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Claremont McKenna College

A Critical Analysis of American Foreign Policy in
the Syrian Civil War

Submitted to Professor Bou Nassif

By,
Sydney Heath

for
Senior Thesis
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Abstract

This thesis explores the development of American policy in the Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011 and has caused the world's largest refugee crisis, among other humanitarian issues. Through analyzing popular debates about U.S. foreign policy in Syria, this project attempts to determine how the United States should have responded to President Bashar al-Assad's aggression towards his people in order to most effectively alleviate suffering. The analysis finds that the United States under President Obama missed a crucial opportunity to weaken Assad and prevent the suffering of millions of Syrians. This paper also explores the present day implications of President Obama's mistakes in Syria, specifically referencing the lack of credibility that the United States has in conflicts like that of Russian and Ukraine. The final chapter presents a bleak outlook on the future of Syria and the possibilities for effective U.S. policy that would depose Assad and end the War. Assad will stop at nothing to remain in power, yet as long as he is in power, Syrians will see no peace.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

The Syrian people have been subjected to a deadly war for over a decade at the hands of the Dictator Bashar al-Assad, and the United States has largely stood idly by. Although the American withdrawal from Afghanistan and more recently the Russian invasion of Ukraine have pushed coverage of the Syrian Civil War off the front page, the conflict in Syria is far from over. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has said that "it is impossible to fully fathom the extent of the devastation in Syria, but its people have endured some of the greatest crimes the world has witnessed this century."¹ The United Nations has also released a statement calling the Syrian Civil War "the worst man-made disaster since World War II."² Over 590,000 people have been killed as a result of the conflict, and at least 15,000 of them died while being tortured in prison by the repressive Syrian government led by Bashar al-Assad.³

This paper will seek to answer the following questions: How did the United States respond to the Syrian Civil War, and to what extent was their response effective at minimizing suffering and protecting U.S national security? How should the United States continue to develop its Syria policy going forward? I will begin with a chapter on how the Syrian conflict came to be and will also discuss international actors that have had significant influences on the Assad regime's ability to stay in power. Chapter 3 will detail the United States' involvement in Syria and examine how the American policy in Syria

¹ Sherlock, Ruth, et al. "Syria's Civil War Started A Decade Ago. Here's Where It Stands." *NPR*, NPR, 15 Mar. 2021,

<https://www.npr.org/2021/03/15/976352794/syrias-civil-war-started-a-decade-ago-heres-where-it-stands>.

² Chughtai, Alia. "Syria's War: Ten Years – and Counting." *Arab Spring: 10 Years on News | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 18 Mar. 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/15/syria-ten-years-of-war>.

³ Ibid.

was crafted. Chapter four will analyze some of the debates between the foremost scholars on the Middle East and government officials about how the United States should have responded to the Civil War in Syria. In order to better understand these debates, I conducted interviews with Hagar Chemali who served as Director for Syria and Lebanon at the National Security Council from 2010 to 2012 and read the opinions and memoirs of many relevant government officials and scholars. Finally, in Chapter 5, I will conclude the paper by proposing suggestions for what U.S. policy in Syria should look like going forward under the current Biden administration. This paper ultimately finds that the United States missed a crucial opportunity in 2012 to have a meaningful effect on the outcome of the Syrian Civil War, potentially saving the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. Going forward, the United States lacks any feasible policy options that would result in Assad losing power now that Russia has put its full military support behind the country, and the opposition has been so thoroughly weakened.

The nation of Syria is approximately the same size as the State of Washington, but only one quarter of its landmass is arable.⁴ In 2010, its population was around 24 million people but that number has dropped to 17.5 million as of 2020 due to the Civil War. American policy in Syria leading up to the Syrian Civil War was inconsistent. In 2002, President George W. Bush included Syria in his “axis of evil” speech in which he listed countries he was concerned were seeking weapons of mass destruction.⁵ Bush

⁴ Polk, W. R. (2013, December 10). *Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to post-assad*. The Atlantic. Retrieved April 16, 2022, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/12/understanding-syria-from-pre-civil-war-to-post-assad/281989/>.

⁵ Polk, W. R. (2013, December 10). *Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to post-assad*. The Atlantic. Retrieved April 16, 2022, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/12/understanding-syria-from-pre-civil-war-to-post-assad/281989/>.

specifically expressed concern that countries like Syria would allow terrorist organizations to access these weapons of mass destruction. In fact, the United States has considered Syria to be a state sponsor of terrorism since 1979 and has imposed strong sanctions on the country since 2003.⁶ Although the relationship between Washington and Damascus has been strained, the U.S. maintained an ambassador in the country up until 2011, when the Civil War began, making Syria the only country on the U.S.'s list of state sponsored terrorists with which the U.S. retained diplomatic efforts.⁷⁸ This inconsistent Syrian policy continued with the start of the Civil War in 2011, as this paper will examine.

American policymakers should be concerned with U.S. policy in Syria not only because of the effects of the Civil War on American national security but also because the conflict has had such devastating effects on the Syrian people, and the United States had a responsibility to alleviate suffering to the best of its ability but failed to do so. The Syrian Civil War created the world's largest refugee crisis, forcing over 5.5 million Syrians to leave their countries and become refugees, primarily in Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan.⁹ Today, one third of the world's refugees are from Syria.¹⁰ The war has also displaced 6.7 million Syrians within Syria.¹¹ The refugee crisis has not only

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Tabler, Andrew. *In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria*. Lawrence Hill Books, 2011, 13.

⁸ Only in 1986 did the U.S. briefly withdraw its Ambassador after it was revealed that Syria was involved in an attempted terrorist attack on Israel. (See Tabler page 13).

⁹ Sherlock, Ruth, et al. "Syria's Civil War Started A Decade Ago. Here's Where It Stands." *NPR*, NPR, 15 Mar. 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/15/976352794/syrias-civil-war-started-a-decade-ago-heres-where-it-stands>.

¹⁰ Chughtai, Alia. "Syria's War: Ten Years – and Counting." *Arab Spring: 10 Years on News | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 18 Mar. 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/15/syria-ten-years-of-war>.

¹¹ Sherlock, Ruth, et al. "Syria's Civil War Started A Decade Ago. Here's Where It Stands." *NPR*, NPR, 15 Mar. 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/15/976352794/syrias-civil-war-started-a-decade-ago-heres-where-it-stands>.

affected Syrians but has also had political implications in European countries that have accepted large numbers of refugees. A growing number of Muslim refugees in Europe has led to the rise of Islamophobia, which in turn has increased the popularity of extremist right-wing politicians.¹²

Children have suffered their own distinctive hardships as a result of the war: In the first six months of 2018 alone, there were over 1,300 cases of harm against children; 60 percent of these were either maiming or murder.¹³ When school-aged children are not given access to education due to the effects of the war, they are more likely to join extremist groups. ISIS, a Muslim extremist group, has attempted to fill this educational void by providing Syrians with their own schools that mainly focus on Islamic law and prohibit subjects like history and sociology.^{14 15} The death and destruction in Syria combined with western sanctions have also severely increased poverty. At least 80 percent of Syrians now live under the international poverty line.¹⁶ Shortages of food, electricity and fuel are commonplace; over 9 million Syrians lack access to sufficient food supplies.¹⁷ The Syrian Civil War has absolutely devastated the nation and has caused dangers to American national security, yet no American President has taken decisive action to end Bashar al-Assad's war on his people.

¹² Sherlock, Ruth, et al. "Syria's Civil War Started A Decade Ago. Here's Where It Stands." *NPR*, NPR, 15 Mar. 2021,

<https://www.npr.org/2021/03/15/976352794/syrias-civil-war-started-a-decade-ago-heres-where-it-stands>.

¹³ Yassin, Nasser. "101 Facts & Figures on the Syrian Refugee Crisis." *Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs*, July 2019.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Monthly stipends provided by ISIS encourage children to attend these new schools.

¹⁶ Chughtai, Alia. "Syria's War: Ten Years – and Counting." *Arab Spring: 10 Years on News* | *Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 18 Mar. 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/15/syria-ten-years-of-war>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 2: What Caused the Syrian Civil War?

In order to analyze the United States' response to the Syrian Civil War and determine future U.S. activity in the nation, we must first understand the causes and effects of the war as well as the role that other international actors have played in the conflict. The decade-long war is fueled in part by ethno religious tensions in the country between the Sunni majority and the Alawite minority.¹⁸ Syria is 10 percent Christian and 87 percent Muslim; 74 percent of Syrian Muslims are Sunni and 13 percent are Shia.¹⁹ In 1970, Hafez al-Assad, the Alawite defense minister, seized power from the ruling Baath party and began a repressive regime that would last almost 30 years. Ethnic tensions during his presidency reached a boiling point in February of 1982 when Sunni members of the Muslim Brotherhood pushed Hafez al Assad's security forces out of the city of Hama, which had a high concentration of Muslim Brothers at the time. In retaliation, the regime promptly bombed Hama and killed over 30,000 people.²⁰

Hafez ruled with an iron fist until his death in 2000, at which point his 34-year-old son, Bashar al-Assad, whom he had been grooming, assumed the Presidency. When it was announced that Bashar would be the next president, Syrians hoped that he would deviate from his father's authoritative practices and modernize the country. Bashar was educated in London and had been an unassuming eye doctor prior to becoming president. He even claimed that the reason he enjoyed being an eye doctor was because "there was very little blood." However, he quickly liberalized the previously state-run

¹⁸ Alawite is a sect of Shia Islam.

¹⁹ *Central Intelligence Agency*, Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/syria/#people-and-society>.

²⁰ Tabler, Andrew. *In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria*. Lawrence Hill Books, 2011.

economy in a way that benefited only the crony capitalists close to his regime rather than the majority of Syrians who were living in poverty.²¹ In his first ten years in power, unemployment and poverty both increased, particularly among younger Syrians.²² To make matters worse, Syria was faced with a severe drought that affected the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of farmers between 2006 and 2010, forcing many to become climate refugees.²³ While farmers were being forced off of their lands, those connected to the regime like Assad's first cousin Rami Makhoul, were becoming significantly wealthier under Assad's regime. The billionaire Makhoul owns Syriatel, a mobile network provider company that is in control of an estimated 55 percent of the network provider market.²⁴ When Assad began to liberalize the economy, Makhoul entered other markets including real estate, construction, tourism, banking, insurance and transport, and allegedly ended up controlling approximately 65 percent of Syria's entire economy.²⁵ Makhoul's corruption caused a chain reaction which ultimately led to the protests that began the Syrian Civil War in 2011.

The Arab Spring Reaches Syria

While resentment towards Assad was growing, nations throughout the Middle East were swept by protestors attempting to oust their respective oppressive regimes.

Beginning in Tunisia in 2010 when a fruit vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself

²¹ Heydemann, Steven. "Pity the Nation: Assessing a Half-Century of Assadist Rule." *Brookings*, Brookings, 14 Dec. 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/12/14/pity-the-nation-assessing-a-half-century-of-assadist-rule/>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Shadid, Anthony. "Syrian Businessman Becomes Magnet for Anger and Dissent." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 30 Apr. 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/01/world/asia/01makhoul.html>.

²⁵ Heydemann, Steven. "Pity the Nation: Assessing a Half-Century of Assadist Rule." *Brookings*, Brookings, 14 Dec. 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/12/14/pity-the-nation-assessing-a-half-century-of-assadist-rule/>.

on fire to protest corruption in the government, the anti-government protests spread to Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, Algeria, Morocco, Oman, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan, and Kuwait. In Tunisia, the protestors successfully coerced president Ben Ali to step down. While protests were spreading in other parts of the Middle East, Assad asserted that they would not reach Syria because he claimed his policies accurately represented the desires of his people.²⁶ His predictions ended up being deeply inaccurate.

The protests in Syria began in the Dara'a province, which had been hit particularly hard by the drought, after government officials detained and tortured a group of children who spray-painted graffiti that said "It's your turn, doctor," implying that President Assad would be the next leader to be deposed.²⁷ As the story goes, Rami Makhoul's company Syriatel wanted to obtain some land that was part of a school in Dara'a so that Syriatel could build a new cell tower, but the Principal of the school refused to allow Makhoul to take the land, and so he sent some men to physically assault her.²⁸ This attack prompted a group of her students to graffiti, for which they were then arrested.²⁹ Anti-regime protests began and quickly spread after the parents of the detained children were never informed about their children's whereabouts. Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, these protests were about dignity and human rights more so than the state of the Syrian economy, although Assad's crony capitalism was certainly a factor as well.³⁰ The government responded to the protests by firing into the crowd and arresting protesters,

²⁶ Tabler, Andrew. *In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria*. Lawrence Hill Books, 2011.

²⁷ Al Jazeera. "Timeline: How the Arab Spring Unfolded." *Arab Spring: 10 Years on News | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 14 Jan. 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/14/arab-spring-ten-years-on>.

²⁸ Chemali, Hagar. Interview. Conducted by Sydney Heath. March 14th, 2022.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

further infuriating the growing opposition.³¹ By early April these nonviolent protests spread across the country, and the Syrian government had deployed tanks to crush protests by the end of the month.³² By July, at least 100,000 people across Syria had joined the anti-regime protests, and over 600 people had been killed by regime forces.³³ In a speech addressed to the nation on January 10th, 2012, President Assad promised to not give in to the “terrorists” and to continue defending his regime with an “iron fist.”³⁴ On February 3rd, government forces killed over 200 people in a single day when they attacked Homs, which was the heart of the anti-regime uprising at the time.³⁵

The Opposition Movement

Given that Assad is Alawite, it makes sense that the majority of the protesters were Sunni Muslims, revealing the sectarian element of the conflict. Initially there were some working-and-middle-class Alawites who supported the protesters and non-Alawites who supported the government. This type of cross-cutting cleavage would all but disappear as the war progressed. Not long after the protests began in Dara’a, rebel militias began to form against the government. At the height of the war, there were 13 main opposition groups operating separately. However, according to some sources there were as many as 1,200 smaller rebel groups.³⁶ The Free Syrian Army, which was mainly made up of soldiers who defected from the Syrian army, was one of the larger groups,

³¹ Al Jazeera. “Timeline: How the Arab Spring Unfolded.” *Arab Spring: 10 Years on News | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 14 Jan. 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/14/arab-spring-ten-years-on>.

