

US policy towards the Syrian conflict under Obama

Strategic patience and miscalculation

Jasmine Gani

Abstract:

The US publicly tied its Syria policy to the Syrian rebels from an early stage of the uprisings. In doing so the US sought to be viewed as champions of democracy and popular movements in the Middle East, in alignment with the US's longstanding role conception, its hegemonic willingness to lead and more specifically with Obama's public rhetoric. This early policy and rhetorical support for the Syrian opposition, however, clashed with the US's strategic and material interests, which saw no pressing need for direct US involvement. The incongruence between US claims and growing *unwillingness* to lead, coupled with a decline in economic capacity and global legitimacy, produced an incoherent Syria policy that prolonged and exacerbated the conflict. The US's Syria policy also undermined the US's global image, facilitated a rise in competing global and regional powers in the Middle East, and ultimately undermined the rebel forces they were claiming to support. The chapter focuses in particular on two turning points in the Obama administration's policy on Syria: the chemical attacks in Ghouta in 2013 and the US counter-terror campaign against the Islamic State in 2014.

Introduction: American role-conception

As the Obama administration drew to a close, analysts rushed to identify achievements and failures during Obama's two terms in office. Obama was keen to present the Iranian nuclear deal as his defining legacy – unsurprising since he began his term in office seeking to create a distance from his predecessor by portraying himself as a man of diplomacy rather than a man of war. Moreover, the Iran deal presented the US with one of the most realistic opportunities for any type of foreign policy achievement in the Middle East. That this was the case, when Iran had been one of the most intransigent foreign policy issues for the US over the past few decades, tells us a great deal about the current state of American Middle East policy. However, it is the conflict in Syria that is most likely to define the Obama administration for years to come.

Critics see the conflict in Syria providing an especially unflattering set of epithets for the Obama administration: failed diplomacy, lack of leadership, weakness, over-cautiousness, incoherence, and indecisiveness. The allegations of US confusion bear some truth. However, initially at least, there was a good deal of strategic rationale and historical justification for the US's Syria policy, but it unravelled due to wide miscalculations regarding the Assad regime, the opposition, and the shift in global power dynamics. Overplayed rhetoric, and a prolonged “wait-and-see” approach, during which time other actors took advantage of an emerging power vacuum, caused the US to become a reactive rather than a proactive party in the crisis. This undermined the United States's agency; thus, what was initially a deliberate policy eventually became an enforced one, a reflection of tied hands rather than strategic caution.

To understand the US's predicament in Syria one needs to historicise the US's presence in the region. Much of the blame for US policy tended to focus on Obama's administration alone, highlighting its apparent lack of decisiveness and leadership. Obama's cautiousness appears accentuated when compared with the hyperactivity of the preceding Bush administration, feeding the notion that his policy reflected a major departure for American foreign policy in the Middle East. However, a comparison of recent US administrations gives us a severely limited, short-term view of the crisis, and tends to condense the debate to bipartisan point-scoring. In reality, the US has a notable record of *selective* inactivity when it comes to the region; indeed “the reality of Obama's Mid-

dle East policy carried more continuity than change.”ⁱ This reluctance was most apparent during the last century when the US was first emerging as a superpower. While Europe was embroiled in World Wars that decimated its populations and economies, the United States was able to enhance its own position as both the inheritor and challenger to Europe’s global power.

America’s image as a moral foreign policy actor was cultivated via its laudable rhetoric. Famous statements by Wilson are still espoused today as symbols of the US’s righteous intentions. And yet, the US held an isolationist position throughout the interwar period, overlooking British and French imperialist transgressions, while only engaging with the Middle East to secure its commercial interests in the newly emerging oil industry in Saudi Arabia. Little had changed in US policy by 1946 when Syria gained independence from the French. Members of the State Department deployed in the Middle East were increasingly aware of the need for more direct and practical support to foster stability in the Arab world, arguing for a yearly allocation of funds by the State, War and Navy Departments to states like Syria “in the interests of peace and security.”ⁱⁱ However, they were unable to persuade the administration to provide any real support to those Arab states challenging colonial rule. The following memo by Gordon P. Merriam, the head of the US Near East department, summed up his frustration at his government’s inaction:

“[O]ur policies in these situations are not worth the paper they are written on because we have not prompt and effective means of carrying them out.”ⁱⁱⁱ

It was telling that the United States only came forward offering financial and military aid with the onset of the Cold War, when stronger alliances with Syria and the Arab states suddenly became strategically valuable in the fight against the USSR. Inducements were offered via the Point IV economic assistance programme and military partnerships, such as the Middle East Command. By then, however, the US had squandered valuable early assets of trust and reliability. US promises of support were by that stage perceived in Syria as self-interested, conditional and inconsistent. Furthermore, contradictory actions by the US, in which it promoted democratic values but supported several coups in Syria (actual and attempted) in 1949, 1952 and 1957, plus its emerging alignment with Israel, confirmed a new and lasting perception of the US as “second-generation imperialists.” It was in this context that Syria turned to the Soviet Union as its strategic partner, having lost faith in the US.

This history between the US and Syria provides examples of mismatched rhetoric and praxis, as well as missed opportunities by the United States. Ironically, if the US had remained neutral and had not intimated greater support for Syrian independence and agency, it would have faced less criticism and fewer accusations of double standards. And yet, the need to export a benevolent image of a global power that was on the right side of history, continued to produce public statements without active implementation.

Evidently there are parallels here with the US's approach to the Syrian conflict. It would be simplistic to suggest that history repeats itself – it does not, for history on its own does not have agency. But it is possible to identify consistent principles and constraints that affected the US both then and now. History lays out the possibilities of action; on a behavioural level, it contributes to habitual practice.

