April. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/07/obama-was-not-a-realist-president-jeffrey-goldberg-atlantic-obama-doctrine/> (accessed 30 July 2018)

Wikileaks, 2006. *Influencing the SARG in the end of 2006*. [online] Available at: [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06DAMASCUS5399\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06DAMASCUS5399_a.html) (accessed 25 June 2018)

Wintour, P., 2013. John Kerry gives Syria week to hand over chemical weapons or face attack. *The Guardian*, 9 September. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/09/us-syria-chemical-weapons-attack-john-kerry> (accessed 29 July 2018)

Wittes, T.C., 2015. The regional impact of U.S. policy toward Iraq and Syria. *Brookings Institution*, 30 April. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-regional-impact-of-u-s-policy-toward-iraq-and-syria/> (accessed 19 July 2018)

Zisser, E., 2013. The Failure of U.S. Policy toward Damascus. *Middle East Quarterly*, 20, Fall 2013. Available at: <https://www.meforum.org/articles/2013/the-failure-of-u-s-policy-toward-damascus> (accessed 3 August 2018).