³² Ibid.

³³ Yacoubian, Mona. “Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising against Assad.” *United States Institute of Peace*, 12 Mar. 2021, <https://www.usip.org/syria-timeline-uprising-against-assad>.

³⁴ Al Jazeera. “Timeline: How the Arab Spring Unfolded.” *Arab Spring: 10 Years on News | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 14 Jan. 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/14/arab-spring-ten-years-on>.

³⁵ Yacoubian, Mona. “Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising against Assad.” *United States Institute of Peace*, 12 Mar. 2021, <https://www.usip.org/syria-timeline-uprising-against-assad>.

³⁶ Gilsinan, Kathy. “The Confused Person’s Guide to the Syrian Civil War.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 16 Nov. 2015.

with as many as 50,000 members by 2013.³⁷ Local militias, however, generally did not accept the authority it claimed to have over the opposition movement. Jabhat Al-Nusra was perhaps the strongest and most effective group of opposition fighters and was Islamist by nature.³⁸ In theory, the overwhelming Sunni majority in the country should have been able to unite against the significantly smaller Alawite minority, but this did not come to be. There were several important reasons why the opposition movement was not able to effectively coordinate or cooperate to defeat the Assad regime. The first of these was the culture of distrust that Assad's rule had established in the country. Even before the beginning of the Civil War, Syrian citizens were not allowed to complain about the government, and anyone could be a spy, including unassuming taxi drivers looking to make some extra money as informers and even one's own neighbors.³⁹ Given this lack of trust, it was difficult for different opposition groups to work together. Additionally, each group had a different interest even though they all needed to reach their distinctive goals by overthrowing Assad. Beginning early on in the war, they were too focused on their own individual interests and end goals and failed to realize that they needed to unite to take down Assad before they could determine what the future of Syria would look like.⁴⁰ In an interview, Hagar Chemali, the former Director for Syria and Lebanon at the National Security Council, explained that the United States would attend conferences in Geneva with leaders from the various opposition groups, and the leaders would spend the majority of the time arguing over matters such as which of them would become the next

³⁷ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Syrian Civil War." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 31 Mar. 2020.

³⁸ Rhodes, Ben. *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*. Random House, 2019.

³⁹ Chemali, Hagar. Interview. Conducted by Sydney Heath. March 14th, 2022.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

prime minister rather than discussing how to defeat Assad, who was the most imminent threat.⁴¹

Indiscriminate Violence and Chemical Weapons

The Assad regime has employed the use of overwhelming violence against civilians in order to weaken the opposition movement to the point of surrender. Assad's violence has taken the form of torturing political prisoners, bombing hospitals, and using chemical weapons on civilians. Although Assad denies the use of torture in his prisons, the New York Times has released Syrian government memos that mention deaths due to torture and awful prison conditions.⁴² The government's targeting of hospitals during airstrikes was exposed by the Physicians for Human Rights group, which has released reports of 46 government attacks on hospitals in the northwest of Syria, and 14 of these hospitals were on a list provided to the Assad regime by the United Nations.⁴³ On the list, the UN included the locations of hospitals in Syria with the hope that Assad and his allies would avoid them during his bombing campaigns.⁴⁴ Instead of complying with the UN's request, Assad chose to target the most vulnerable population of civilians, pressuring the opposition to surrender. Since the start of the conflict in 2011, 890 medical professionals have been killed in 578 bombings of health facilities.⁴⁵ Since the beginning of the war, government militias have killed over 11,000 civilians, including almost 2,000 children, using over 82,000 barrel bombs.⁴⁶ Assad's forces even resorted to bombing the funerals

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Allen, Opinion by Jonathan. "Terrorizing Civilians and Bombing Hospitals Is a Core Part of Assad's Strategy." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 2 Sept. 2019.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ "In Nine Years, the Syrian Regime Has Dropped Nearly 82,000 Barrel Bombs, Killing 11,087 Civilians, Including 1,821 Children - Syrian Arab Republic." *ReliefWeb*, 15 Apr. 2021,

of their victims in order to target those they believed were supportive of the opposition movement.⁴⁷

Assad's use of chemical weapons against civilians has been one of his most egregious war crimes. Although Syria has signed the Geneva Gas Protocol, which prohibits "the use in war of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gasses, and of all analogous liquids," this technically only applies to wars among separate countries and therefore does not prevent the government from using chemical weapons on its own citizens.⁴⁸ The Assad regime's first reported use of chemical weapons was on December 23rd, 2012, when seven people in Homs died from a mysterious poisonous gas.⁴⁹ In March 2013, there was another reported incident in which 25 people were killed by chemical weapons in Damascus and Aleppo; the Syrian government blamed the opposition for these attacks.⁵⁰ Despite these claims, one comprehensive report on Syria's chemical weapons usage found that only two percent of chemical weapon attacks can be attributed to the opposition, and more specifically to ISIS.⁵¹ In August 2013, the government perpetrated another large scale attack that killed 1,429 people, including a number of non-combatants and 426 children.⁵² The chemical used in the attack was a nerve agent called Sarin that is

<https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/nine-years-syrian-regime-has-dropped-nearly-82000-barrel-bombs-killing>.

⁴⁷ Power, Samantha. *The Education of an Idealist: a Memoir*. Del St., an Imprint of William Morrow, 2021, 596.

⁴⁸ Hurd, Ian. "Saving Syria: International Law Is Not the Answer." *Opinions | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 27 Aug. 2013,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2013/8/27/saving-syria-international-law-is-not-the-answer#:~:text=Yett%20in%201953%20Syria%20did,These%20are%20important%20commitments>.

⁴⁹ "Fact Sheets & Briefs." *Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012-2021 | Arms Control Association*, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity>.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

20 times more toxic than cyanide.⁵³ As this paper will examine later, a United Nations resolution in 2013 required Syria to destroy its chemical weapons equipment, but this had little effect because 91.5 percent of the chemical weapons attacks have been chlorine bombs, and chlorine plants were not required to be destroyed under the UN resolution because of chlorine's quotidian uses.⁵⁴ These indiscriminate chemical weapons attacks, which seem to deliberately target not only the rebel militias but also noncombatants, including children, have served to weaken the already-divided opposition movement.

The Role of the Islamic State

One of Assad's most effective tactics has been his indirect support for jihadist groups such as ISIS and the Army of Islam, who initially made up only a small fraction of the opposition. He has supported these groups by releasing prisoners known to be affiliated with extremist groups, purchasing gas and oil from territories controlled by the terrorist organizations, and largely sparing extremist rebels from his bombing campaigns.⁵⁵ In doing so, he effectively portrayed the entire opposition movement as extremist in nature, ensuring that countries in the West would be hesitant to intervene on behalf of the rebels and securing the loyalty of Shia across the country whose existence was threatened by Sunni extremist groups like ISIS.

Although Assad may have only purchased oil from terrorist groups out of necessity (as he would likely claim), this nonetheless proves Assad's willingness to work

⁵³ Allen, Opinion by Jonathan. "Terrorizing Civilians and Bombing Hospitals Is a Core Part of Assad's Strategy." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 2 Sept. 2019.

⁵⁴ Lombardo, Clare. "More than 300 Chemical Attacks Launched during Syrian Civil War, Study Says." *NPR*, NPR, 17 Feb. 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/17/695545252/more-than-300-chemical-attacks-launched-during-syrian-civil-war-study-says>.

⁵⁵ Becker, Michael. "When Terrorists and Target Governments Cooperate: the Case of Syria." *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2015, pp. 95–103. *JSTOR*. Accessed 13 May 2020.

with jihadist groups, despite his anti-ISIS rhetoric. An ISIS fighter gave further evidence of Assad's indirect support for extremist groups when he said: "We were confident that the regime would not bomb us."⁵⁶ The Assad regime focused its violence overwhelmingly on the more moderate groups of rebel fighters along with civilians. And finally, Assad's most direct form of support for extremists came in the form of releasing prisoners whom he knew to be jihadists.⁵⁷ An interesting example of this phenomenon is the case of Zahran Alloush. In 2009, Alloush, a known Sunni fundamentalist, was arrested and sent to prison in Damascus during a crackdown on Sunni extremism across the country.⁵⁸ Assad released Alloush from prison in 2011, just as the Civil War was beginning to heat up. Alloush went on to form the Army of Islam, a Salafi fundamentalist militia group that became a powerful part of the opposition movement.⁵⁹

What exactly did Assad gain from his indirect support for Sunni fundamentalist groups who wanted to overthrow his government? There were three main outcomes that have significantly contributed to Assad's success in the Civil War. Firstly, through supporting the growth of terrorist organizations, Assad was able to frame the protesters as extremists, which discouraged foreign powers such as the United States from intervening on the side of the rebels. This was largely successful given that the U.S. terminated its aid for the rebels in 2013.⁶⁰ The U.S. then went a step further and brought the war on terror to Syria, carrying out airstrikes against ISIS in 2014 with the support of Assad.⁶¹ A total of

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Lund, Aron, et al. "The Syrian Rebel Who Tried to Build an Islamist Paradise." *POLITICO Magazine*, 31 Mar. 2017.

⁵⁹ Barnard, Anne. "Powerful Syrian Rebel Leader Reported Killed in Airstrike." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 25 Dec. 2015.

⁶⁰ Becker, Michael. "When Terrorists and Target Governments Cooperate: the Case of Syria." *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2015, pp. 95–103. *JSTOR*. Accessed 13 May 2020.

⁶¹ Ibid.

nine countries have worked together to bomb ISIS in Syria, thereby indirectly supporting Assad's regime in the Civil War.⁶² A second tactical reason for encouraging the growth and development of terrorist organizations is that it has divided the opposition movement, thereby weakening it. Conflict between different groups in the opposition has at times become more common than fighting between the opposition and the regime.⁶³ Not only are Sunni fundamentalist groups at odds with the more moderate militias, the extremist groups are also in conflict with one another. For many moderate Sunni Syrians, the fundamentalist lifestyle and beliefs of groups like ISIS, such as political Islam and conservative dress for women, are perhaps even more unappealing than those of the current Syrian regime.⁶⁴ There is also a perception that some extremist groups have ties to Assad, given his aforementioned support for them, which makes moderate groups hesitant to work with them.⁶⁵ Regarding conflict between Sunni fundamentalist groups, the hostility between ISIS and Zahran Alloush's Army of Islam is a good example of the effectiveness of Assad's decision to release Alloush from prison. These two organizations see each other as competitors for power, and their clashes have effectively weakened both groups relative to the strength of the Assad regime.⁶⁶

The final factor that likely motivated Assad to support Sunni fundamentalist organizations was his need to ensure that Alawites and other non-Sunnis would remain loyal to him throughout the war. By making certain that the face of the opposition was

⁶² Gilsinan, Kathy. "The Confused Person's Guide to the Syrian Civil War." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 16 Nov. 2015,

⁶³ Becker, Michael. "When Terrorists and Target Governments Cooperate: the Case of Syria." *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2015, pp. 95–103. *JSTOR*. Accessed 13 May 2020.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Barnard, Anne. "Powerful Syrian Rebel Leader Reported Killed in Airstrike." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 25 Dec. 2015.

Sunni extremist and therefore anti-Shia, this would deter Alawites, Christians, and Druze from finding a place in the opposition.⁶⁷ These minority groups would see the conflict as an existential threat and feel that they needed to support Assad.

International Actors in the Conflict

One of Assad's most powerful weapons in the Syrian Civil War, if not *the* most powerful, has been the support he has received from Russia, Iran and China. Not only have these countries helped to fund the Assad regime, they have also provided troops and weapons, trained Assad's army, and acted as important diplomatic allies in the United Nations. In 2011, when the UN Security Council attempted to pass a resolution that would have denounced Assad's use of violence, China and Russia vetoed the resolution, preventing its enactment.⁶⁸ Russia has exercised its veto power 12 times in the UN Security Council to protect Assad since the beginning of the War.⁶⁹ Additionally, when the European Union put sanctions on Syria in order to weaken Assad, Russia and Iran provided economic support that counteracted the effect of the sanctions.⁷⁰ Iran loaned Syria \$4.6 billion, and Putin printed Syrian pounds within Russia for Assad.⁷¹

Russia

Russia's decision to back Assad in the Syrian Civil War can be traced back to the "Putin Doctrine" written in 2008.⁷² This doctrine focused on Russia's aim to suppress the

⁶⁷ Hincks, Joseph. "Bashar Assad Is Using Old Tactics to Regain His Grip on Syria." *Time*, Time, 29 May 2019.

⁶⁸ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Syrian Civil War." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 31 Mar. 2020.

⁶⁹ Allen, Opinion by Jonathan. "Terrorizing Civilians and Bombing Hospitals Is a Core Part of Assad's Strategy." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 2 Sept. 2019.

⁷⁰ Phillips, Christopher. "The World Abetted Assad's Victory in Syria." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 10 Aug. 2018.

⁷¹ *Iran has spent 16 billion dollars in Middle Eastern Wars since 2012*. Iran International. (2018, October 9). Retrieved April 24, 2022, from <https://old.iranintl.com/en/world/iran-has-spent-16-billion-dollars-middle-eastern-wars-2012>

⁷² Colucci, Lamont. "What Russia Is up to in Syria." *TheHill*, The Hill, 4 May 2020.