Recognition of the role of ideology and a constructivist framework can point to the way in which historical values and previous foreign policy behaviour can incrementally shape future foreign policies, and produce what K. J. Holsti termed “national role-conception.” Adhering to role-conception is a regular feature of state behaviour, particularly for great powers that utilise their identities and historical records to assert their legitimacy and competence as global leaders.^{iv}

For the US, that role-conception emerged as one of a global hegemon. Borrowing from various frameworks of hegemony, I argue the US has had to buttress its role-conception in praxis, via three factors: capacity, willingness and legitimacy.^v Capacity to lead as a hegemon has over the years been upheld by US military spending, strategic bases, and economic growth via a global market economy. Willingness to lead on the world stage has been articulated at least in rhetoric by every US president from F. D. Roosevelt to Barack Obama, without which the impression of hegemony could not be maintained even if the capacity was intact. It is in the realms of legitimacy that the US has arguably faced the hardest task, but it has also been one of the US's greatest strengths and facilitators for continued hegemony.^{vi} One of the means of accruing this legitimacy has been the consistent projection of a strong ideological identity for both domestic and external consumption, which has been reiterated at important historical junctures. That identity has often been summarised as American exceptionalism: that is, the belief that the US is meant to play a unique role in world

history,^{vii} and indeed (given its God-chosen uniqueness) that it has a duty to be a “Good Samaritan of the entire world.”^{viii}

The (re)assertion of American exceptionalism and liberal missionarism was apparent at the end of the two world wars, during and after the Cold War, and at the turn of the century after 9/11.^{ix} A failure to adhere to this constitutive ideological vision would mark a major departure in US identity and foreign policy behaviour. This helps to explain why US administrations routinely feel compelled to make robust, public pronouncements on their commitment to ideological goals, for the US and other states, with the intended implication that it has both the capacity and willingness to offer appropriate leadership when and where necessary. In line with his predecessors, Obama announced on the presidential campaign trail in 2007:

“I’ll be a president who finally sends a message to the black, white, and brown faces beyond our shores; from the halls of power to the huts of Africa that says, ‘You matter to America. Your future is our future. And our moment is now.’”^x

Obama’s willingness to lead showed an assumption of legitimacy, and a confidence in capacity – in rhetoric at least. It should be noted that these three spokes of the hegemonic wheel have often been mutually reinforcing and worked in harmony for the US. However, there are occasions on which two or all of the three goals are in conflict with each other – i.e. there may be the capacity or willingness to lead, but short supply of legitimacy. In such circumstances, the US has had to adopt a complex balancing act in which it seeks to mitigate such an incongruence without severely damaging its role conception and international image as a global hegemon. This balancing act was particularly evident with the Obama administration’s cautious response to the Arab uprisings.

The rest of this chapter will look at the key phases of Obama’s Syria policy through the lenses of these three spokes, from the start of the crisis until the emergence of ISIS (the “Islamic” state of Iraq and Sham). The next section will locate the justifications for, and advantages to, Obama’s “strategic caution” for the administration’s domestic and external interests. It will also highlight the dilemmas faced by the US administration as it attempted to straddle its normative and strategic demands. The final two sections will address two key turning points (one of inaction, the other of intervention) which emerged, in part, due to the US’s deliberate cautiousness, but more so due to the inconsistency between rhetoric and action, thus laying bare the limitations of US power

and causing it to become a reactive player in the crisis. The net result was increased destabilisation of the region, conflagration of the conflict, and an unanticipated shift in the global power balance.

Obama’s “strategic patience”: justifications and dilemmas

Obama’s decision to minimise the level of US military engagement in the Arab uprisings was in part due to a major recovery plan since the Bush administration. Capacity, legitimacy and even willingness among the domestic public, were all on the wane. In reference to the flurry of academic comment on the subject during the Bush administration,^{xi} it is worth noting that this was a period of relative decline for the US, not absolute decline: it stood at a critical juncture, while still at a vantage of power.

The financial crisis of the late 2000s, and the huge economic costs of the Iraq War at \$1.5 trillion, forced a policy of retrenchment; moreover, Obama made clear on coming to power in 2009 that US foreign policy would renew its efforts at multilateralism in recognition that, for all its power, it was not omnipotent. This was reiterated in the National Security Strategy of 2015, in which it was stated:

“The threshold for military action is higher when our interests are not directly threatened. In such cases we will seek to mobilise allies and partners to *share the burden* and achieve lasting outcomes.”^{xii}

As testament to the above, the US resolved to rely on surrogate warfare in which the burden of war is externalised to other actors instead of a direct deployment of US ground troops.^{xiii} Commitment to any crisis would have to be better negotiated between the urgency of intervention in the face of direct security threats and the political costs to public opinion at home. As it happened, the American public was war-weary after a decade of involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, which involved 2 million servicemen and women, resulted in 6,000 American deaths and 40,000 wounded.^{xiv} As some of the uprisings transcended into full-blown conflicts, the domestic political costs of intervention and regional conflagration were considered to be too great with relatively few returns for US national interests.

Moreover, as Krieg argues, such an approach allowed room for deniability.^{xv} The outcome of the uprisings was still uncertain, and any attempt at overt regime change by the US would have faced heavy criticism, whereas delegating combat to surrogates on the ground would, it was hoped, defray the link between any negative consequences and the United States, shielding it from the type of condemnation and embarrassment faced after Iraq. It was also considered a viable route to prevent the loss of legitimacy among local civilians – had the United States committed ground troops or engaged in direct firepower against those regimes, it would have been seen to be exploiting the crisis to carve out an occupying presence.