U.S.'s influence around the world and to increase Russia's regional power.⁷³ Syria is Russia's last remaining sphere of influence in the region.⁷⁴ Not only is Putin concerned with losing leverage in the Middle East, he also fears that the United States will replace Putin's regime with one friendly to the United States if given the opportunity. This fear is not unfounded; the United States had done so in Afghanistan, Libya and Iraq in the early 2000s.⁷⁵ Later in the Syrian conflict Moscow lost its foothold in Ukraine following the 2014 Ukrainian revolution, in which a pro-United States government took power, giving Putin further reason to fear the growing U.S. influence.⁷⁶ As a result, Putin currently has an estimated 5,000 troops stationed in Syria who are fighting on behalf of Assad as well as an airbase in Hmeimim and military bases across the country.⁷⁷ Putin has also framed Russia's involvement in the conflict as a means to defeat ISIS, however Russian airstrikes have disproportionately killed civilians and moderate rebel militias rather than ISIS fighters.⁷⁸ The Syrian Network for Human Rights has estimated the number of civilian deaths since 2011 to be 226,247, and Russian airstrikes have been responsible for anywhere between 6,500 and 8,400 of these deaths.⁸⁰

Iran

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Before the fall of the Soviet Union, the USSR wielded political influence over a number of nations in the Middle East such as Iraq, Egypt, Yemen and Algeria.

⁷⁵ Baghdadi, George. "Why Syria's Civil War Is Still a 'Living Nightmare' after 10 Years." *CBS News*, CBS Interactive, 15 Mar. 2021,

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/syria-civil-war-still-living-nightmare-10-years-bashar-assad-russia-un-us/>.

⁷⁶ "Dangerous Liaisons: Russian Cooperation with Iran in Syria." *Dangerous Liaisons: Russian Cooperation with Iran in Syria* | *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2 Feb. 2022,

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/dangerous-liaisons-russian-cooperation-iran-syria>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Like Russia, Iran's support for the Assad regime stems from its desire to limit U.S. influence around the world and the fact that Iran has few other Shia allies in the region.⁸¹ Iran seeks to limit the expansion of the Sunni Islamic state in Syria, so it has an interest in supporting the Alawite Assad regime. Iranian support for the pro-regime Syrian military has taken many forms; the Iranian government backs Hezbollah, a Lebanese terrorist organization that has provided significant military aid and approximately 8,000 fighters to Assad's forces since 2013.⁸² Iran has also supplied Assad with weapons as well as 3,000 members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force.⁸³ Reports say that Iran's aid to Assad has cost Iran \$15 billion per year.⁸⁴ One particularly calculating way in which Iran has supported the Assad regime is through the engineering of population swaps in which Shia Muslims from Lebanon, Iraq and other parts of Syria are sent into areas of Syria that were previously occupied by Sunni Muslims prior to the war.⁸⁵

China

China is interested in maintaining a working relationship with Assad in order to secure trade deals and include Syria in its Belt and Road Initiative. In 2017, Assad announced that China, Russia and Iran would be given priority to rebuild infrastructure

⁸¹ Sherlock, Ruth, et al. "Syria's Civil War Started A Decade Ago. Here's Where It Stands." *NPR*, NPR, 15 Mar. 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/15/976352794/syrias-civil-war-started-a-decade-ago-heres-where-it-stands>.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ "Dangerous Liaisons: Russian Cooperation with Iran in Syria." *Dangerous Liaisons: Russian Cooperation with Iran in Syria* | *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2 Feb. 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/dangerous-liaisons-russian-cooperation-iran-syria>.

⁸⁴ McLoughlin, Paul. "Investing in Death: How Iran Funded Assad's War at the Expense of Its Own Citizens." *Alaraby*, The New Arab, 18 Feb. 2020.

⁸⁵ Chulov, Martin. "Iran Repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to Help Tighten Regime's Control." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 14 Jan. 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/13/irans-syria-project-pushing-population-shifts-to-increase-influence>.

whenever the Syrian war ends, and China has since promised to invest \$2 billion in the country.⁸⁶ Apart from this main economic interest, China is also worried about the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), an extremist organization made up of Uighur Muslims that has a presence in Idlib in Syria. The Chinese government has an interest in defeating extremist Uighur Muslims in Syria before they make their way back to China where they have historically carried out terrorist attacks.⁸⁷ China has supported the Assad regime both through pledging billions of dollars to support future infrastructure projects as well as through its current investments in Syria's petroleum industry.⁸⁸

International Organizations' Response to the Syrian Civil War

The international community, with the exception of Russia, Iran and China, has taken some steps to weaken Assad's power in Syria. On February 24th, 2012, the "Friends of Syria" meeting convened and was attended by over 70 countries and international organizations.⁸⁹ They refused to recognize Assad as the legitimate leader of Syria and demanded that humanitarian aid be allowed to reach civilians.⁹⁰ Friends of Syria has continued to convene occasionally to coordinate support for the rebel groups. The United Nations has also attempted to bring about peace in Syria. Kofi Annan was the UN special envoy to Syria at the start of the Civil War. In 2012, he wrote a six-point peace plan, which was supported by the UN Security Council, that called for a UN-mediated cease-fire, humanitarian aid, and freedom of press and protest, to name a

⁸⁶ Hemenway, Dan. "Chinese Strategic Engagement with Assad's Syria." *Atlantic Council*, 16 Aug. 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/chinese-strategic-engagement-with-assad-s-syria/>.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Yacoubian, Mona. "Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising against Assad." *United States Institute of Peace*, 12 Mar. 2021, <https://www.usip.org/syria-timeline-uprising-against-assad>.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

few of his requests.⁹¹ In what would become a concerning pattern, the Assad regime accepted the reforms that Kofi Annan put forward but did not ultimately implement them.⁹² In the words of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon: “The hand extended to turn away from violence in favor of dialogue and diplomacy – as spelled out in the six-point plan – has not been not taken, even though it still remains the best hope for the people of Syria.”⁹³ In April of the same year, the UN mediated a ceasefire between the government and the opposition fighters, but it also proved unsuccessful almost immediately.⁹⁴ The vast majority of concerted efforts on the part of the international community proved ineffective at putting an end to Assad’s indiscriminate violence against his citizens.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² “Kofi Annan Resigns as UN-Arab League Joint Special Envoy for Syrian Crisis | | UN News.” *United Nations*, United Nations, 2 Aug. 2012, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2012/08/416872-kofi-annan-resigns-un-arab-league-joint-special-envoy-syrian-crisis>.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Yacoubian, Mona. “Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising against Assad.” *United States Institute of Peace*, 12 Mar. 2021, <https://www.usip.org/syria-timeline-uprising-against-assad>.

CHAPTER 3: The Development of the U.S. Policy towards Syria (2011-2020)

The Geopolitical Context

The United States' policy towards the Syrian Civil War was largely shaped by the American people's disinterest in any further military action in the Middle East following the failed Iraq and Libya interventions. This nationwide anti-intervention sentiment influenced President Obama's decisions to refrain from playing a more active role in Syria. In 2016, President Obama was asked what he considered to be the "worst mistake" of his presidency. He answered: "Probably failing to plan for the day after, what I think was the right thing to do, in intervening in Libya."⁹⁵ So what exactly happened in Libya and where did the United States go wrong? The Libyan Civil war took place in 2011 not long before the start of the Syrian Civil War. Dictator Muammar Gaddafi was massacring his people, and the United States under President Obama decided to intervene for strictly humanitarian reasons.⁹⁶ As Robert Gates, the Secretary of Defense in 2011, stated: "[Gaddafi] was not a threat to us anywhere. He was a threat to his own people, and that was about it."⁹⁷ The invasion of Libya under Obama ended up having rather disastrous results, including the death of two American diplomats, Christopher Stevens and Sean Smith, at Benghazi. Not only did these two deaths affect the American people's perception of military intervention in the Middle East region, they also became an area of

⁹⁵ Tierney, Dominic. "The Legacy of Obama's 'Worst Mistake'." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 18 Apr. 2016,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/04/obamas-worst-mistake-libya/478461/>.

⁹⁶ Barndollar, Gil. "U.S. Military Interventions Loom Large 10 Years after Obama Attacked Libya." *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 19 Mar. 2021,

<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/u-s-military-interventions-loom-large-10-years-after-obama-ncna1261548>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

controversy and criticism that haunted the Obama administration.⁹⁸ The legacy of U.S. intervention in Libya was a failed state, the proliferation of extremist groups and another Civil War in 2014 because, as Obama himself admits, his administration failed to consider the future of democracy in Libya following the defeat of Gadhafi.⁹⁹ When considering whether or not to take a similar course of action in the humanitarian crisis that was evolving in Syria, Obama certainly considered the result of U.S. intervention in Libya. As UN Ambassador Samantha Power points out in her memoir: “Libya actually seemed far more straightforward than Syria, which had a pre-war population that was three times larger and had deep societal cleavages. Although Syria was 74 percent Sunni Muslim, the Assad family and much of the governing class came from the minority Alawite sect.”¹⁰⁰ Later, when the United States was considering a military response to Assad’s chemical weapons use, Russian members of the United Nations reminded the world of the results of the United States’ actions in Libya.¹⁰¹

The other conflict which weighed heavily on Obama and influenced his Syria policy was the Iraq war. In 2003, President George W. Bush led the U.S. invasion of Iraq, claiming that Iraq’s leader, Saddam Hussein, possessed “weapons of mass destruction.” The Iraq war took the lives of 4,550 American soldiers, and to this day there is still a U.S. military presence in the country.¹⁰² Ultimately it was determined that there were no

⁹⁸ McKernan, Bethan. “War in Libya: How Did It Start, Who Is Involved and What Happens next?” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 18 May 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/18/war-in-libya-how-did-it-start-what-happens-next>.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Power, Samantha. *The Education of an Idealist: a Memoir*. Del St., an Imprint of William Morrow, 2021, 608.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Brown, Daniel. “The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan Have Killed at Least 500,000 People, According to a New Report That Breaks down the Toll.” *Business Insider*, Business Insider, 9 Nov. 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-many-people-have-been-killed-in-iraq-and-afghanistan#6951-us-military-deaths-1>.

weapons of mass destruction in the country. The legacy of this faulty intelligence became an issue when the Obama administration was trying to determine whether or not to react to Assad's use of chemical weapons. Obama's intelligence community felt they needed to be extremely cautious before declaring definitively that Assad had used chemical weapons against his own people because of the intelligence failure in Iraq.¹⁰³ Additionally, one of President Obama's campaign promises was the removal of troops from Iraq.¹⁰⁴ The prospect of starting another war in the Middle East was certainly not one he would look favorably upon.

Overall there seemed to be a general sense of exasperation among Americans, many of whom felt that President Obama should stay out of the Middle East. Ben Rhodes, President Obama's Deputy National Security Advisor, wrote in his memoir:

In Lebanon, young men set fire to American fast food restaurants. In Tunis, four people were killed at the U.S. embassy when an angry mob climbed the walls and raised a black flag...In Afghanistan, the Taliban launched an attack that killed two Marines. Meanwhile, the caskets of the four Americans killed in Benghazi were returned to Andrews Air Force Base.¹⁰⁵

These events, while not huge in scale, added up and gave the American people the perception that the United States should not involve itself in the Middle East. Rhodes describes the dilemma that President Obama faced, writing:

[Obama] had to respond to this awful event in Syria while bearing the additional weight of the war in Iraq which caused his own intelligence community to be

¹⁰³ Rhodes, Ben. *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*. Random House, 2019.

¹⁰⁴ Korb, Lawrence J. "The Promised Withdrawal from Iraq." *Center for American Progress*, 10 Jan. 2017, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-promised-withdrawal-from-iraq/>.

¹⁰⁵ Rhodes, Ben. *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*. Random House, 2019.

cautious, his military to be wary of a slippery slope, his closest allies to distrust U.S. military adventures in the Middle East, the press to be more skeptical of presidential statements, the public to oppose U.S. war overseas, and Congress to see matters of war and peace as political issues to be exploited.¹⁰⁶

All of these were significant factors that ultimately influenced the president's decision to not take a more active role in the conflict in Syria.

The Beginning Years of U.S. Policy on Syria: 2011-2012

Given the geopolitical context at the time, President Obama's policy on Syria during the first year of the Syrian Civil War centered around harsh statements and sanctions, but did not go any further. On April 29th, a little over a month after the start of the war, President Obama issued Executive Order 13572, which declared:

The Government of Syria's human rights abuses, including those related to the repression of the people of Syria, manifested most recently by the use of violence and torture against, and arbitrary arrests and detentions of, peaceful protestors by police, security forces, and other entities that have engaged in human rights abuses, constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States.¹⁰⁷

This executive order also placed sanctions on many officials connected to the Assad regime including Assad's brother, Maher, and his cousin, both members of Assad's security forces.¹⁰⁸ The order additionally sanctioned Iran's Revolutionary Guard as

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ "Executive Order 13572 --Blocking Property of Certain Persons with Respect to Human Rights Abuses in Syria." *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/04/29/executive-order-13572-blocking-property-certain-persons-respect-human-ri>.

¹⁰⁸ Tabler, Andrew. *In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria*. Lawrence Hill Books, 2011.

punishment for “providing material support to the Syrian government related to the crackdown,” which referred in part to the software that Iran allegedly gave Assad that helped him track dissidents through social media.¹⁰⁹

In the month following the executive order, President Obama gave a speech about United States involvement in the Arab spring in which he stated: “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.”¹¹⁰ He followed up this statement with strong sanctions on President Assad, the Vice President, the Prime Minister, and the Defense and Interior Ministers.¹¹¹ The result of all of this pressure from the United States and other Western countries combined with increasing internal protests led President Assad to make some pro-democracy promises that he would not ultimately keep. Assad laid out a number of reforms, such as increased freedom of press and new election laws but claimed that they would go into effect months into the future.¹¹² As it became clear that Assad had no intention of implementing any real reforms, the United States continued to impose sanctions and release statements. On August 18, 2011, President Obama officially called for Assad to renounce the presidency and then implemented harsh sanctions on the Syrian Central Bank and banned the import of petroleum from Syria.¹¹³ While the United States’ banning of oil imports from Syria did not have a significant effect on the Syrian economy, the European Union ended up following suit. Given that Syria had exported

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Rhodes, Ben. *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*. Random House, 2019.

¹¹¹ Tabler, Andrew. *In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria*. Lawrence Hill Books, 2011.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Power, Samantha. *The Education of an Idealist: a Memoir*. Del St., an Imprint of William Morrow, 2021.

over 92 percent of its petroleum to countries in the European Union in the year prior, these sanctions did substantial damage to its economy.¹¹⁴ However, as this paper will explain, sanctions were not able to be nearly detrimental enough to compel Assad to create any meaningful change or come to the negotiating table.

The Red Line

The most controversial part of President Obama's Syria policy was certainly the "red line" incident in which the Obama Administration failed to follow through on a threat they made to Assad regarding Assad's chemical weapon usage. In July 2012, President Obama was asked what it would take for him to pursue military action in Syria. He answered: "We have been very clear to the Assad regime 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."¹¹⁵ In other words, all other forms of mass murder were not deemed worthy of intervention by the Obama administration but the use of chemical weapons would cross a "red line" that would in theory incite the U.S. to intervene militarily. Despite President Obama's warning, Assad went ahead and perpetrated a chemical weapons attack against civilians on December 23rd, 2012.¹¹⁶ The United States intelligence community took months to officially conclude that chemical weapons had been used in Syria. Their hesitance to do so earlier was one of the legacies of the Iraq war, which the United States waged based on false reports about weapons of mass destruction.¹¹⁷ It was not until April 25th, 2013, that the Obama administration informed

¹¹⁴ "Syria Sanctions: Eu Follows US Ban on Oil Imports, and Expands List of Designated Persons." *HFW*, <https://www.hfw.com/Syria-Sanctions-EU-Follows-US-Ban>.

¹¹⁵ Rhodes, Ben. *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*. Random House, 2019.

¹¹⁶ "Fact Sheets & Briefs." *Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012-2021* | *Arms Control Association*, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity>.

¹¹⁷ Power, Samantha. *The Education of an Idealist: a Memoir*. Del St., an Imprint of William Morrow, 2021.

Congress that the U.S. intelligence community had strong reason to believe that sarin, a deadly nerve agent, had been used by Assad.¹¹⁸ After these findings were released to the public, President Obama requested that the United Nations conduct its own independent investigation into whether or not Assad had perpetrated these sarin attacks.¹¹⁹ This was in part because Obama was aware that the rest of the world might not trust U.S. intelligence reports, especially given what had happened in Iraq, and he hoped the UN investigation would appear more objective.¹²⁰ At this point, many Americans were questioning whether or not President Obama would follow through on his threat to Assad. When a reporter asked Ben Rhodes, Deputy National Security Advisor, if Obama believed the “red line” had been crossed, Rhodes responded:

We are continuing to do further work to establish a definitive judgment as to whether or not the red line has been crossed... President Assad and those around him should know that the world is going to continue to carefully monitor this issue and bring forward information as we have it... Were he to undertake any additional use [of chemical weapons] he would be doing so under very careful monitoring from us and the International Community.¹²¹

Exactly four days after Rhodes released this statement at an April press briefing, the Assad regime once again shamelessly attacked its citizens with chemical weapons.¹²² The United Nations agreed to conduct their independent investigation in Syria, but when

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

investigators tried to enter the country, Assad would not permit them to cross the border into Syria.¹²³

On June 13th, the Obama administration finally formally acknowledged that Assad had crossed the “red line.” Ben Rhodes released a statement saying that they had “high confidence” in their intelligence reports from Syria.¹²⁴ The first commitment President Obama made following this formal acknowledgement was a promise to arm and train the moderate branches of the oppositional movement in Syria.¹²⁵ In a press conference where Rhodes was to explain what President Obama’s response would be to Assad’s violation of the “red line”, he was not able to give specifics about the new policy because it was classified information. As Samantha Power points out: “Since even Assad didn't know the particulars of the cost he would be bearing, he seemed unlikely to be deterred from carrying out further attacks.”¹²⁶ On August 18th, 20 United Nations investigators were finally allowed to enter Damascus to conduct their report. In a demonstration of incredible audacity, Assad conducted another extremely large chemical weapons attack on his people just three days after the UN investigators arrived.¹²⁷ Assad was yet to be deterred by any of the United States’ sanctions, strong statements or support for the opposition and was certainly not concerned by the threat of a United Nations report.

Contemplating U.S. Military Action in Syria

Now that President Obama had essentially threatened military action against Assad, he felt he had to follow through and initially planned to launch a military

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

operation on August 25th.¹²⁸ The White House had explained that ousting Assad was not their goal; their only aim was to force Assad to stop using chemical weapons.¹²⁹ There were, however, several issues to consider regarding U.S. military action in Syria. The first of these was the UN secretary general, Ban Ki-moon's refusal to pull the UN investigators out of the country. Ki-moon did not want the UN to be seen as supportive of the U.S.'s military plans and additionally wanted to finish the investigation that had been initially delayed due to Assad's failure to comply. With the UN investigators in Syria, President Obama feared that any retaliatory American air strikes might put them in danger, or Assad would use the UN investigators as human shields.¹³⁰ By now, Assad and his allies had grown quite supportive of the UN's presence in Syria because they realized the implications of the investigators' departure.¹³¹ While the UN remained in Syria, Assad had time to hide any weapons he did not want the United States to bomb. Another issue that President Obama faced was how he would justify military intervention in Syria under international law. International law permits one state to invade another under three circumstances: 1) Self-defense, 2) When there is consent by both states, and 3) When the UN Security Council authorizes an invasion.¹³² Putin would no doubt veto any military invasion of Syria given his alliance with Assad, which left Obama unsure how to justify the intervention. Ultimately, White House lawyers suggested that because the Assad regime had already violated many significant international commitments, a U.S. invasion

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Lee, Carol E. "Boehner Sends Letter to Obama over Syria." *The Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company, 28 Aug. 2013, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324324404579041310190845266>.

¹³⁰ Power, Samantha. *The Education of an Idealist: a Memoir*. Del St., an Imprint of William Morrow, 2021.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

would be justified, as had been true for the case of Kosovo.¹³³ It was deeply important that the U.S. preserve the international standard against chemical weapons use, given the indiscriminate nature of their targets. Another problem that made President Obama hesitant to bomb Syrian chemical weapons factories was the danger that the toxic fumes would leak out and kill thousands of Syrian civilians.¹³⁴ Bombing other military targets, on the other hand, would allow Assad to continue to gas his people, perhaps in retaliation for American involvement and aid to the opposition groups. Apart from these concerns, Obama was also uninterested in a large military operation in Syria and was worried that a more targeted operation would be forced to expand as Assad continued to kill his people in unforeseen ways, to which the U.S. would have to respond to maintain its credibility.¹³⁵ Despite all of President Obama's apprehension about military involvement, he was fully prepared to begin air strikes without seeking Congressional approval once the UN investigators left Syria.

Domestic Backlash Against the Military Operation in Syria

As President Obama was forced to delay the military operation in Syria, this allowed many members of Congress to express their concerns over a U.S. invasion of Syria. 98 Republican and 18 Democratic Members of Congress sent President Obama a letter stating that Assad posed no direct threat to U.S. national security interests and that without Congressional approval, it would be unconstitutional to start a war because it would violate the separation of powers.¹³⁶ The Speaker of the House, John Boehner,

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Rhodes, Ben. *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*. Random House, 2019.

wrote his own letter in which he asked President Obama to consider the potential consequences of U.S. military intervention in Syria. His letter reads:

It will take Presidential leadership and a clear explanation of our policy, our interests, and our objectives to gain public and Congressional support for any military action against Syria...After spending the last 12 years fighting those who seek to harm our fellow citizens, our interests, and our allies, we all have a greater appreciation of what it means for our country to enter into conflict. It will take that public support and Congressional will to sustain the Administration's efforts, and our military, as well as their families, deserve to have the confidence that we collectively have their backs — and a thorough strategy in place.¹³⁷

The letter also inquired about the total costs of the operation and why the President felt he could invade another country without Congressional approval: “It is essential you address on what basis any use of force would be legally justified and how the justification comports with the exclusive authority of Congressional authorization under Article 1 of the Constitution.”¹³⁸All of this sudden backlash from Congress combined with the fact that the UK had just voted not to join the United States’ airstrike operation in Syria led President Obama to reconsider his Syria strategy.¹³⁹

The UN investigators finally left Syria on August 30th, and their report confirmed what the United States and much of the world already knew: Assad had used Sarin gas

¹³⁷ Sherman, Jake. “Boehner to Obama: Make Syria Case.” *POLITICO*, 28 Aug. 2013, <https://www.politico.com/story/2013/08/john-boehner-barack-obama-syria-096011>.

¹³⁸ Lee, Carol E. “Boehner Sends Letter to Obama over Syria.” *The Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company, 28 Aug. 2013, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324324404579041310190845266>.

¹³⁹ Rhodes, Ben. *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*. Random House, 2019.

against his people.¹⁴⁰ Instead of immediately launching a military operation as he had previously planned, President Obama decided to seek authorization from Congress. He knew that if he made the unilateral decision to invade Syria, he would risk impeachment and would not have the backing of Republicans, making it difficult to maintain a successful military operation in Syria.¹⁴¹ However, if he were able to obtain official approval from Congress, then the invasion would be less political and more likely to be sustainable and seen as legitimate.¹⁴² According to the U.S. Constitution, only Congress can declare war, but as the Commander in Chief of the U.S. military, the President may pursue short term military operations without authorization from Congress. The War Powers Resolution of 1973 limited the President's power as Commander in Chief. One of its stipulations was that the President must remove U.S. troops within 60 days after invading a foreign country if he or she does not have Congressional approval to begin a war. Without Congressional approval, President Obama feared that Assad would realize that the U.S. military would be forced to leave in under two months. President Obama said on the matter: "If Assad thinks he can wait us out, that's in nobody's interest."¹⁴³ Although many members of Congress did not support U.S. military action in Syria, President Obama hoped that there were some factors that would sway those who were undecided. For example, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had been vocal in his support for a U.S. invasion of Syria, meaning that President Obama had the backing of the powerful lobbying group, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee

¹⁴⁰ Power, Samantha. *The Education of an Idealist: a Memoir*. Del St., an Imprint of William Morrow, 2021.

¹⁴¹ Rhodes, Ben. *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*. Random House, 2019.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Power, Samantha. *The Education of an Idealist: a Memoir*. Del St., an Imprint of William Morrow, 2021.

(AIPAC).¹⁴⁴ Additionally, President Obama hoped that the strong anti-Iran sentiment would push many politicians to support the invasion given Iran's support for Assad.¹⁴⁵ Ultimately, his administration's calculus proved incorrect, and it became clear that they would simply not have sufficient support in Congress; they decided there was no reason to proceed with the vote and doing so would be politically disadvantageous. John Kerry advised President Obama: "It is no exaggeration to say, if you lose with Congress, having already told the world you are going to use military force, people will proclaim the effective end of your second term."¹⁴⁶ Since the red line incident, President Obama has said of his decision:

The perception was that my credibility was at stake, that America's credibility was at stake. And so for me to press the pause button at that moment, I knew, would cost me politically. And the fact that I was able to pull back from the immediate pressures and think through in my own mind what was in America's interest, not only with respect to Syria but also with respect to our democracy, was as tough a decision as I've made, and I believe ultimately it was the right decision to make.¹⁴⁷

Instead of pursuing airstrikes in Syria, the Obama Administration took a more diplomatic approach that ended up being wholly insufficient. On September 6th, he met with Russian President Putin to try to convince him to force Assad to dismantle his chemical weapons collection. At this point, President Obama had not yet announced that he had abandoned his plans to begin a military operation in Syria. In a press conference

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

not long after, John Kerry was asked what Assad could do to avoid a U.S. invasion. He answered: “[Assad] could turn over every bit of his weapons to the international community within the next week. Turn it over, all of it, without delay . . . But he isn’t about to do it, and it can’t be done, obviously.”¹⁴⁸ That same day, much to everyone’s surprise, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov called Kerry and explained that President Putin would work with the United States to destroy Assad’s chemical weapons.¹⁴⁹ This partnership resulted in UN Resolution 2118, which “determin[ed] that the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic constitutes a threat to international peace and security.”¹⁵⁰ The Resolution also:

endorses the decision of the OPCW Executive Council 27 September 2013, which contains special procedures for the expeditious destruction of the Syrian Arab Republic’s chemical weapons program and stringent verification thereof and calls for its full implementation in the most expedient and safest manner.¹⁵¹

As a result of the Resolution, Assad’s chemical weapons equipment was destroyed in twenty-one different locations, and weapons that had been hidden were removed and neutralized in the ocean by Danish and Norwegian ships.¹⁵² Ultimately, just seven months after the UN Resolution, the Assad regime began creating new chemical weapons using chlorine and has perpetrated attacks as recently as 2019.¹⁵³

The Role of ISIS in the U.S.’s Syria Policy

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ *United Nations S Security Council*.

https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2118.pdf.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Power, Samantha. *The Education of an Idealist: a Memoir*. Del St., an Imprint of William Morrow, 2021.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

Beginning in 2014, President Obama had a renewed interest in a U.S. military intervention in Syria due to the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an Islamic extremist group. However, the Obama Administration's main priority was no longer supporting the opposition movement and stopping Assad from using chemical weapons; it was almost entirely to defeat ISIS, which was perceived as a serious national security threat to the United States. ISIS was originally an offshoot of Al Qaeda and was formed in Iraq in 2004. After the Civil War began in Syria in 2011, ISIS took advantage of the instability of the country and began spreading and increasing terrorist attacks in both Syria and Iraq.¹⁵⁴ In August of 2014, the United States began "Operation Inherent Resolve", in which they carried out over 8,000 airstrikes against ISIS in Syria and Iraq.¹⁵⁵ By 2018, there were 2,000 American troops stationed in Syria.¹⁵⁶ Apart from conducting airstrikes, the United States also announced they would train members of the Syrian opposition movement both to fight ISIS and also to defeat the Assad regime.¹⁵⁷ Ultimately, the U.S. government identified 7,000 members of the opposition who were good candidates to be trained by the U.S. military, but they only ended up working with 54 fighters even after announcing they would train 5,400.¹⁵⁸ Despite the United States' aggressive military campaign, ISIS continued to spread throughout Syria. While the U.S. was engaged in their battle with ISIS, the Assad regime claimed that the entire opposition

¹⁵⁴ "Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State." *Wilson Center*, 28 Oct. 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ "Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State." *Wilson Center*, 28 Oct. 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>.