Thus, in the early months of 2011, Obama preferred to stick with a cautious policy of either staying out of the crisis altogether, or “leading from behind” via a reliance on surrogate actors; he simultaneously hoped to boost US legitimacy by dressing up this policy as a desire to give Arab populations greater agency. Both options were pursued depending on the US’s strategic interests. For example, with the uprisings in Egypt, Obama was highly reticent about the US’s preferred outcome to the crisis. Just a few days before Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was removed in early February, Obama still shied away from openly calling on him to step down, using mild diplomatic-speak instead:

“He needs to listen to what is voiced by the people and make a judgment about a pathway forward that is orderly, that is meaningful and serious ... My hope is he will end up making the right decision” (*BBC*, February 5, 2011).

His only overt support to the protestors was to reassure them that the US was hearing the voices of the Egyptian youth (*ABC News*, February 1, 2011). With the protests in Bahrain, Obama merely expressed “deep concern” at the regime’s repressive tactics and welcomed a national dialogue.^{xvi} Alternatively, surrogate warfare was the preferred option for Libya: the US administration took the decision after two months of protests and bloody crackdown to publicly call for the removal of Colonel Gaddafi. Even so, Obama was keen to point out that “[b]roadening our military mission to include regime change would be a mistake” (*Reuters*, March 29, 2011). Despite this overt commitment to the removal of Gaddafi, Obama was still careful to maintain deniability, restraining US

rhetoric in the interests of legitimacy, while still engaging in military intervention behind the scenes to demonstrate its willingness and capacity to act as a global hegemon.

In *practice*, this caution and retention of deniability was similarly applied to the Syrian uprising. With time, a further useful consequence of US non-intervention also emerged as Hizbullah and Iran entered the fray, in part against Sunni jihadists, producing a tacit recognition that a war of attrition contained within Syria's borders could advantageously drain and weaken all of the US's main enemies in the region (*Foreign Policy*, April 17, 2015; *The Huffington Post*, August 6, 2014; *The Jerusalem Post*, June 20, 2013). Overt US involvement could have served to unite the opposing actors against the US; furthermore, the one area of the US's Middle East policy that contained seeds for potential breakthrough, the Iranian nuclear deal, would have been jeopardised if the US were brought into direct combat with their interlocutors on the battlefield. Thus, it was not only caution but also expedience which pushed for a wait-and-see approach. With these calculations at play, US military intervention and greater financial assistance to the opposition were firmly off the agenda in the initial stage of the Syrian uprising.

However, the caution in practice was not matched by the emphatic public and private encouragement given to the emerging opposition in Syria, and it is here that some of the contradictions in US policy began to surface. The rhetoric employed differed widely from the rhetoric towards Egypt or Bahrain, and of course appeared to mirror US policy towards Libya.

First, evidence emerged that the United States had been funding anti-government groups, such as the Movement for Justice and Development, since the Bush administration, a policy that continued under his successor. In 2011, Tamara Wittes of the US Bureau for Near Eastern Affairs, gave a generic confirmation by stating: "There are a lot of organizations in Syria and other countries that are seeking changes from their government. That's an agenda that we believe in and we're going to support" (*The Washington Post*, April 17, 2011). As expectations for the swift removal of Assad remained high at the time, other US officials came out with public confirmation that the US was indeed funding democracy movements on the ground in Syria (*CBS News*, April 18, 2011), hoping to demonstrate the indispensability of the US and cultivating a role for itself in the new political future for Syria.

This support for civilian groups was soon extended to armed rebel forces, loosely brought together as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the military wing of the SNC (Syrian National Coalition). The State Department took charge of supplying non-lethal aid, including food rations and pickup trucks, to the opposition (*The New York Times*, January 9, 2014). While it would not yet take the decision to arm the rebels, the CIA was involved with covert operations to vet the opposition groups, and provided training and communications from the Turkish and Jordanian borders (*The Wall Street Journal*, January 13, 2012). Despite its support for the rebels, Washington at first refrained from openly calling for Assad to go. This changed in August 2011 when Obama made the following statement:

“The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way. His calls for dialogue and reform have rung hollow while he is imprisoning, torturing, and slaughtering his own people. We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.”^{xvii}

In contrast to the dilemma that Mubarak and even Gaddafi posed for Washington, the removal of Assad appeared uncontroversial and viewed as an opportunity for a favourable geopolitical realignment in the region. Despite all the above reservations behind intervention, the US - particularly the State Department - started to buy into the notion of the Arab Spring as an unstoppable force sweeping through the region, identifying it as a point of rupture and anticipating the swift removal of the Assad regime. If old allies had to fall, such as Egypt and Tunisia, then old enemies might fall as well and present the US with renewed security options. Indeed, it was hoped that the fall of Assad would in turn isolate Iran, push it closer to the west and precipitate a quicker resolution to the nuclear negotiations. The US wanted some part to play in Syria's (and potentially the region's) reconfiguration, without direct or costly commitment. The call for Assad's removal opened the way for American recognition of the SNC as the de facto government of Syria, facilitating the appointment of opposition ambassadors in various allied countries.

US political support for the opposition was not yet matched with material military support - that was to come later. But though it was reluctant to supply arms and greater funding, it continued to give the public the impression it would do so if the FSA could prove it was a united, competent

and reliable ally – not just militarily, but ideologically as well (*Reuters*, July 8, 2013). This conditional promise of arms and training was meant to act as a buffer between the FSA and more extreme elements which were now emerging in the Syrian quagmire. In the meantime, the US supported and facilitated the supply of weapons from other actors, one example being the Syria Support Group which was provided with a license in July 2012 to fund the Free Syrian Army. The existing restriction on arms appeared to have changed the following year in June 2013, when US officials announced they had approved the provision of lethal arms to the opposition’s Supreme Military Council (*USA Today*, June 13, 2013) – this was to consist of small arms and ammunitions but not yet the anti-aircraft weapons oft-requested by the opposition, which started to filter through from the Gulf in 2015-6. ^{xviii}

However, a pattern was beginning to emerge – there were numerous pledges to increase funding to civilian groups and to the FSA, but the prospective timing was never concrete. Moreover, on the one occasion when supplies had been publicly confirmed by the US in summer 2013, the actual delivery was then publicly refuted by the rebels. Salim Idris, the then head of the FSA stated in an interview:

“They [the US] say that they will go back with these ideas to Washington and discuss that with the administration, and then we will get an answer. We are in contact with our friends, American friends here. But till now, honestly and frankly, there is no military support” (*NPR*, September 12, 2013).

It was only after the US had already politically committed itself to the uprisings, the rebel forces, and eventually regime change, that the doubts crept in. Moreover, the perennial notion that Arabs would not opt for democracy if given the opportunity began to resurface as the Islamist bogeyman appeared on the horizon.^{xix} As was the case with the struggles for Arab independence at the start of the 20th century when US support was conditional on Arab pursuit of a western-styled nation-state, the Syria conflict saw US support for the rebels conditional on their avowed secularism, regardless of how unrealistic and impractical this might be. As occurred during the Cold War, when neutralism in the Arab world was mistakenly conflated with Communist sympathies, any form of Islamic affiliation in the Syrian conflict was interpreted as a sign of radicalism. In the meantime, hopes given to the FSA and SNC of even greater US military support that might actually tip the balance in their

favour helped entrench the conflict, as both sides – regime and opposition – dug their heels in: the former because it recognised it now faced an existential threat, with possible US intervention on the horizon, the latter because it believed aid would come if they could prove their stamina and competence. Already by this stage it was becoming clear the US was not willing to fully commit to expectations it generated via its rhetoric of regime change in the early stages of the conflict, and yet it appeared unwilling to admit to this change, neither publicly, nor to the rebels.

Had the conflict remained at a low-intensity level, contained within Syria's borders, with relatively little global attention, the US could have overridden the costs to its reputation, much as it did in the interwar period when the western public's gaze was centred on developments in Europe. However, three important estimations were overturned as the conflict in Syria intensified, exposing the dualism and limitations of the United States in a way that has fundamentally undermined America's standing in the world. The first was the US expectation that there would be a swift fall of the Asad government following the pattern of other key Arab states. Though dissatisfaction with the regime was high, the US underestimated the level of loyalty and support it was still able to command – inspired in part by fear, clientalism or sectarian affinity. Second, and relatedly, the US overestimated the level of support and mobilisation commanded by the opposition.^{xx} And finally, the US, just like many observers around the world, including Syrians, failed to predict just how deadly, entrenched and far-reaching the war would be.

By the summer of 2012, the death toll was at 20,000 exceeding even the worst predictions (*The Guardian*, July 22, 2012). Targeted killings by regime forces at protests and funeral gatherings had turned to indiscriminate shelling of entire villages and towns using barrel bombs. Leaked images of gruesome tortures and reports of massacres by regime-sponsored Shabiha militias filled the media. Meanwhile, the mass exodus of people fleeing the conflict took the number of refugees beyond the UNHCR's estimates of 200,000, leading to camps as large as cities opening in Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan.^{xxi}

The debilitating stalemate at the UN and the lack of action from the US produced palpable anger and incredulity. Asad's immunity to global condemnation, and the lack of more noticeable punitive measures from the US (apart from the hike in sanctions) did not yet undermine perceptions of US capacity. But the increasingly obvious lack of willingness to act, despite rhetoric giving im-

pressions to the contrary, was damaging to its legitimacy. “Polite decline” was looking increasingly unfeasible;^{xxii} rather the message it gave, that the US needed to manage its own house first while Syrian civilians were dying in their thousands, was deeply offensive to the very opposition figures whom the US had been courting for over a year. The strategic calculus had not changed, yet something had to be done to offset pressure from the opposition and global public opinion, and to demonstrate the US had a plan. Thus, Obama sought to assuage critics by finally committing the US to concrete action; but he deferred it beyond a line of transgression that he anticipated would not be crossed by the Asad regime given the likely consequence, stating:

“We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus ... that would change my equation” (*The Washington Post*, August 20, 2012).

Turning point I: Ghouta

The US’s aversion to a direct conflict with the Syrian regime was exposed in the summer of 2013. On 21 August, a devastating chemical weapons attack was launched against the civilian population in Ghouta, just south of Damascus, killing an estimated 1,729 people – many of them children. Global attention immediately turned to the United States and Obama’s “red line,” set out exactly a year before.

Initially, it seemed military intervention was a question of when, not if (*Al-Jazeera*, August 27, 2013). Obama stated the following:

“It’s important for us to recognize that when over 1,000 people are killed, including hundreds of innocent children, through the use of a weapon that 98 or 99 percent of humanity says should not be used even in war, and there is no action, then we’re sending a signal that that international norm doesn’t mean much ... and that is a danger to our national security” (*CNN*, August 30, 2013).

In statement on 26 August 2013, US Secretary of State John Kerry also made an emphatic call for military action. By elaborating on the consequences of inaction for US credibility, he issued not only a warning but helped to negatively shape international perceptions of the US in the aftermath:

“...it matters deeply to the credibility and the future interests of the United States of America and our allies. It matters because a lot of other countries whose policies challenge these international norms are watching. They are watching. They want to see whether the United States and our friends mean what we say ... It matters because if we choose to live in a world where a thug and a murderer like Bashar al-Assad can gas thousands of his own people with impunity, even after the United States and our allies said no, and then the world does nothing about it, there will be no end to the test of our resolve and the dangers that will flow from those others who believe that they can do as they will” (*The Daily Telegraph*, August 30, 2013).