¹⁵⁷ Pollack, Kenneth. "Pushing Back on Iran, Part 3: The Syrian Civil War - AEI."

<https://www.aei.org/Foreign-and-Defense-Policy/Middle-East/Pushing-Back-on-Iran-Part-3-the-Syrian-Civil-War/>, 14 Feb. 2018, <https://www.aei.org/foreign-and-defense-policy/middle-east/pushing-back-on-iran-part-3-the-syrian-civil-war/>.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

movement was made up of violent extremists. Using this logic, he attempted to justify his violent repression tactics against the opposition.¹⁵⁹ Assad's government forces were slowly growing weaker and weaker, until 2015 when Russian President Vladimir Putin began sending military aid to Syria to help Assad defeat ISIS (and the opposition movement); this new addition to the conflict made President Obama even less likely to intervene and begin a proxy war with Russia.

Removal of U.S. Troops from Syria

The Syrian Kurds, allies of the United States, were instrumental in the United States' fight against ISIS. They were joined by the Arab Syrians to create the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which was heavily supported by the United States.¹⁶⁰ Together with the SDF, the United States continued to weaken the Islamic State in Syria. In December of 2018, U.S. President Trump announced that the Islamic State was defeated, and he began suggesting his intention to pull troops out of the country.¹⁶¹ Trump's decision to pull American troops out of Syria was in part a result of his talks with Turkish President Recep Erdogan who was planning to invade Syria to attack the Syrian Kurdish population. Trump, who ran on a platform of "America first" (prioritizing American interests), made this decision despite the fact that Turkey has been explicit about its desire to invade Northern Syria in order to go after the Kurds, who are American allies, and create a place where they can send the millions of Syrian refugees who have fled to Turkey since the beginning of the war.¹⁶² Turkey declared war against the Syrian Kurds

¹⁵⁹ Power, Samantha. *The Education of an Idealist: a Memoir*. Del St., an Imprint of William Morrow, 2021.

¹⁶⁰ "Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State." *Wilson Center*, 28 Oct. 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² DeYoung, Karen, et al. "Republicans Assail Trump's Decision to Pull Troops from Northern Syria as Turkey Readies Offensive." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 8 Oct. 2019,

because, according to Erdogan, the Kurdish fighters in Syria are connected to the Kurdistan Workers' Party within Turkey, which has perpetrated terrorist attacks in Turkey for 30 years.¹⁶³ Despite Erdogan's claims, Syrian Kurdish fighters have never attacked Turkey; in fact, the peaceful territory in Northern Syria that they control has actually prevented extremist groups like ISIS from reaching Turkey.¹⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Erdogan has gone to great lengths to prevent a Kurdish autonomous state between Syria and Turkey. President Trump was worried about the escalating violence in the region and wanted to pull out U.S. troops, despite the implications for its Kurdish allies. According to one advisor, "[Trump] doesn't believe any of his advisers that tell him that [the Kurds] are in jeopardy, that Erdogan will kill them."¹⁶⁵

On October 6th, 2019, President Trump withdrew around 50 U.S. soldiers who had been fighting alongside Kurdish forces in Syria.¹⁶⁶ Days later he pulled out the remaining 1,000 U.S. troops who had been stationed in the country, completely abandoning the Kurdish forces.¹⁶⁷ This decision was met with considerable backlash from both Republicans and Democrats in part because of the implications for the Syrian Kurds. General James Mattis resigned from his position as Secretary of Defense in protest over Trump's decision. Later in October, President Trump decided to send a few hundred U.S.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-to-pull-troops-from-northern-syria-as-turkey-readies-offensive/2019/10/07/a965e466-e8b3-11e9-bafb-da248f8d5734_story.html.

¹⁶³ Saeed, Yerevan. "Turkey's Attack on Kurds in Syria Betrays Those Doing the Fighting against ISIS - and Dying." *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 14 Oct. 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/turkey-s-attack-kurds-syria-betrays-those-doing-fighting-against-n-cna1066061>.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ DeYoung, Karen, et al. "Republicans Assail Trump's Decision to Pull Troops from Northern Syria as Turkey Readies Offensive." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 8 Oct. 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-to-pull-troops-from-northern-syria-as-turkey-readies-offensive/2019/10/07/a965e466-e8b3-11e9-bafb-da248f8d5734_story.html.

¹⁶⁶ Feaver, Peter, and Will Inboden. "The Realists Are Wrong about Syria." *Foreign Policy*, 4 Nov. 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/04/the-realists-are-wrong-about-syria/>.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

troops back to the country for the exclusive purpose of guarding oil fields in Syria.¹⁶⁸ It is worth noting that since 2014, there have been only four members of the U.S. military killed in combat in Syria.¹⁶⁹

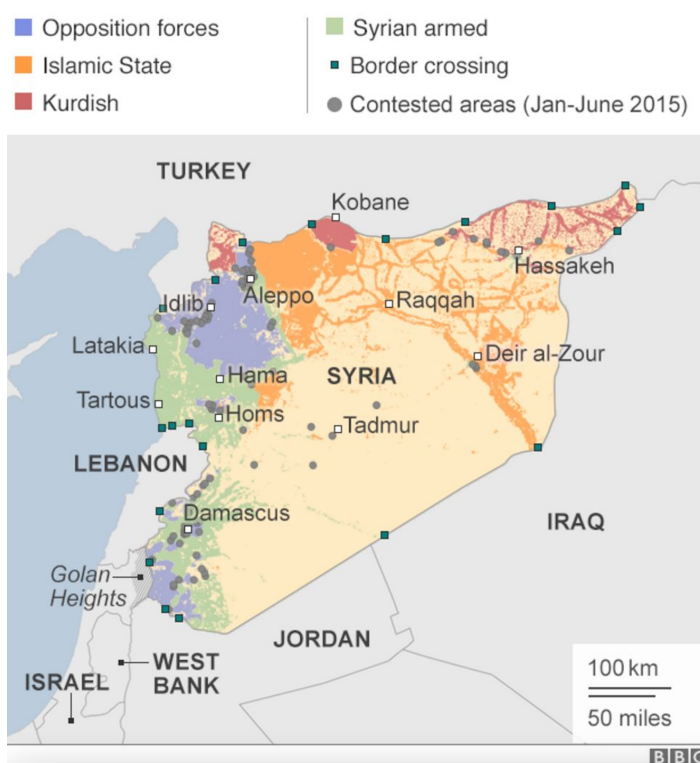


Figure 1: 2015 Map of a divided Syria¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ DeYoung, Karen, et al. "Republicans Assail Trump's Decision to Pull Troops from Northern Syria as Turkey Readies Offensive." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 8 Oct. 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-to-pull-troops-from-northern-syria-as-turkey-readies-offensive/2019/10/07/a965e466-e8b3-11e9-bafb-da248f8d5734_story.html.

¹⁷⁰ "Syria: Mapping the Conflict." *BBC News*, BBC, 10 July 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22798391>.

CHAPTER 4: An Analysis of Debates about U.S. Policy in Syria (2011-2022)

Chapter 4 will analyze the different arguments that have been made by government officials and scholars regarding how U.S. policy towards Syria should have been crafted beginning in 2011. This chapter will describe arguments made by Samantha Power, Ben Rhodes, Max Boot, Hagar Chemali, and Fred Hof, to name just a few, and will focus on the following questions: Was there anything that the U.S. could have done to prevent Assad from escalating the war on his people? How should President Obama have responded to Assad's chemical weapons use? Were sanctions effective at deterring Assad? What types of aggression should constitute a "red line"? Would no-fly zones have been feasible and effective? Should President Trump have pulled troops out of Syria when he did? And, to what extent should the U.S. use Syria to weaken Iran?

American Policy in Syria Before Chemical Weapons Usage

The main area of contention among experts regarding how the United States should have responded to Assad's violence leading up to his chemical weapons attacks comes down to diplomacy versus military action. Syria experts such as Hagar Chemali, the Director of Syria and Lebanon at the National Security Council between 2010 and 2012, believe that the United States should have pursued a military response to Assad's use of indiscriminate violence even before chemical weapons were officially used.¹⁷¹ Although she acknowledges this sort of policy was not politically feasible and would have aligned more with President Bush's Middle East policy than President Obama's, Chemali still believes that military action such as striking weapons depots or

¹⁷¹Chemali, Hagar. Interview. Conducted by Sydney Heath. March 14th, 2022.

airways would have been the only way to deter Assad from pursuing further violence against his citizens.¹⁷² “The only language Assad understands is the language of military force,” explained Chemali in an interview.¹⁷³ According to Chemali, the United States realized that Assad would use indiscriminate violence against his citizens as early as April 2011, and they should have preempted mass violence against civilians rather than waiting for escalation to occur.¹⁷⁴ Anyone who had studied the history of the Assad regime in Syria should have been able to foresee that Bashar al-Assad was far more concerned with staying in power than with the lives of his own people, Chemali explained. Frederic Hof, the former U.S. Special Envoy to Syria under Obama, seems to agree with Chemali that diplomacy was and remained largely unsuccessful in deterring Assad throughout the conflict. Referencing the 2012 Geneva Final Communiqué, which was an agreement between the UN Security Council members that would have allowed for a peaceful transition of power in Syria (assuming both sides complied), Hof writes:

The preferred American route to political transition has been one of Syrian peace negotiations under United Nations auspices...But the Assad regime rejected Geneva, spurned political transition, and mocked substantive peace negotiations.¹⁷⁵

As Hof explains, the majority of diplomatic efforts to weaken or negotiate with Assad did not prove successful, so it seems unlikely that they would have been effective in stopping Assad towards the beginning of the war.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Hof, Frederic C. *A Long Road to Syria - Atlantic Council*. Sept. 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/A-Long-Road-to-Syria-IB-FIN-web-092319.pdf>.

There are a number of experts who disagree with Hof and Chemali and feel that diplomacy might have effectively dissuaded Assad from his violent campaign against his citizens. Robert Ford, U.S. Ambassador to Syria from 2011-2014, and Ben Rhodes, President Obama's Deputy National Security Advisor of the United States, are two of these government officials who stress the importance of diplomacy. In his memoir, Rhodes writes:

I am haunted by the question of whether some more assertive diplomatic initiative could have avoided some of the violence to come, even if it didn't require Assad's immediate ouster. We were counting on the building pressure on Assad from within to be met with growing isolation from abroad in a way that would cause his regime to crumble.¹⁷⁶

Rhodes admits that he and the rest of the Obama administration underestimated Assad's resolve and strength.¹⁷⁷ Earlier in his memoir, Rhodes does claim that he suggested bombing Syrian airways and other regime infrastructure to Obama, to which the President responded: "And what happens after we bomb the runways and Russia, Iran and Assad rebuild them?"¹⁷⁸ Nevertheless, when reflecting on what could have been done differently, Rhodes never argues that military action like that which he proposed to President Obama was necessarily a better option than diplomacy. Similarly to Rhodes, Robert Ford is quoted in an interview to have said:

We all learned from Iraq that regime change is not the way to bring about positive political change. In the case of civil war, there needs to be negotiation between

¹⁷⁶ Rhodes, Ben. *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*. Random House, 2019.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

the opposition and the government. The question is how you increase the likelihood that it will succeed.¹⁷⁹

Ambassador Ford goes on to admit that neither the United States nor the rest of the international community were able to facilitate successful negotiations between Assad and the opposition, but he still maintains that diplomacy would have been the best option had it been approached differently.¹⁸⁰

It is certainly easier to come to this conclusion knowing what we know now, but it definitely seems as though the only thing that would have prevented Assad from escalating violence against his own people and ultimately using chemical weapons would have been a military demonstration of the United States' resolve early on in the conflict. That being said, it is unsurprising that President Obama was not willing to demonstrate his military will and become involved in another war in the Middle East after Libya and Afghanistan.

The Red Line Incident

After some reflection on the past decade, the majority of scholars seem to disagree with President Obama's decision not to enforce his threat to Assad about chemical weapons use. However, several government officials who worked under Obama, along with the President himself, maintain that it was the right decision to pursue a diplomatic response rather than air strikes in response to Assad's crossing of President Obama's "red line" threat given factors such as the political climate in the United States

¹⁷⁹ Wright, Robin, and Nathan Fitch. "Former Ambassador Robert Ford on the State Department Mutiny on Syria." *The New Yorker*, 17 June 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/former-ambassador-robert-ford-on-the-state-department-mutiny-on-syria>.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

and the cost of a military intervention. President Obama, Ambassador Ford, and Ben Rhodes all defend the President's decision to go to Congress for approval to pursue airstrikes in Syria and then to ultimately back down from military action when it became clear that Congress would not vote in favor of a military intervention in Syria. Samantha Power, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, along with Hagar Chemali and Frederic Hof all strongly believe that the United States made a grave mistake in not enforcing the red line that chemical weapons constituted.

Ambassador Ford's criticism of Obama's Syria policy is different from that of many other critics. He believes that the United States should never have established chemical weapons as a red line in Syria given what he considers to be the United States' lack of national security interest in the country. In a CNN interview, Ambassador Ford remarked on the issue:

American rhetoric must be in harmony with American interests and determination to back up its word. We spoke very sternly and were not willing to back it up. In the end... Syria was not a national American security interest... We should not threaten to change the balance of power of a foreign country somewhere if we are not prepared to do it, and clearly if it is not a vital national security issue there will be people in Washington who say wait, hold on, let's not escalate.