The Obama administration had unexpectedly been caught in a bind and the Syrian regime was calling its bluff. It was clear at the time, and in retrospect even more so given US inaction since then, that the government did not want to engage in ‘game-changing’ military intervention. However, such was the risk to US hegemonic credibility if it did not follow up on its promise that it was willing to pursue a dangerous strategy of intervention – even if merely posing the question undermined the President’s popularity. This was testament to the importance of a global *perception* of US willingness and capacity. However, several developments altered the American calculus shortly after the chemical attacks, notably increased public opposition in the US; the lack of greater international support; and uncertainty within the US administration over its strategic objectives.

First, public opinion was not on Obama’s side. In contrast to their usual ambivalence to foreign policy, the majority of the American public were at the time strongly opposed to any military involvement. According to a joint poll by the Pew Research Centre and USA Today, 48% were opposed to military involvement at the time of the Ghouta attacks; in the weeks that followed, ironically amid intense lobbying from the US administration, this figure went up to 63%.^{xxiii} Iraq and Afghanistan had made the American public war-weary but also war-wary; this scepticism was filtered through to their representatives in Congress. While the vote on military strikes by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations was close-- at 10-7--in favour, Congress members were at pains to

express their opposition: a poll carried out in the midst of heated debates at the time indicated 230 of the 433 members were considering voting against any motion to go to war (*BBC*, September 9, 2013). Obama well knew that if he were to lose the vote it would be a massive blow for his authority and credibility, at home and abroad. Such an outcome would have been politically disastrous for his administration and would have had serious implications for the rest of his second term.

Second, lukewarm international support made apparent at the G20 summit did not just put the brakes on US intervention but negatively affected collective US confidence as to whether it was in fact the right course of action. Britain, normally the first to confer legitimacy on the US, delivered Obama an unexpected set-back with a parliamentary vote against intervention. Though Kerry was keen to minimise its significance in a statement the following day, undecided members of congress stated that it did have a bearing on their position, generating doubt over intelligence that evidently was not good enough for their British allies.^{xxiv} Moreover, the rushed vote in the UK put pressure on the US and France to similarly consult their respective assemblies, despite the fact that Obama and French president Francois Hollande were not constitutionally bound by any such vote. The UK effectively slowed down the momentum for military intervention, allowing room for deeper scrutiny of US policy and with that growing domestic scepticism.

Finally, the crisis sharply exposed the lack of direction and lack of unity over Washington's policy in Syria. Obama and his government did not seem to know themselves what the defining objectives of military action were (or at least how to sell them), nor how to proceed in the aftermath. Hence the constant dual messages in an effort to win over both hawks and sceptics of war, at home and abroad.

This was reflected by the shifting emphasis in goals: initially Obama and Kerry focused heavily on national security interests – the credibility of the US and its red lines, reassurance to its allies in the region, namely Israel and Jordan, and a warning to its enemies Iran and North Korea.^{xxv} With his counterparts abroad wondering why they should go to war to save face for the US, Obama deftly refocused on humanitarian goals and international norms in the run-up to the G20 summit: it was the international community's credibility on the line, not the United States's, he argued (*The New York Times*, 4 September, 2013).

This did seem to make some headway; Russia cautiously accepted there might be a case for intervention *if* it was proven the Syrian government was behind the chemical attack, while the UN hastened the timetable for the weapons inspectors' report for fear of appearing redundant. But Obama's rhetoric also served to provoke questions by anti-war activists and left-wing journalists, particularly outside of the US, over inconsistency towards the use of chemical weapons – why was action being urged now when other states, namely Iraq and Israel, had allegedly used chemical weapons in the past with apparent impunity (Foreign Policy, September 10, 2013)?^{xxvi} Coincidentally in the same month, declassified CIA files had confirmed that the US aided Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons against Iran in 1988 (*Foreign Policy*, August 26, 2013). Opponents to intervention highlighted this inconsistency, arguing that it undermined Obama's calls for urgency and raised questions over US motives behind a military attack.

Beyond the mixed motives, there also emerged a deeper ambiguity over the US's intended strategy. Aiming his comments at the opponents of intervention, Obama declared any military strikes would be limited, merely to punish the Assad regime, not to remove it from power. On the other hand, when probed by interventionists at the Foreign Relations Committee, Kerry argued the strikes would indeed destabilise the regime and might be the first step in Assad's removal from power; in the debate, he even briefly opened the door for the deployment of ground troops in the future, which he then swiftly retracted (*Reuters*, September 3, 2013). The US government was attempting to straddle both camps, while concerns about collateral damage, the dangers of striking chemical weapon facilities, and of regional consequences, were not adequately answered. The net result was a highly unconvincing account of strategic objectives and post-intervention planning; thus, the risks of military involvement looked even greater for the US than they had before the chemical attacks. For all of Obama's assertions that any intervention would not be a repeat of Iraq, its shadow continued to loom large over Washington's foreign policy decisions.

All of this served to bring home, in a very public way, the reality that the US lacked the willingness to lead over Syria even in a vacuum of leadership, and crucially that it could not command international or domestic legitimacy for any decisive military action against a Syrian regime that had transgressed clear boundaries of international law. This weakness was dramatically emphasised, when a seemingly throw-away remark by US Secretary of State John Kerry opened the door for a non-military response to the deadly chemical attack of 21 August. In a press conference at the

British Foreign office on 9 September 2013, in response to a question on whether anything could cancel military action at the eleventh hour, Kerry remarked:

“If he [Asad] could turn over every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community in the next week – turn it over, all of them – without delay, and allow full and total accounting for that; but he isn’t about to do it...” (*The Guardian*, September 9, 2013).

Russia and Syria, seizing on the comments, tabled a proposal to place Syria’s chemical weapon stockpiles under international control in an attempt to avert military action. It may have simply been a delaying tactic, or an attempt to embarrass the US by calling its bluff, but the suggestion received surprisingly swift consideration by the US, with Obama stating in an interview that such a resolution would “absolutely” take military action off the table (*ABC News*, September 9, 2013). In the immediate drama of the incident, Obama sought to downplay Kerry’s remarks, revealing that he had already discussed the matter with Russia at the G20 summit the previous week; whether or not it was a blunder from his Secretary of State, or was a calculated ploy, remains unclear – even if it had been an error, a slip of the tongue, it was nevertheless a convenient one that provided the US with a way out of a problematic, and by now, unwanted commitment to military action.

Given the above developments, Russia’s proposal for dismantling Syria’s chemical weapons offered a timely opportunity for the US to back down from a risk-laden intervention without having to entirely give up on Obama’s notorious red line of 2012. The removal of Syria’s chemical weapons provided a clearer and more limited goal for the US to work towards; crucially it was a policy that could be pursued through the UN, avoiding some of the controversies pertaining to unilateral military intervention. The Obama administration pointed out that they achieved a tangible result, and appropriately used the threat of force to bring it about. In one of the few articles to support Obama’s approach, Phil Arena argued that the demonstration of flexibility and indeed unpredictability from the US, actually put Syria and Russia on the back-foot and forced them to grant some concessions, where previously they had agreed to none.^{xxvii} To some extent, one could argue this was a masterful stroke in diplomacy, and reflected a welcome return to caution in a situation of unknown consequences.

Nevertheless, it marked a detrimental turning point for US credibility. The episode exposed the realism of US policy over Syria, one which very obviously did not tally with its public statements. Ironically, prior the Russian deal, statements by Obama and Kerry pre-empting the loss of face for the US served actually to articulate and crystallise negative perceptions once it became clear no action would be taken. The tags of apathy, impotence or (especially among Syrian critics) of duplicity, was severely damaging – not only for the credibility of the US, but also for its capacity to mobilise and unite regional and international efforts in search of a resolution. The longer international actors waited to see whether or not the US's backtracking was a case of a strategic genius, the more it became apparent that it was not; the US did not appear to have a constructive plan to follow it up. The Geneva II talks that ensued in the autumn made it very apparent that the chemical weapons agreement had in fact strengthened Assad's hand in the war and reasserted his authority. The frustration and weariness of then UN peace envoy Lakhdar Brahimi summed up the lack of any progress as a result of earlier US-Russian diplomacy, while the US did little to hide its lack of ideas having mismanaged its key asset: the threat of force.

The next significant development in US policy came three months after the Ghouta attacks, producing a mismatch between prevailing discourse, which focused on insufficient US military support to the rebels (an impression even the head of the FSA did not try to contradict), and the real nature of US military support. In November 2013 the Obama initiated a covert CIA programme to supply weapons and train Syrian rebels that would eventually cost \$1 billion over four years and would go on to produce some success, not least in pushing back the regime in Raqqa in 2015.^{xxviii} However, this was only publicly admitted once it was terminated by the incoming Trump administration in 2017. By that stage the programme's successes began to flag and with reports of weapons falling into the hands of Al-Nusra. Yet at its height it did demonstrate the capacity to shape events on the ground in the rebels' favour. The need to conceal the extent of US military support for the rebels, despite its potential for modest success, was clearly shaped by the public reaction during the chemical weapons debacle. At a congressional hearing, Chuck Hagel confirmed that the US administration had not openly admitted to its covert sponsoring of the Syrian FSA for fear of public opposition and further unpredictable and uncontrollable reactions from the regime and its allies. Ironically, had the administration admitted to the programme, it would have enabled the US to counter the charges of indecisiveness that were so undermining their credibility in the conflict, and would have provided greater material reinforcement to its diplomatic efforts vis a vis Russia.

US reticence over the actual levels of its military support are a stark reflection of the administration's unwillingness to lead, and fears over the legitimacy of its foreign policy decisions at home and abroad. This episode gave a further green light to other actors to become embroiled in the war, either to fill the apparent vacuum of power left by the diplomatic impasse, or to capitalise on the increased rebel support, thereby sowing further seeds of conflict. Regional actors Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar, Hizbullah, Turkey, and significantly ISIS (the "Islamic" state of Iraq and Sham), increasingly began to shape developments on the ground, regardless of US decision-making. Moreover, it became clear that Russia was now just as important a power on the international scene, carrying as much leverage on the Syria crisis as the United States.^{xxix} Despite the US' attempt to regain the upper hand via the covert CIA programme, the Ghouta attacks and its aftermath represented a significant blow for America's reputation and hegemonic standing.

Turning point II: ISIS

For all the vacillating in 2013, Barack Obama finally announced plans for military operations on the 10 September 2014; however, the intervention was not against the regime but against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. In the context of US reluctance to offer an active strategy for Syria in the previous three and a half years, the decisiveness of its military intervention against ISIS marked an obvious change. Previously, the US was accused of being bereft of ideas and failing to provide the leadership needed to end the devastating conflict. Did this latest wave of military intervention reflect a rediscovered purpose and clarity in US strategy over Syria and the Middle East in general?

In one sense, ISIS did provide Washington with an opportunity to recover both its strategy and reputation over Syria. Its attempt to do so over the chemical attacks was beset with problems: the lack of clear goals, lack of clear linkage with US interests or legal justification; fears of a repeat of Iraq under George W. Bush; and the failure to convey a coherent message to the American public and the international community – all stalled military strikes that were intended to show the world that the US was *doing something*. This time, with the target being ISIS, Washington was more successful in conveying a narrowed set of goals that sat within the familiar framework of counter-terrorism – seemingly less ambitious and less contentious than regime change. The US made early progress, militarily by destroying ISIS bases and halting their advance in northern Syria, and politically by rallying a coalition of Arab states to offset allegations of unilateralism.