In President Obama's final press conferences where he talked about his successes and failures over his eight years in office, he said of the crisis in Syria: "Responsibility for this brutality lies in one place alone, with the Assad regime and its allies, Russia and Iran,

and this blood and these atrocities are on their hands.”¹⁸¹ The wording of this statement would certainly suggest that he absolves himself and the United States of any guilt. Later in the press conference, President Obama is asked about any personal responsibility he felt regarding Syria. He answered:

I always feel responsible. I felt responsible when kids were being shot by snipers... I feel responsible for murder and slaughter that's taken place in South Sudan that's not being reported on... There are places around the world where horrible things are happening and because of my office, because I'm president of the United States, I feel responsible.¹⁸²

Here, President Obama misses an opportunity to specifically address his mistakes in Syria. Instead, he brings up other conflicts, making it appear as though there is only so much the President of the United States can do in the face of a world full of atrocities, thereby absolving himself of responsibility. He does specifically address Syria later when he talks about how his administration was unable to come up with a solution to weaken Assad. He places the blame on the lack of support from Congress and the American people for a military intervention in Syria.¹⁸³ He explains:

Unless we were all in and willing to take over Syria, we were going to have problems. And everything else was tempting because we wanted to do something and it sounded like the right thing to do but it was going to be impossible to do

¹⁸¹ Smith, David. “Obama Reflects on Syria at Farewell Press Conference: ‘I Always Feel Responsible.’” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 16 Dec. 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/16/obama-syria-assad-aleppo-final-press-conference>.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

this on the cheap. And in that circumstance, I have to make a decision as President of the United States as to what is best. I'm sorry.¹⁸⁴

However, as Frederic Hof points out, President Trump's air strikes against chemical weapons machinery in Syria did not lead to any sort of global conflict or even any deaths of American soldiers or pilots.¹⁸⁵ Nowhere in his press conference does President Obama specifically admit to making the wrong decision; he stands by his choices regarding Syria, but he is apologetic about their outcomes.

Ben Rhodes emphasizes the importance that President Obama placed on the political climate and feasibility of his options in his memoir. He explains: "At a meeting on what he was aiming to accomplish in his first term, I pointed to the potential for a democratic opening in Burma. 'Ben,' he said, 'no one cares about Burma in Ohio.'¹⁸⁶ Clearly Obama was at times more interested in re-election than in doing what was right. President Obama's lack of an apology is particularly notable given that President Bill Clinton specifically called his decision not to intervene in Rwanda his "greatest mistake."¹⁸⁷

Ben Rhodes has interesting insights on this debate because he worked closely with President Obama while the President was crafting his Syria policy. Rhodes believes that Congress' pushback to airstrikes in Syria was politically motivated given that, "for eight years, Republicans had defended Bush's ability to do whatever he pleased as

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Hof, Frederic C. *A Long Road to Syria - Atlantic Council*. Sept. 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/A-Long-Road-to-Syria-IB-FIN-web-092319.pdf>.

¹⁸⁶ Rhodes, Ben. *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*. Random House, 2019.

¹⁸⁷ Lithwick, Dahlia. "Why Bill Clinton Got Wistful on His Trip to the Holy Land." *Slate Magazine*, Slate, 19 June 2013, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2013/06/bill-clinton-accepts-israels-presidential-medal-of-distinction-the-former-president-discusses-the-genocide-in-rwanda-as-his-greatest-regret.html>.

commander-in-chief...Now they were suddenly devoted to constitutional limits on the commander-in-chief.”¹⁸⁸ Rhodes also helps us better understand President Obama’s thought process regarding the decision to go to Congress, writing:

Obama talked about the different ways in which the debate can play out. ‘The thing is’, he said, ‘if we lose this vote it will drive a stake through the heart of neoconservatism, everyone will see they have no votes.’ I realized then that he was comfortable with either outcome. If we won authorization, he’d be in a strong position to act in Syria. If we didn’t, then we would potentially end the cycle of American wars of regime change in the Middle East.¹⁸⁹

Throughout his description of President Obama’s decision-making process, Rhodes suggests that at times he wishes Obama had followed through on his threats to Assad. Ultimately, however, Rhodes defends Obama’s decision and praises the agreement with Russia that in theory forced Assad to destroy his chemical weapons. Rhodes writes:

The Congressional vote never took place. Thousands of tons of chemical weapons would be removed from Syria and destroyed, far more than could have been destroyed by military action. The war would continue. Barack Obama would continue to keep the United States out of it.¹⁹⁰

Rhodes’ memoir was published in 2018, and there have been chemical weapons attacks in Syria as recently as 2019 that Rhodes conveniently ignores. Hagar Chemali’s assertion that “the only language Assad understands is the language of military force” rings true. The diplomatic attempts of Russia and the United States were unsuccessful in deterring

¹⁸⁸ Rhodes, Ben. *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*. Random House, 2019.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Assad, which is not ultimately surprising due to Russia's vested interest in Assad maintaining power.

Although she too worked for the Obama Administration in 2011, Hagar Chemali maintains that the Obama Administration made a mistake in choosing not to follow through on the red line threat. In response to people like Ben Rhodes who defend Obama's decision to go to Congress for approval, Chemali explains that the airstrikes that President Obama had originally planned did not need to begin a prolonged military effort in Syria; they could have lasted a night or two meaning that approval from Congress was certainly not necessary.¹⁹¹ She explains that it is highly unlikely that the invasion would have lasted longer than the 60 days after which Obama would have been constitutionally required to get Congressional approval.¹⁹² The airstrikes would have functioned as a "slap on the wrist" that proved to Assad that the United States was willing to use military force if he continued murdering his civilians indiscriminately.¹⁹³ Chemali criticizes President Obama's failure to respond, explaining: "It shows that we are not prepared to deal with dictators and thugs when it comes to war. We don't play by the same set of rules."¹⁹⁴ Apart from Assad's continued use of chemical weapons on his people, Chemali points out another consequence of the United States' failure to follow through on the red line threat: the U.S. government can no longer credibly make a threat like the one that President Obama made against Assad. For example, when President Putin invaded Ukraine, a U.S. government representative stated that the consequences would be severe if Putin were to

¹⁹¹ Chemali, Hagar. Interview. Conducted by Sydney Heath. March 14th, 2022.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

use chemical weapons in Syria.¹⁹⁵ The media has called this “another red line” and has suggested that the U.S. government will not follow through once again.¹⁹⁶

Samantha Power, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, is another government official who worked closely with President Obama on his Syria policy. Unlike Ben Rhodes, Power remains critical of Obama’s decision to pursue diplomacy over military action in response to Assad’s chemical weapons usage. The first specific criticism Power has of President Obama was his decision to wait for the United Nations inspectors to confirm that chemical weapons had indeed been used in Syria, even after the American intelligence community already strongly believed they had been used by Assad. In her memoir, Power questions Obama’s motivation for turning to UN intelligence, writing:

The Syrian regime had used chemical weapons. Assad was extremely unlikely to allow UN inspectors anywhere near evidence of his culpability. Was the White House in denial that the red line has been crossed? Or had President Obama decided not to enforce his threat?¹⁹⁷

Power was ultimately correct- Assad did not initially allow the UN investigators to enter Syria. Due to this delayed entry, they were still in Syria when President Obama decided to launch airstrikes (but was prevented from doing so because of the UN’s refusal to leave).

With regards to Obama’s decision to go to Congress for approval for military strikes, Power seems to agree with Rhodes that it was clear that Republicans were

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Power, Samantha. *The Education of an Idealist: a Memoir*. Del St., an Imprint of William Morrow, 2021.

determined to oppose any policy that Obama proposed.¹⁹⁸ She writes: “I regretted our administration had not determined whether we had the votes before the president announced he was going to Congress. Had he known he would fail, I did not believe he would have chosen the path he did.”¹⁹⁹ On the usefulness of diplomacy when dealing with Assad, Power writes:

In my view diplomacy had been ineffective in part because Assad had become convinced that no one would stop him from using even the most merciless tactics against his own people. If the U.S. government looked away from this incident, signaling that Assad could gas his citizens at will, I worried he would never feel sufficient pressure to negotiate.”²⁰⁰

Like Chemali, Power also brings up the Obama administration’s lack of credibility resulting from Obama’s failure to act, writing that:

It is undeniable that the perception of the un-enforced threat shadowed our administration’s subsequent efforts to influence Assad and other actors in the war. This moved us further away from the President’s aim and the regional and global necessity of achieving a negotiated settlement to end the conflict.”²⁰¹

It seems as though most of the American Syria apologists are those who worked under President Obama during the Syrian Civil War, meaning that they have a vested interest in defending their policies. However, former Obama government officials Samantha Power and Hagar Chemali maintain that President Obama made the wrong decision in pursuing a diplomatic solution over a military invasion in Syria. Given the

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

current situation in Syria and the ineffectiveness of all of President Obama's Syria policies, it would seem as though officials like Power and Chemali were correct in their thinking.

The Effectiveness of Sanctions

Sanctions were one of the key aspects of U.S. policy in Syria, although there has been some debate regarding their effectiveness. According to Hagar Chemali, who has referred to herself as the “architect of the Syrian sanctions,” the most effective of these were multilateral oil sanctions where the United States worked with the European Union to sanction Syrian oil.²⁰² Since the United States has never imported Syrian oil, they had to work with European nations on these sanctions. Chemali claims that Syria was losing \$400 million dollars a month due to these sanctions, which undermined the regime's ability to finance its “war machine.”²⁰³ Chemali explains that sanctions have never been a “silver bullet” that would end the war, but they can often serve to bring the aggressor to the negotiating table or dismantle the financial networks that support the perpetrator. She explains that “they are meant to be one prong in a broader strategy.”²⁰⁴ Unfortunately, Chemali laments, the sanctions in Syria never convinced Assad to negotiate. During the first half of the Civil War, Assad was growing weaker, in part due to multilateral sanctions. However, when the Russians decided to get involved in the war in 2015 and back Assad both militarily and financially, the United States and European sanctions were no longer as effective, Chemali admits.²⁰⁵ Samantha Power expresses strong opinions on Syria sanctions in her memoir, writing that Assad was hardly affected at all

²⁰² Chemali, Hagar. Interview. Conducted by Sydney Heath. March 14th, 2022.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

by those implemented by the United States because the United Nations Security Council was unable to impose multilateral sanctions across all member nations due to Russia's veto power.²⁰⁶ As a result, Assad would always have somewhere to store his money (much of it was stored in Russia). Power again pointed to the futility of sanctions as a policy option, writing: "If we responded with more of the same, I felt sure Assad's regime would continue with more of the same."²⁰⁷ While Chemali would disagree with Power that sanctions were essentially futile, she would agree that they lost their effectiveness as soon as Russia decided to put its full weight behind Assad. Today, the only way that sanctions could prove effective would be if the United States' new sanctions on Russia in response to the invasion of Ukraine significantly hurt the Russian economy to the extent that it has an effect on the Syrian economy as well.

What Should Constitute a Red Line?

There is a particularly interesting debate that has come out of discourse around President Obama's decision to impose a red line specifically for chemical weapons usage. Even before Assad began using chemical weapons against his people, he was killing them indiscriminately and in large numbers using other types of weapons such as Scud missiles and barrel bombs. Both Samantha Power and Frederic Hof bring up the question of whether other types of weapons and/or number of civilian deaths should also constitute a red line. Hof writes:

By publicly highlighting chemical weapons use as the trigger for military retaliation, the United States and its allies have inadvertently signaled to the

²⁰⁶ Power, Samantha. *The Education of an Idealist: a Memoir*. Del St., an Imprint of William Morrow, 2021.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

Assad regime that other tools of mass terror—barrel bombs, field artillery, rockets, Scud missiles, and conventional aerial bombs—are permissible. Mass homicide should, as a matter of U.S. policy, be inadmissible regardless of the murder weapon.²⁰⁸

Power feels similarly to Hof, but she does believe that chemical weapons:

warranted a specific red line. They were weapons of mass destruction, capable of killing a vast number of people at once. The nations of the world had come together after World War I to ban these weapons, and if the international consensus against their use were to break down, the labs would almost certainly come back to haunt many more people in and out of conflict zones around the world.²⁰⁹

That being said, Power points out that in making chemical weapons a red line issue, “Assad could reasonably conclude that, going forward, he could starve his people into submission, carpet bomb hospitals and schools... all without the United States doing much to stop him.”²¹⁰ Of course, President Obama's failure to enforce his red line against chemical weapons meant that Assad could also conclude that he should feel free to continue using this type of weapon on his people without fear of international intervention. Power also makes an interesting point when she writes about the UN Security Council resolution that she supported, which in theory forced Assad to destroy his chemical weapons. She writes:

²⁰⁸ Hof, Frederic C. *A Long Road to Syria - Atlantic Council*. Sept. 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/A-Long-Road-to-Syria-IB-FIN-web-092319.pdf>.

²⁰⁹ Power, Samantha. *The Education of an Idealist: a Memoir*. Del St., an Imprint of William Morrow, 2021.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

I could not shake the concern that the Council was implicitly licensing other kinds of attacks on civilians. Because Russia refused to include references to SCUD missiles, artillery, barrel bombs and even napalm, the resolution was silent on Assad's other murderous weapons. This resolution was not enough. Two days after its passage, a regime airstrike would kill 14 people, most of them children on their first day of school.²¹¹

This specific question of what should constitute a "red line" is not one that has been as widely discussed as the question of how President Obama should have reacted to Assad's crossing of the chemical weapons red line; nevertheless, it is worth exploring. Of course, chemical weapons are particularly deadly, but dictators like Assad are more than capable of killing just as many people with other types of weapons, and the international community and the United States specifically should perhaps determine another type of red line that speaks to number of deaths rather than the murder weapon or the ethnicity of the people being killed.