However, any gains made from the air strikes were soon being judged against the negative consequences, which had a greater bearing on the next phase of the Syrian conflict, and in turn on US policy. Four key developments as a result of US airstrikes against ISIS can be identified.

First, the airstrikes appear to have inadvertently worked in Assad's favour. While the regime believed it had come out as the winner after the chemical weapons agreement, reasserting itself as the de facto government of Syria with whom the international powers had to do business, it later suffered substantial losses in territory and personnel at the hands of ISIS, with a particularly humiliating defeat in Raqqa in the summer of 2014 (*The Telegraph*, September 13, 2014). Moreover, rising criticism from Assad's own Alawi community, accusing him of failing to safeguard their security,^{xxx} and signs of dispute within the regime, reflected its growing vulnerability. There were signs that some of his supporters were now starting to see Assad as a part of the problem, rather than a rallying figure. American airstrikes deflected some of this pressure from the regime by taking the fight with ISIS off the regime's hands – in the summer of 2013, Assad was their target; a year later the US and its allies had turned their firepower on one of Assad's most significant opponents. US strikes against ISIS enabled the regime to regroup and galvanise its support base with renewed accusations of a western conspiracy to destroy Syria and the "resistance" axis (*SANA*, October 4, 2016). The direct involvement of Saudi Arabia and Gulf states, already despised by the Ba'th and its supporters as puppets of the US, provided further ammunition for the regime's ideological narrative.

A second consequence was the rise in extremist opposition towards the US. The Obama administration had already been frustrated in its attempts to cultivate a reliable, moderate opposition, but with its intervention against ISIS the problem only doubled. Groups that were focused on fighting regime forces now turned their attention to the US. For example, Jubhat al-Nusra's bases in Idlib were bombed early on as the US expanded its targets beyond ISIS. Designated as an extremist group by the US, it also attracted large swathes of support from Syrian civilians for its effectiveness in pushing back both regime and ISIS forces, and not least because it was largely made up of local Syrian fighters. But with these airstrikes, the al-Nusra Front added the US to its list of enemies, making it harder for more moderate rebel groups to openly ally with the US (*The New York Times*, September 28, 2014). Meanwhile, reports of rising civilian casualties, and the bombing of food stores and market places, led to large civilian protests across Syria denouncing the US, further dent-

ing the US's legitimacy and role as an ally to the opposition and the Syrian people (*The Wall Street Journal*, September 26, 2014). Worse still for Washington, ISIS boasted that it was likely to gain more recruits as a result of the US-led campaign, a promise that was fulfilled. Shortly after the strikes began, Obama admitted that US intelligence had underestimated the threat of ISIS (*Reuters*, September 28, 2014). It also became apparent that the administration had also underestimated the extremist blowback against its latest military venture.

Third, the group that had the most to lose from America's bombing campaign was, ironically, the US's allies, the FSA and the Syrian Opposition Coalition, in direct contradiction of Washington's publicly stated long-term game plan. Its then leader Hadi al-Bahra publicly supported the US strikes at a time when his compatriots (including FSA affiliates) were turning in the opposite direction (*The Guardian*, September 11, 2014; *The Wall Street Journal*, September 26, 2014). Furthermore, the Opposition Coalition's assertions that the strikes against ISIS would in some way help remove Asad were highly tenuous at the time and have been proved wrong. The US's deliberate concentration on ISIS instead of the regime only fuelled criticism of the Opposition Coalition, and the diminishing returns of its alliance with the west. This was exacerbated when in a congressional hearing in the same month that airstrikes had been launched, then secretary of defence Chuck Hagel was asked by Senator John McCain whether the FSA would be granted military aid if attacked. Hagel, with no clear directives from above, was unable to answer in the affirmative – a glaring omission that prompted him to starkly admit in a private memo to John Kerry, Susan Rice and the President that the US did not have a policy on Syria (*Foreign Policy*, December 18, 2015). This impression of a 'non-policy' was exacerbated in October 2015, when the US officially announced the end of the Pentagon's \$500 million programme to train and equip Syrian rebels to fight ISIS (*The New York Times*, October 9, 2015) – effectively an admission that the programme had failed to achieve its goals, but in direct contrast to the continued support being funnelled via the CIA. Thus inconsistencies existed not only between rhetoric and actual policy, but also within actual policies conducted via different departments.

By this stage the SNC's capacity to speak for the wider opposition movement and its legitimacy on the ground was already in question; but US airstrikes on ISIS, and failure to publicise the military aid provided by the CIA, further undermined the Opposition's credibility among the local Syrian population and the value of its US connections. It created an even greater polarisation be-

tween the warring factions, making a political settlement even more distant. US actions against ISIS were widely compared to US inaction on the regime's alleged crimes in Ghouta. The willingness of the US to pursue (and publicise) limited goals that fitted within the existing 'War on Terror' framework, compared to its deep reluctance to pursue and admit to game-changing intervention against the regime, exposed the risk-averse, self-interested nature of the US's strategy towards the Syrian conflict. This risk-aversion and diminished political leadership emboldened other actors, notably Russia, to capitalise on waning US legitimacy and willingness to take control.