The Debate Over No-Fly Zones

One common debate in Syria policy was whether or not the United States should impose a no-fly zone in Syria, which would have acted as a deterrent to attacks from both ISIS and the Assad regime. Prominent government officials such as Hillary Clinton and Secretary of State John Kerry spoke out in support of establishing these no fly-zones, monitored by the U.S. military, but many others including President Obama were quite opposed to the idea, and they were never implemented. According to Karl Mueller, a political scientist at RAND, there are two main reasons why the U.S. government might

²¹¹ Ibid.

have considered no-fly zones: they could have created a “safe zone” for Syrian civilians who would otherwise have become refugees and contributed to the growing refugee problem in neighboring countries and Europe; additionally, no-fly zones may have provided a sheltered area where the Syrian opposition could have trained.²¹² That being said, the United Nations never would have supported this type of intervention if Russia thought that it would help rebel forces.²¹³ Mueller points out that this would mean that any members of the opposition forces would be turned away if they tried to enter the safe zones, even if just to seek refuge as a civilian.²¹⁴ Mueller also explains that the no-fly zone proposals have generally included more than just monitoring of the skies and a threat against Assad’s bombing of his civilians (After all, ISIS has never had air capabilities); the proposals also included ground forces to guard the borders of the safe zones.²¹⁵ Dennis Ross, an influential former Middle East advisor to President Obama, suggested that Turkey provide the ground troops and the United States provide the air support, which seemed to be a good compromise.²¹⁶

Despite the clear benefits of some form of no-fly zone, the argument against them was ultimately more convincing to President Obama. The main pushback against these enforced safe zones was (and remains) that they would escalate conflict with the Syrian army and the Russia military presence in Syria. Max Boot, a national security expert at the Washington Post, originally supported no-fly zones but changed his mind after Russia became heavily involved in support of Assad. He writes:

²¹² Mueller, K. P. (2015, October 15). *A no-fly zone over Syria: Q&A with Karl Mueller*. RAND Corporation. Retrieved April 1, 2022, from <https://www.rand.org/blog/2015/10/a-no-fly-zone-over-syria-qa-with-karl-mueller.html>

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

In 2012, I joined many others in calling for the United States to enforce a no-fly zone to stop the rain of Assad's barbaric "barrel bombs" and to provide aid to the Free Syrian Army to overthrow him. A lot more people might be alive today if President Barack Obama had listened, and a strategic and humanitarian disaster might have been averted. But... I no longer think that advice makes sense now. Russia got involved in Syria in 2015, and the United States can't attack Russian aircraft without risking a war.²¹⁷

In response to this type of argument, it is important to recall that Israel has entered Syrian air fields numerous times to strike weapons depots or carry out assassinations, and only one of their planes has ever been shot down.²¹⁸ That being said, given the uniquely tense relationship between Russia and the United States, many experts correctly have expressed worry about escalating the conflict today.

The Debate Over Pulling Troops Out of Syria

President Trump's decision to pull American troops out of Syria proved extremely unpopular with many members of the U.S. national security community. This pushback over Trump's decision was largely due to its effect on the Kurdish population in Syria that has proven to be a crucial ally to the United States in the fight against the Islamic State. Hagar Chemali argues that not only did we hurt the Kurds, we also weakened our relationship with all current and potential future allies to the United States who can no longer be sure they can trust us.²¹⁹ Chemali also points out how poorly it reflects on the

²¹⁷ Boot, Max. "Opinion | to Save Syrians, Let Assad Win." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 9 Mar. 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/to-save-syrians-let-assad-win/2018/03/08/7741eaa6-22f4-11e8-86f6-54bfff693d2b_story.html.

²¹⁸ Chemali, Hagar. Interview. Conducted by Sydney Heath. March 14th, 2022.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

United States that President Trump sent back a small number of troops to Syria for the explicit purpose of protecting not our allies but the oil fields.²²⁰

There are, however, members of the U.S. government that supported Trump's decision to remove troops from Syria. Robert Ford says of the decision:

The reason I think it's the best course of action [removing troops] is that the American soldiers there have done about as much as they can in terms of reducing ISIS's capacity to threaten the United States. To totally eradicate ISIS, that's really a job that only Syrians, not American soldiers, can do.²²¹

Ford completely ignores the United States' commitment to our Kurdish allies as well as the hundreds of thousands of Syrians dying at the hands of Assad. Mark Esper, President Trump's Defense Secretary, was another defender of President Trump's decision, claiming that removing a small number of American troops was not actually letting down our Kurdish allies because several hundred American soldiers were not going to stop an invasion from Turkey. That being said, Esper does not acknowledge the symbolic effect of removing U.S. troops from Syria. Turkey was certainly less likely to attack the Syrian Kurds if it meant endangering American lives given that Turkey and the United States are NATO allies.

Joshua Landis, a well-known expert on Syria at the University of Oklahoma, also agrees with Trump's decision, claiming that "Trump's instinct to keep the US from establishing a permanent role in Syria is fundamentally correct, in my estimation."²²²

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Martin, Rachel. "Former U.S. Ambassador Ford on Trump's Syria Policy." *NPR*, NPR, 14 Jan. 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/14/685062268/former-u-s-ambassador-on-trumps-syria-policy>.

²²² Landis, Joshua. "Syria, Deterrence of Chemical Weapons and U.S. Policy in the Middle East - by Joshua Landis." *Syria Comment*, 18 Apr. 2018, <https://www.joshualandis.com/blog/syria-deterrence-of-chemical-weapons-and-u-s-policy-in-the-middle-east-by-joshua-landis/>.

Landis actually directly opposes U.S. support for the Syrian Kurds. He goes as far as to state that “the U.S. would be committing a grave mistake should it try to build a viable state in North Syria for the Kurds.”²²³ He backs up this claim by explaining that the region in Northern Syria that is inhabited by both Kurds and Arabs is poor and filled with ethnic tensions and conflict that has arisen from their “diametrically opposed national ambitions” and years of war.²²⁴ Landis believes that the United States should help the Syrian Kurds negotiate a deal with Assad and unite against Turkey and the Islamic state, their common enemies.²²⁵ He explains that “Washington has the leverage in Syria to make such an agreement last and to help the Kurds; it does not have the leverage to depose Assad or roll back Iran.”²²⁶ Landis worries that if the United States continues to support the Syrian Kurds then Assad and Erdogan will become allies and will be a danger to both the United States and the Kurdish goal of state-building.²²⁷

In reality, Assad and Erdogan are and have been foes for the duration of the war and there is more danger of Turkey attacking the Syrian Kurds than of Turkey and Assad ever joining forces. The United States made a commitment to its allies and then broke that commitment despite losing very few American lives in Syria. Pulling American troops out of Syria also signaled to Assad that the United States is no longer interested in the conflict and gave him the green light to continue massacring his people.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Landis, Joshua, and Matthew Barber. “A Sustainable United States Policy for North Syria, the Kurds, Turkey and the Syrian Government - by Landis and Barber.” *Syria Comment*, 26 Jan. 2018, <https://www.joshualandis.com/blog/a-sustainable-united-states-policy-for-north-syria-the-kurds-turkey-and-the-syrian-government-by-landis-and-barber/>.

CHAPTER 5: U.S. Policy in Syria Going Forward

This chapter will examine several debates about the role that the United States can play in Syria going forward in order to answer the question of whether there is any hope of a liberal democracy returning to Syria and what the role of the United States can be in this transition. The current U.S. President, Joe Biden, has yet to engage with the conflict in Syria or propose any concrete Syria policy, and given the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, it seems that the Biden administration has put Syria on the backburner. Below is a map of Syria from November of 2019 that shows the new political makeup of Syria and how the territory is divided.

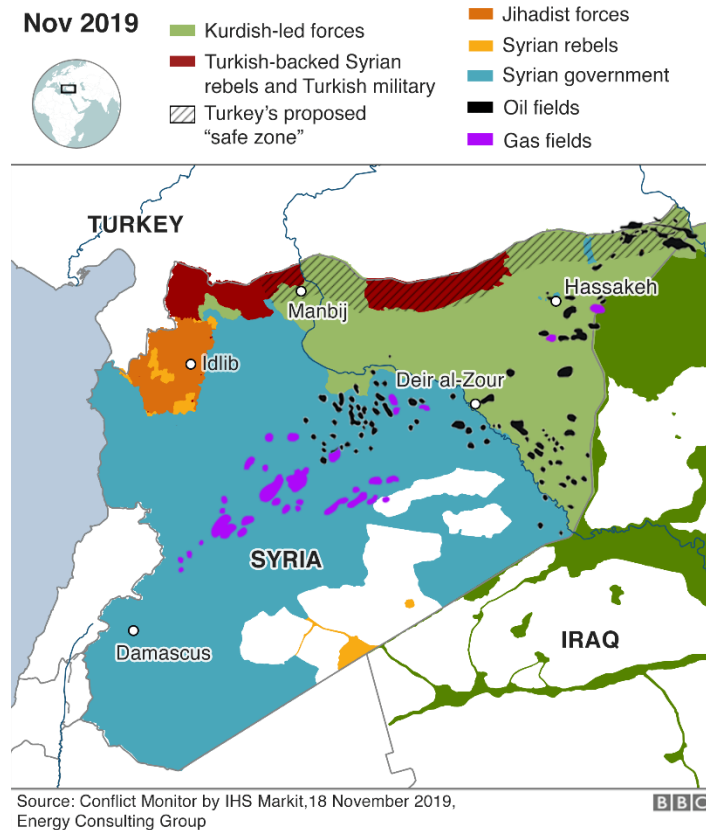


Figure 2: Territorial Divide of Syria in 2019²²⁸

The Debate over a Proxy War with Iran

When considering U.S. policy in Syria, several experts and scholars have suggested that the United States should take advantage of Iran's heavy involvement in the Syrian conflict to weaken their influence given that Iran is the United States' biggest foe in the region. Kenneth Pollack, a former member of the National Security Council, and Joshua Landis hold opposing views on this topic. Pollack has written that "Syria is the ideal place for the United States to take on Iran."²²⁹ He supports this view by pointing out that as of 2018, when his article was written, Iran had lost an estimated 2,000 of their own troops in the war in Syria, and the war was costing them between \$15 billion to \$20 billion dollars every year.²³⁰ This means that Iran's Syria commitment is taking up almost 20 percent of their defense budget.²³¹ Pollack claims that these high costs contributed to the strong anti-regime sentiments that ultimately caused the protests at the end of 2017 in Iran.²³² Pollack reminds us that Iran has a strong incentive to remain in the war supporting Assad given its fear of Sunni dominance in the Middle East. He writes:

It strikes me that the right American response is to make sure that [Iranians] *aren't* left alone to complete the pacification of Syria anytime soon — that their foes are

²²⁸ Reality Check Team. (2019, November 21). *Syria War: Who benefits from its oil production?* BBC News. Retrieved April 17, 2022, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/50464561>.

²²⁹ Pollack, Kenneth. "Pushing Back on Iran, Part 3: The Syrian Civil War - AEI." <https://www.aei.org/Foreign-and-Defense-Policy/Middle-East/Pushing-Back-on-Iran-Part-3-the-Syrian-Civil-War/>, 14 Feb. 2018, <https://www.aei.org/foreign-and-defense-policy/middle-east/pushing-back-on-iran-part-3-the-syrian-civil-war/>.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

armed, trained, and supplied to allow them to persevere and to keep bleeding the Iranians and their allies.²³³

Pollack believes that the best way to continue to weaken Iran is to create a more robust training program for “all but the absolute worst Syrian opposition figures.”²³⁴ He claims that the United States should not worry about arming and training fighters affiliated with the Islamic state because “the vast majority of foreign fighters who have returned to Europe from fighting with Salafi Jihadist groups have returned to normal lives and [given] up violence entirely.”²³⁵ Pollack attributes this to the fact that many people join extremist organizations like the Islamic State due to the opportunities for money or glory that the groups offer.²³⁶ But, he writes “their decisions are based on their situations, and when their situations change, so too will their allegiances and beliefs.”²³⁷ Whether or not this would play out in Syria if Assad were ousted is still to be seen. It’s difficult to determine whether this pattern has held up in Syria given that a majority of ISIS fighters have been killed and have not been given an opportunity to leave the organization.

Joshua Landis strongly disagrees with Pollack on the benefits of using the conflict in Syria to weaken Iran. He believes that it would be “neither wise nor humanitarian” to escalate the conflict any further in Syria given the effect it would have on Syrian citizens, even if the United States might be able to weaken Iran in the process.²³⁸ He writes:

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Landis, Joshua. “Syria, Deterrence of Chemical Weapons and U.S. Policy in the Middle East - by Joshua Landis.” *Syria Comment*, 18 Apr. 2018, <https://www.joshualandis.com/blog/syria-deterrence-of-chemical-weapons-and-u-s-policy-in-the-middle-east-by-joshua-landis/>.

Washington should admit its losses and stop further efforts to defeat Iran or Russia in the region. It should allow these powers to rebuild the region. The U.S. does not have to cooperate with Assad in rebuilding... but it should allow the region to stabilize and revive on its own, finding help where it can.

In other words, due to the detrimental impact that the Syrian Civil War has had on Syrians, the United States should not involve itself in the conflict in Syria with the explicit purpose of weakening Iran because this would not be fair to the millions of Syrians who have been displaced or lost their lives in this war. Going forward, Landis believes that the United States should “recognize that Iran has won this war, and [the U.S.] must come to terms with the fact that it was its own policies that were largely responsible for that victory.”²³⁹

Half a decade ago, Pollack’s vision of U.S. involvement in Syria might have been feasible. If the U.S. government had been looking for a compelling way to convince the American people to increase U.S. military involvement in Syria, they could have taken advantage of the strong anti-Iran sentiment in the United States and pointed to Iran’s influence in Syria and the opportunity that provided. That being said, given the state of the opposition movement in Syria, the Russian commitment to the conflict, and the fact that the vast majority of U.S. troops have been sent home, it seems unlikely that increased involvement in the conflict will be feasible unless we are willing to put a large number of American lives at risk. Arming the opposition is no longer a practical U.S. policy option because the opposition has been so thoroughly weakened. As the next section of this paper will touch on, we should not follow Landis’s advice to allow Iran, Russia, and

²³⁹ Ibid.

China to rebuild the region. Sanctions must be placed on those countries that are supportive of the Assad regime and will invest in the country's growth following the war. From my analysis, neither Landis nor Pollack offer pragmatic or effective policy suggestions given the current political climate in Syria. Any policy that supports Assad maintaining power (such as allowing other countries to invest in the country) is antithetical to a peaceful future for Syria, as the next section will explain.