Conclusion

The underlying strategy of the Obama administration was highly realist and cautious. It prioritised national interest and retrenchment after Bush's overreach, and deemed both humanitarian intervention and democracy promotion as too risky, replete with potential unforeseeable consequences – arguably sensible for the US in light of its foray in Iraq and the complexity of the Syrian crisis, but jarring with America's self-identity and the image it wished to portray of itself on the world stage. This dilemma became reflected in policy incoherence, in which the US government's realism was undermined by public statements committing itself to action, and regular promises of an imminent policy change in favour of arming the rebels; this rhetoric was intended to keep the rebels onside, maintain pressure on Assad, and deflect domestic and international criticism of US apathy, yet the US appears to have failed on all three counts. Ghouta in August 2013 marked a watershed when these developments became apparent to an international audience, emphatically exposing the limitations of US hegemony. The weakness in US legitimacy had been growing for some time – a legacy of the Bush administration's War and Terror – and in turn contributed to US unwillingness to lead. However, as highlighted in this chapter, this is not unprecedented in US foreign policy behaviour. Notable parallels can be identified between the Obama administration and the divisions afflicting US administrations in the interwar period when America's global strategy was still in gestation. At that time, the US faced uncertainty and manifested incoherence as it wrestled between isolationism and an aspiration to rise up in global power; a century or so later, the US has manifested similar foreign policy traits, but this time as it sought to manage its descent.

Bibliography

Cox, Michael, "Whatever Happened to American Decline? International Relations and the New United States Hegemony," *New Political Economy* 6, no. 3 (2001): 311-340.

Gani, J. *The Role of Ideology in Syrian-US Relations, Conflict and Cooperation*. Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014.

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

Gilpin, Robert, *The Political Economy of International Relations*. Princeton University Press, 1987.

Goldsmith, Leon T. "Is Alawite Solidarity Finally Breaking?" Hurst publishers, 25 August 2015, accessed at <http://www.hurstpublishers.com/is-alawite-solidarity-finally-breaking/>

Gramsci, A. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Translated and edited by Hoare, Q. and Nowell-Smith, G. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971.

Holsti, K. J., "National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy." *International Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (1970): 233-309.

Ikenberry, G., & Kupchan, C. "Socialization and Hegemonic Power." *International Organization* 44, no. 3 (1990): 283-315.

Kindleberger, C. *The World in Depression, 1929-1939*. University of California Press, 1973.

Krieg, Andreas. "The Obama Doctrine and US Foreign Policy in the Middle East." *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2015): 104.

Lesch, David. "The Uprising that wasn't Supposed to Happen: Syria and the Arab Spring." In *Change and Resistance in the Middle East*, edited by David W. Lesch and Mark L. Haas, 83. Westview Press, 2013.

Morgenthau, H. *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York Knopf, 1965.

Nayak, Meghana V. and Christopher Malone. "American Orientalism and American Exceptionalism: A Critical Rethinking of US Hegemony." *International Studies Review*, (June 2009).

Nye, Jr. Joseph S, "Soft Power." *Foreign Policy*, (Autumn, 1990): 153-171.

Notes

1. Gerges, *The End of America's Moment?* 2.
 2. Gani, *The Role of Ideology*, 31.
 3. Ibid., 32.
 4. Holsti, "National Role Conceptions," 233-309.
 5. For the development of hegemonic theories, see Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*; Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*; Ikenberry and Kupchan, "Socialization and Hegemonic Power;" Kindleberger, *The World in Depression*; and Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations*.
 6. Nye, "Soft Power," 153-171; Nye, "Soft Power and American Foreign Policy," 255-270.
 7. Restad, "American Exceptionalism," 53-76.
 8. Luce, 2004
 9. Nayak and Malone, "American Orientalism."
 10. Obama speech, 2007
 11. Cox, "Whatever Happened to American Decline?" 311-340.
 12. Krieg, "The Obama Doctrine," 104.
 13. Ibid., 97-113 [My italics].
 14. Ibid., 104.
 15. Ibid., 102.
 16. Statement by the White House, 27.2.2011, accessed at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/27/statement-president-bahrain>
 17. President Obama: "The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way." The White House website, 18 Aug 2011, accessed at:
- ^{xviii} By 2016, it was evident that rebels had acquired anti-aircraft weapons, which were used to shoot down Syrian regime fighter jets. It is thought these were either supplied by Gulf backers of the opposition, or were seized by rebel forces after the capture of regime-held territory. See report by Haid Haid in the Atlantic Council, 15 April 2016, for more detail: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?view=article&id=29884:does-the-syrian-opposition-have-anti-aircraft-missiles>
19. Gerges, *Obama and the Middle East*, 4.
 20. Lesch, "The Uprising that Wasn't Supposed to Happen," 83.

21. “Syrian Refugees: A Snapshot of the Crisis – in the Middle East and Europe,” accessed at: http://syrianrefugees.eu/?page_id=163

22. Quinn, “The Art of Declining Politely,” 803-824.

23. *Opposition to Syrian Airstrikes Surges*, Pew Research Centre

24. Strong, “Interpreting the Syria Vote,” 1132.

25. The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, ‘Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Syria’, 10 September 2013, Accessed at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/10/remarks-president-address-nation-syria>

^{xxvi} See articles and blog posts such as ‘America’s Chemical Weapons: Hypocrisy, Conspiracy and a Forgotten History’, November 2013, Global Research Centre, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/americas-chemical-weapons-hypocrisy-conspiracy-and-a-forgotten-history/5358082>, and ‘On Intervening in Syria’ 28 August 2013, London Review of Books, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2013/08/28/tariq-ali/on-intervening-in-syria/>.

27. Phil Arena, ‘How Could US Signals of Weakness Bring Russia and Syria to the Table?’, *The Duck of Minerva*, 14.09.2013, Accessed at: <http://duckofminerva.com/2013/09/how-could-us-signals-of-weakness-bring-russia-and-syria-to-the-table.html>

^{xxviii} Mark Mazzetti, Adam Goldman and Michael S. Schmidt, *New York Times*, 2 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/middleeast/cia-syria-rebel-arm-trump.html>

29. Stent, “US-Russia Relations,” 123-138.

30. Goldsmith, “Is Alawite Solidarity Finally Breaking?”