Should We Let Assad Win?

As this paper has touched on, there are scholars such as Joshua Landis who believe that allowing Assad to win the war would be the best way to end the death and suffering that has plagued Syria for over a decade. This is a perspective shared by Max Boot, who has written: "The way to save lives, I've sadly concluded, is to let Assad win as quickly as possible."²⁴⁰ In response to arguments like these, Fred Hof counters that

The objective of the United States in Syria must be a full political transition from criminal, terrorist rule by family and entourage to a consensual, legitimate system featuring rule of law. Absent this transition, other important goals [such as]... an end to armed conflict, protection of civilians from state and Islamist terror, the return of over six million refugees, sustained tranquility and reconstruction—will be very difficult or impossible to achieve.²⁴¹

Hof claims that if we wish to improve the lives of Syrians, we must fight for regime change rather than simply allowing Assad to win, which would end the war but not the

²⁴⁰ Boot, Max. "Opinion | to Save Syrians, Let Assad Win." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 9 Mar. 2018,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/to-save-syrians-let-assad-win/2018/03/08/7741eaa6-22f4-11e8-86f6-54bfff693d2b_story.html.

²⁴¹ Hof, Frederic C. *A Long Road to Syria - Atlantic Council*. Sept. 2019,

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/A-Long-Road-to-Syria-IB-FIN-web-092319.pdf>.

dictatorship and oppression. In response, Boot points to pictures that have been circulating showing happy civilians in re-built public parks in Aleppo now that Assad has defeated the rebels in the city. He writes: “It’s terrible that they have to live under Assad, but at least they’re alive. Tyranny is preferable to endless and useless war.”²⁴² In a direct response to this statement, Michael Rubin, a researcher at the American Enterprise Institute, counters that “more than a half million Syrians are not strolling in public parks but are buried under them because of Assad’s ethnic and sectarian cleansing.”²⁴³ Rubin questions whether it would have been morally correct to appease Hitler in order to save the lives of millions of Allied soldiers and civilians who ultimately died in WWII.²⁴⁴ “To Save Brits, Let Hitler Win”, Rubin quips.²⁴⁵ Rubin also points out that allowing Assad to win would “signal to any dictator that if only he employed enough brutality against his population, no matter what the regional impact, he could have his cake and eat it too.”²⁴⁶ He implores U.S. policy makers to “not create a self-fulfilling prophecy in which we urge abandonment of anti-Assad Syrians and then complain that they don’t have enough support to win.”²⁴⁷

This disagreement between Rubin and Boot is perhaps the most important and frustrating debate about the present-day American role in the Syrian Civil War. Given the current political climate in Syria, Rubin’s argument is entirely idealistic. That having

²⁴² Boot, Max. “Opinion | to Save Syrians, Let Assad Win.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 9 Mar. 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/to-save-syrians-let-assad-win/2018/03/08/7741eaa6-22f4-11e8-86f6-54bfff693d2b_story.html.

²⁴³ Rubin, Michael. *Let Assad Win? A Response to Max Boot* | *American ... - Aei*. 14 Mar. 2018, <https://www.aei.org/foreign-and-defense-policy/middle-east/let-assad-win-a-response-to-max-boot/>.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

been said, he is correct that even if the war ends, Assad will remain a ruthless, corrupt dictator. Even before Syria entered a state of war, Assad was not above torturing and killing innocent teenagers. Hamza al-Khateeb was a particularly notable case. Hamza was a 13-year-old boy who was arrested by the regime in some of the earliest protests in April 2011 that ultimately led to the Civil War. His body, which showed clear signs of brutal torture, was returned to his family one month later.²⁴⁸ Hamza was one of thirteen people whose mutilated bodies were returned from the prison a month after that specific protest. Thousands of innocent people followed in the decade to come. If the Assad regime is willing to go to such terrible lengths to suppress opposition even when the country is not at war, it is hard to understand how Max Boot can suggest that letting Assad win would bring peace to Syria. There will always be a Sunni majority in the country who will oppose him, which means that Assad will continue using brutal repression tactics until every person who dares speak out against the regime has been forced to leave the country, tortured or killed. Additionally, Hof is absolutely correct that many of the other problems plaguing Syria, such as the Islamic state, extreme poverty, and the refugee crisis, are a direct result of the Assad regime remaining in power. Allowing Assad to win the war would not solve any of these issues.

While it is clear that Assad remaining in power will never bring peace to Syria, there are not currently any feasible policy solutions that the United States can implement that would result in Assad giving up power. Assad knows that if he loses power, he will either be killed immediately or arrested for life, not unlike Gaddafi's fate in Libya.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ Macleod, H., & Flamand, A. (2011, May 31). *Tortured and killed: Hamza al-Khateeb, age 13*. Features | Al Jazeera. Retrieved April 11, 2022, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2011/5/31/tortured-and-killed-hamza-al-khateeb-age-13>

²⁴⁹ Muammar Gaddafi was captured as the Libyan Civil War ended, and he was killed almost immediately.

Given the life or death nature of his position, he will go to great lengths to stay in power, as we can see given the atrocious acts of murder he has committed over the past 11 years). Rex Tillerson, the U.S. Secretary of State under President Trump, articulated his proposed Syria Policy in 2018, although it was ultimately ignored by President Trump. Tillerson stated in a speech that “a stable, unified and independent Syria ultimately requires post-Assad leadership in order to be successful.”²⁵⁰ One of the specific components of his Syria policy involved “[rallying] the Syrian people and individuals within the regime to compel Assad to step down.”²⁵¹ Tillerson ignores the obvious, which is that the Syrian people have been “rallying” for over a decade. They are about as convinced as they have ever been that Assad needs to leave power. But, members of the regime are certainly not going to abandon Assad. Many of them have been supporting the Assad family since Hafez al-Assad was in power.²⁵² Just like Assad, they know they will face serious repercussions if he were to lose power. Tillerson fails to propose a specific policy that would significantly change the course of the Civil War in any meaningful way. Perhaps when Tillerson spoke about “rallying”, he was referring to the opposition’s inability to work together to defeat Assad, but this is a cultural issue within Syria that the United States is unlikely to solve through any given policy. Earlier in the conflict, the United States tried to help the different opposition groups work together, but they were unsuccessful. Even before the start of the Syrian Civil War, Assad was cultivating a culture of distrust and an “every man for himself” mentality among Syrians. Additionally,

²⁵⁰ SHASHKEVICH, A. (2018, January 18). *Secretary of State Rex Tillerson discusses U.S. strategy in Syria at Stanford*. Stanford News. Retrieved April 2, 2022, from

<https://news.stanford.edu/2018/01/18/secretary-state-rex-tillerson-discusses-u-s-strategy-syria-stanford/>

²⁵¹ Schake, Kori. “Rex Tillerson's Syria Policy Is Sensible-but It's Fanciful.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 19 Jan. 2018,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/tillerson-syria-stanford/550853/>.

²⁵² Chemali, Hagar. Interview. Conducted by Sydney Heath. March 14th, 2022.

most Syrians have not had a liberal democracy in their lifetime, so “rallying” to create one would not be so simple.

Ultimately, the United States is not currently in a good position to depose Assad or convince him to leave. Both Assad and Putin are deeply invested in Assad’s survival as leader of Syria. Russia would never allow democratic elections in Syria if it might mean that the new President could be friendly to the United States and represent U.S. interests. The United States will never be as invested as Russia is in this conflict. Before Russia became so heavily involved in 2015, the United States had a real opportunity to change the course of the war. Now that the United States has pulled most of its troops from the country and the regime is in control of most of the country, there is essentially no policy that the United States could implement that would lead to Assad losing power. For eleven years, the United States along with the international community have been trying diplomatic solutions to convince Assad to give up power, and none has been successful. It seems as though the only way that Assad will leave power would be if a country offered him asylum and impunity if he agrees to step down. Given that he is a war criminal, most countries would not be interested in pursuing this solution. It is also unclear if Assad even has any interest in giving up power given that he benefits financially from being in power. As of 2012, he had a fortune of an estimated \$1.5 billion dollars.²⁵³ If Assad did leave the country, there is also some uncertainty regarding who would take his place. There is a strong possibility that it would be someone connected to the Assad regime such as Assad’s corrupt cousin, Rami Makhlouf, who may be even

²⁵³ Inman, P. (2012, July 19). *Bashar al-Assad has amassed fortune of up to £950m, analysts estimate*. The Guardian. Retrieved April 16, 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/19/bashar-al-assad-950m-fortune>

more repressive and ruthless than Assad himself. Given that the United States has lost credibility in Syria, it would not be in a position to oversee democratic elections in the country. The United Nations would be the only body that could supervise elections, and the UN has not historically been successful in creating any real change in Syria given that Russia is a permanent member of the Security Council.

Biden's Syria Policy

The Biden Administration has not implemented or proposed a concrete Syria policy, but it has reiterated its support for UN Resolution 2254, adopted in 2015. This resolution proposes a transitional government. It reads:

[The Resolution] expresses its support...for a Syrian-led political process that is facilitated by the United Nations and, within a target of six months, establishes credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance and sets a schedule and process for drafting a new constitution, and further expresses its support for free and fair elections, pursuant to the new constitution, to be held within 18 months and administered under supervision of the United Nations.²⁵⁴

Despite claiming to support the resolution, the Biden Administration has not taken any steps to promote a political transition in Syria. That being said, it is unlikely that there are any feasible U.S. policy options that would facilitate this transition anyway. Given that the UN has been trying to encourage a transitional government in Syria since 2015 and

²⁵⁴ *UN Resolution 2254*. United Nations S Security Council. (2015, December 18). Retrieved April 11, 2022, from https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2021_890_E.pdf

has been unsuccessful, it is improbable that a diplomatic approach to this conflict will be effective, even under American leadership.

One particular issue that the United States needs to address is the concern that Assad's leadership is becoming increasingly accepted in the international community. For example, Interpol (The International Criminal Police Organization), recently reinstated Syria as a member organization, meaning that Assad can issue arrest warrants in other countries, putting millions of Syrian refugees who have opposed the government in danger.²⁵⁵ Given that Assad himself is clearly a war criminal, this was a strange decision for Interpol to make. The World Health Organization also decided in 2021 to bring Syria onto its Executive Board, regardless of the fact that the Assad regime has bombed hospitals and committed countless other atrocities on its civilian population.²⁵⁶ The United States cannot follow in the footsteps of these groups and begin normalizing relations with Syria. Neither can the United States allow countries like Russia, Iran and China to support the rebuilding of Syria after the war, which would contribute to the acceptance of the Assad regime both internally and on the international stage. The United States must sanction any country that attempts to invest in Syria, as is stipulated under the Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act of 2019.²⁵⁷

The United States must work to alleviate suffering in Syria to the best of its ability given that deposing Assad is no longer an option. The U.S. government should increase its refugee quota and take some of the burden off of Turkey, which has accepted

²⁵⁵ Lister, C. (2021, October 8). *Biden's inaction on Syria risks normalizing Assad and his crimes*. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved April 9, 2022, from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/08/biden-syria-policy-assyad-war-crimes/>.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Shatz, H. J. (2021, July 8). *The power and limits of threat: The Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act at One Year*. RAND Corporation. Retrieved April 17, 2022, from <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/07/the-power-and-limits-of-threat-the-caesar-syrian-civilian.html>

over half of all Syrian refugees. Additionally, the United States must continue to support the international norm against the use of chemical weapons and consider imposing new standards that consider the number of civilian deaths rather than the weapons used to kill them.

Concluding Remarks

Given the relative military power and capabilities of the United States, the U.S. government had the responsibility to protect the Syrian people from Bashar al-Assad yet continuously failed to do so. The war has been underway for over a decade now, and over half a million people have been killed. Because the U.S. government failed to act, even after it promised to do so, it missed its opportunity to influence the trajectory of the Civil war. Prolonging intervention is almost never effective, and decisive military action can sometimes be the best policy, as it would have been in Syria.

Through analyzing the development of U.S. Foreign Policy in Syria during the ongoing Civil War, this thesis has attempted to determine how the United States could have better prevented the mass atrocities that occurred under the Assad regime. Chapter 1 introduced the conflict and aimed to convince the reader why they should be concerned with the conflict in Syria, highlighting the humanitarian and refugee crisis that it has created over the past eleven years. This chapter also gave background into the history of U.S.-Syria relations prior to 2011. Chapter 2 delved into the causes of the Civil War in Syria beginning in 2011, describing the rise of the opposition movement and Assad's violent means of crushing protests. Chapter 2 also discussed the crucial role that Russia, Iran and China have played in Assad's ability to maintain power. Without Putin's military and financial support, it is unlikely that Assad would have been able to regain territory in Syria to the extent that he has today. Chapter 3 describes the development of U.S. Policy towards Assad, beginning with an explanation of the geopolitical factors that influenced President Obama's Middle East Policy. The legacies of the Libyan and Iraq wars specifically had the largest impact on President Obama's Syria policy: the American

people had little appetite for further failed wars in the Middle East as a result. This chapter focuses on the Obama administration's infamous red line threat decision, which implicitly told Assad that the United States was not militarily resolved to intervene in the conflict. This paved the way for Assad's continued aggressions against his people, which largely went unpunished until President Trump launched airstrikes in response to chemical weapon attacks in 2018.

Analysis of popular debates about American policy in Syria in Chapter 4 indicates that rather than relying on diplomacy in the form of sanctions and strong statements, the United States should have taken more decisive military action, perhaps even before Assad began using chemical weapons. Additionally, this chapter suggests that the United States and the international community should reconsider what constitutes a "red line" given that dictators like Assad are capable of killing the same number of people with chemical weapons as they are with barrel bombs. The final chapter presents a bleak outlook on the future of Syria and the possibilities for effective U.S. policy that would depose Assad and end the War. Assad will stop at nothing to remain in power, yet as long as he is in power, Syrians will see no peace.

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